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Observer

As every schoolboy knows, you can fit the whole of England on the Isle of Wight. Grotesque, visionary tycoon Sir Jack Pitman takes the saying literally and does exactly that. He constructs on the island 'The Project', a vast heritage centre containing everything 'English', from Big Ben to Stonehenge, from Manchester United to the white cliffs of Dover. The project is monstrous, risky and vastly successful. In fact, it gradually begins to rival 'Old' England and even threatens to supersede it...

One of Barnes's finest and funniest novels, *England, England* calls into question the idea of replicas, truth vs fiction, reality vs art, nationhood, myth-making, and self-exploration.

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TO PAT

PITMAN HOUSE

had been true to the architectural principles of its time. Its tone was of secular power tempered by humanitarianism: glass and steel were softened by ash and beech; licks of eau-de-nil and acid yellow gave hints of controlled passion; in the vestibule a dusty-red Corb drum subverted the dominion of hard angles. The supernal atrium objectified the aspirations of this worldly cathedral; while passive ventilation and energy-saving showed its commitment to society and the environment. There was flexibility of spatial use and candid ductwork: according to the architectural team of Slater, Grayson & White, the building combined sophistication of means with transparency of intent. Harmony with nature was another key commitment: behind Pitman House was an area of specially-created wetland. Staff on the decking (hardwood from renewable sources) could eat their sandwiches while inspecting the transient birdlife of the Hertfordshire borders.

The architects were accustomed to client intervention; but even they lost a little fluency when glossing Sir Jack Pitman's personal contribution to their design: the insertion at board-room level of a double-cube office with moulded cornices, shagpile carpet, coal fires, standard lamps, flock wallpaper, oil paintings, curtained *faux* windows and bobble-nosed light switches. As Sir Jack musingly proposed, 'Rightly though we glory in the capabilities of the present, the cost should not, I feel, be paid in disdain for the past.' Slater, Grayson & White had tried to point out that building the past was, alas, nowadays

considerably more expensive than building the present or the future. Their client had deferred comment, and they were left to reflect that at least this sealed sub-baronial unit would probably be considered Sir Jack's personal folly rather than an element in their own design statement. As long as no-one congratulated them on its ironic post-post-modernism.

Between the airy, whispering space created by the architects and the snug den demanded by Sir Jack lay a small office – no more than a transitional tunnel – known as the Quote Room. Here Sir Jack liked to keep visitors waiting until summoned by his PA. Sir Jack himself had been known to linger in the tunnel for more than a few moments while making the journey from outer office to inner sanctum. It was a simple, austere, underlit space. There were no magazines, and no TV monitors dispensing promo clips about the Pitman empire. Nor were there gaudily comfortable sofas covered with the hides of rare species. Instead, there was a single high-backed Jacobethan oak settle facing a spotlit slab. The visitor was encouraged, indeed obliged, to study what was chiselled in Times roman:

JACK PITMAN

is a big man in every sense of the word.
Big in ambition, big in appetite, big in generosity.

He is a man whom it takes a leap
of the imagination fully to come to terms with.
From small beginnings, he has risen like a meteor

to great things. Entrepreneur, innovator,
ideas man, arts patron, inner-city revitaliser.
Less a captain of industry than a very admiral,
Sir Jack is a man who walks with presidents
yet is never afraid to roll up his sleeves
and get his hands dirty.

For all his fame and wealth, he is yet
intensely private, a family man at heart.
Imperious when necessary, and always forthright,
Sir Jack is not a man to be trifled with;

he suffers neither fools nor busybodies.

Yet his compassion runs deep.

Still restless and ambitious,

Sir Jack makes the head spin with his energy,
dazzles with his larger-than-life charm.

These words, or most of them, had been written a few years previously by a *Times* profiler to whom Sir Jack had subsequently given brief employment. He had deleted references to his age, appearance and estimated wealth, had the whole thing pulled together by a rewrite man, and ordered the final text to be carved on a swathe of Cornish slate. He was content that the quote was no longer sourced: a few years ago the acknowledgment 'The Times of London' had been chiselled out and a filler rectangle of slate inserted. This made the tribute more authoritative, and more timeless, he felt.

Now he stood in the exact centre of his double-cube snugger, beneath the Murano chandelier and equidistant from the two Bavarian hunting-lodge fireplaces. He had hung his jacket on the Brancusi in a way that – to his eye, at least – implied joshing familiarity rather than disrespect, and was displaying his roundedly rhomboid shape to his PA and his Ideas Catcher. There had been some earlier institutional name for this latter figure, but Sir Jack had replaced it with 'Ideas Catcher'. Someone had once compared him to a giant firework, throwing out ideas as a Catherine wheel throws out sparks, and it seemed only proper that those who pitched should have someone to catch. He pulled on his after-lunch cigar and snapped his MCC braces: red and yellow, ketchup and egg-yolk. He was not a member of the MCC, and his brace-maker knew better than to ask. For that matter, he had not been to Eton, served in the Guards, or been accepted by the Garrick Club; yet he owned the braces which implied as much. A rebel at heart, he liked to think. A bit of a maverick. A man who bends the knee to no-one. Yet a patriot at heart.

'What is there left for me?' he began. Paul Harrison, the

Ideas Catcher, did not immediately activate the body-mike. This had become a familiar trope in recent months. 'Most people would say that I have done everything a man is capable of in my life. Many, indeed, do. I have built businesses from the dust up. I have made money, few would deny that. Honours have come my way. I am the trusted confidant of heads of state. I have been the lover, if I may say so, of beautiful women. I am a respected but, I must emphasize, not *too* respected member of society. I have a title. My wife sits at the right hand of presidents. What is there left?'

Sir Jack exhaled, his words swirling in the cigar smoke which fogged the lower droplets of the chandelier. Those present knew the question to be strictly rhetorical. An earlier PA had naively imagined that at such moments Sir Jack might be in search of useful suggestions, or, even more naively, consolation; she had been found less demanding employment elsewhere in the group.

'What is real? This is sometimes how I put the question to myself. Are *you* real, for instance – you and you?' Sir Jack gestured with mock courtesy to the room's other occupants, but did not turn his head away from his thought. 'You are real to yourselves, of course, but that is not how these things are judged at the highest level. My answer would be No. Regrettably. And you will forgive me for my candour, but I could have you replaced with substitutes, with . . . simulacra, more quickly than I could sell my beloved Brancusi. Is money real? It is, in a sense, more real than you. Is God real? That is a question I prefer to postpone until the day I meet my Maker. Of course I have my theories, I have even, as you might say, plunged a little into futures. Let me confess – cut your throat and hope to die, as I believe the saying goes – that I sometimes imagine such a day. Let me share my suppositions with you. Picture the moment when I am invited to meet my Maker, who in His infinite wisdom has followed with interest our trivial lives in this vale of tears. What, I ask you, might He have in store for Sir Jack? If I were He – presumptuous thought I admit – I would naturally be obliged to punish Sir Jack for his many human faults and

vanities. No, no!' Sir Jack held up his hands to quell the likely protests of his employees. 'And what would I - He - do? I - He - might be tempted to keep me - oh, for not too long a stretch, I trust - in a Quote Room of my own. Sir Jack's very personal limbo. Yes, I would give him - me! - the hard settle and spotlight treatment. A mighty tablet. And *no magazines*, not even the holiest!'

Sotto chuckles were appropriate, and were duly provided. Sir Jack walks with the deity, Lady Pitman dines at the right hand of God.

Sir Jack strolled heavily across to Paul's desk and leaned towards him. The Ideas Catcher knew the rules: eye contact was now required. Mostly, you preferred to pretend that working for Sir Jack required hunched shoulders, lowered lids, unbreakable concentration. Now, he panned upwards to his employer's face: the wavy, boot-black hair; the fleshy ears, the left lobe pulled long by one of Sir Jack's negotiating tics; the smooth convexity of jowl which buried the Adam's apple; the clarety complexion; the slight pock-mark where a mole had been removed; the mattresy eyebrows with their threads of grey; and there, waiting for you, timing how long it took to get your courage up, the eyes. You saw so many things in those eyes - benign contempt, cold affection, patient irritation, logical anger - though whether such complexities of emotion in fact existed was another matter. Reason told you that Sir Jack's technique of personnel-management consisted in never offering the mood or expression obvious to the occasion. But there were also times when you wondered if Sir Jack was merely standing before you holding in his face a pair of small mirrors, circles in which you read your own confusion.

When Sir Jack was satisfied - and you never quite knew what did satisfy Sir Jack - he took his bulk back to the middle of the room. Murano glass above his head, shagpile lapping his laces, he swilled another grave question around his palate.

'Is my name . . . real?' Sir Jack considered the matter, as did his two employees. Some believed that Sir Jack's name was not

real in a straightforward sense, and that a few decades earlier he had deprived it of its Mitteleuropäisch tinge. Others had it on authority that, though born some way east of the Rhine, little Jacky was in fact the result of a garage liaison between the shire-bred English wife of a Hungarian glass manufacturer and a visiting chauffeur from Loughborough, and thus, despite his upbringing, original passport, and occasional fluffed vowel, his blood was one hundred percent British. Conspiracy theorists and profound cynics went further, suggesting that the fluffed vowels were themselves a device: Sir Jack Pitman was the son of a humble Mr and Mrs Pitman, long since paid off, and the tycoon had allowed the myth of continental origin slowly to surround him; though whether for reasons of personal mystique or professional advantage, they could not decide. None of these hypotheses received support on this occasion, as he supplied his own answer. 'When a man has sired nothing but daughters, his name is a mere trinket on loan from eternity.'

A cosmic shudder, which may have been digestive in origin, ran through Sir Jack Pitman. He swivelled, puffed smoke, and eased into his peroration.

'Are great ideas real? The philosophers would have us believe so. Of course, I have had great ideas in my time, but somehow - do not record this, Paul, I am not certain it is for the archive - somehow, sometimes I wonder how real they were. These may be the ramblings of a senile fool - I do not hear your cries of contradiction so I presume you agree - but perhaps there is life in the old dog yet. Perhaps what I need is one last great idea. One for the road, eh, Paul? That you may record.'

Paul tapped in, 'Perhaps what I need is one last great idea', looked at it on the screen, remembered that he was responsible for rewrites as well, that he was, as Sir Jack had once put it, 'my personal Hansard', and deleted the wimpish 'Perhaps'. In its more assertive form the statement would enter the archive, timed and dated.

Sir Jack good-humouredly lodged his cigar in the stomach-hole of a Henry Moore maquette, stretched and pirouetted

lightly. 'Tell Woodie it's time,' he said to his PA, whose name he could never remember. In one sense, of course, he could: it was Susie. This was because he called all his PAs Susie. They seemed to come and go at some speed. So it was not really her name he was unsure of, but her identity. Just as he'd been saying a moment ago – to what extent was she real? Quite.

He retrieved his jacket from the Brancusi and shrugged it past his MCC braces. In the Quote Room he paused to read again the familiar citation. He knew it by heart, of course, but still liked to linger over it. Yes, one last great idea. The world had not been entirely respectful in recent years. Well then, the world needed to be astonished.

Paul initialled his memorandum and stored it. The latest Susie rang down to the chauffeur and reported on their employer's mood. Then she picked up his cigar, and returned it to Sir Jack's desk drawer.

'DREAM A LITTLE

with me, if you please.' Sir Jack raised the decanter interrogatively.

'My time, your money,' replied Jerry Batson of Cabot, Albertazzi and Batson. His manner was always agreeable and always opaque. For instance, he made no evident response, by word or gesture, to the offered drink, yet it was somehow clear that he was politely accepting an armagnac which he would then politely, agreeably and opaquely judge.

'Your *brain*, my money.' Sir Jack's correction was an amiable growl. You didn't jerk someone like Jerry Batson around, but the residual instinct to establish dominance never left Sir Jack. He did so by his heartiness, his embonpoint, his preference for staying on his feet while others sat, and his habit of automatically correcting his interlocutor's first utterance. Jerry Batson's technique was different. He was a slight figure, with greying

curly hair and a soft handshake he preferred not to give. His manner of establishing, or contesting, dominance was by declining to seek it, by retreating into a little Zen moment where he was a mere pebble washed briefly in a noisy stream, by sitting there neutrally, just feeling the *feng shui* of the place.

Sir Jack dealt with the *crème de la few*, so he dealt with Jerry Batson of Cabot, Albertazzi and Batson. Most people assumed that Cabot and Albertazzi were Jerry's transatlantic and Milanese associates, and imagined they must resent the way in which the international triumvirate effectively meant nothing but Batson. Neither, in fact, resented the primacy of Jerry Batson, since neither of them – despite having offices, bank accounts and monthly salaries – in fact existed. They were early examples of Jerry's soft-handed skill with the truth. 'If you can't present yourself, how can you be expected to present a product?' he had been inclined to murmur in his earlier, candid, pre-global days. Even now, twenty or more years on, he was still inclined, in post-prandial or reminiscing mood, to accord real existence to his sleeping partners. 'Bob Cabot taught me one of the first lessons of this business . . .' he would begin. Or, 'Of course, Silvio and I never used to agree about . . .' Perhaps the reality of those monthly Channel Island transfers had invested the account-holders with lingering corporeality.

Jerry accepted the glass of armagnac and sat quietly while Sir Jack went through the swirling and snuffling, the gum-rinse and the ecstatic eyes. Jerry wore a dark suit, spotted tie and black loafers. The uniform was easily emended to murmur youth, age, fashionability or gravitas; cashmere polo-necks, Missoni socks and designer specs with plain-glass lenses all offered nuance. But with Sir Jack he displayed no professional accessories, human or mechanical. He sat there smiling a nominal subservience, almost as if waiting for his client to define the terms of employment.

Of course, the time was long past when 'clients' 'employed' Jerry Batson. A key prepositional switch had taken place a decade back, when Jerry decided that he worked with people

rather than for them. Thus, at different periods (though also sometimes not) he had worked with the CBI and the TUC, with animal liberation and the fur trade, with Greenpeace and the nuclear industry, with all the main political parties and several splinter groups. At about the same time he had begun discouraging such crude labels as ad-man, lobbyist, crisis manager, image-rectifier and corporate strategist. Nowadays Jerry, mystery man and black-tied alumnus of the party pages, where they hinted that he was soon to become Sir Jerry, preferred to position himself differently. He was a consultant to the elect. Not to the elected, he liked to point out, but the elect. Hence his presence in Sir Jack's city penthouse, sipping Sir Jack's armagnac, with the whole of darkened, sparkling London behind a curtain-wall of glass against which his loafered feet gently tapped. He was here to crunch a few ideas. His very presence provoked synergy.

'You have a new account,' announced Sir Jack.

'I do?' There was the mildest, opaquest frown in the voice. 'Silvio and Bob handle all the new accounts.' Everyone knew this. He, Jerry, was above the battle. He used to think of himself as a kind of superior lawyer, one arguing his cases in the higher, wider courts of public opinion and public emotion. Lately, he had promoted himself to the judiciary. That was why talk of accounts in his presence was frankly a touch vulgar. But then you did not expect delicacy from Sir Jack. Everyone agreed that he was a little short – for whatever reason – of *finesse* and *savoir*.

'No, Jerry, my friend, this is both a new account and a very old one. All I ask, as I say, is for you to dream a little with me.'

'Will I like this dream?' Jerry affected a slight nervousness.

'Your new client is England.'

'England?'

'Just so.'

'Are you buying, Jack?'

'Let's dream that I am. In a manner of speaking.'

'You want me to dream?'

Sir Jack nodded. Jerry Batson took out a silver snuff-box,

sprang open the lid, launched the contents of a tensed thumb-hollow up each nostril, and sneezed without conviction into a paisley handkerchief. The snuff was darkened cocaine, as Sir Jack probably knew. They sat in matching Louis Farouk armchairs. London was at their feet, as if waiting to be discussed.

'Time is the problem,' Jerry began. 'In my judgment. Always has been. People just don't accept it, not even in their daily lives. "You're only as old as you feel," they say. *Correction*. You are as old, and exactly as old, as you are. True of individuals, relationships, societies, nations. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm a patriot, and I bow to none in admiration of this great country of ours, I love the place to bits. But the problem can be put in simple terms: a refusal to face the mirror. I grant you we're not unique in this respect, but among those in the family of nations who paste on the slap every morning whistling *You're only as old as you feel*, we are an egregious case.'

'Egregious?' queried Sir Jack. 'I am a patriot too, you forget.'

'So England comes to me, and what do I say to her? I say, "Listen, baby, face facts. We're in the third millennium and your tits have dropped. The solution is not a push-up bra."'

Some people thought Jerry Batson a cynic; others merely a scoundrel. But he was not a hypocrite. He considered himself a patriot; what's more, he had the memberships where Sir Jack had only the braces. Yet he did not believe in mindless ancestor-worship; for him, patriotism should be pro-active. There were still old-timers around nostalgic for the British Empire; just as there were others soiling their pants at the idea that the United Kingdom might break up. Jerry had not gone on public record – and caution might prevail until he was safely Sir Jerry – with opinions he would happily express when mixing with free-thinkers. He didn't, for instance, see anything except historical inevitability in the notion that the whole of Ireland should be governed from Dublin. If the Scots wanted to declare independence and enter Europe as a sovereign state, then Jerry – who in his time had worked with both the Scotland For Scots campaign

and the Union Forever lads, and was well-placed to see all the arguments – then Jerry would not stand in their way. Ditto Wales, for that matter.

But in his view you could – and should – be able to embrace time and change and age without becoming a historical depressive. He had been known on certain occasions to compare the fair land of Britain to the noble discipline of Philosophy. When the study and elaboration of philosophy had begun, back in Greece or wherever, it had contained all sorts of skill-zones: medicine, astronomy, law, physics, aesthetics, and so on. There wasn't much the human brain churned out which wasn't part of philosophy. But gradually, down the centuries, each of these various skill-zones had spun off from the main body and set up on its own. In the same way, Jerry liked to argue – and did so now – Britain had once held dominion over great tracts of the world's surface, painted it pink from pole to pole. As time went by, these imperial possessions had spun off and set themselves up as sovereign nations. Quite right too. So where did that leave us now? With something called the United Kingdom which, to be honest and facing facts, didn't live up to its adjective. Its members were united in the way that tenants paying rent to the same landlord were united. And everyone knew that leaseholds could be turned into freeholds. But did philosophy cease to address life's central problems just because astronomy and its chums had set up house elsewhere? By no means. You could even argue that it was able to concentrate better on the vital issues. And would England ever lose her strong and unique individuality established over so many centuries if, just for the sake of argument, Wales and Scotland and Northern Ireland decided to bugger off? Not in Jerry's book.

'Tits,' said Sir Jack remindingly.

'My point. Quite. You have to face facts. This is the third millennium and your tits have dropped, baby. The days of sending a gunboat, not to mention Johnny Redcoat, are long gone. We have the finest army in the world, goes without

saying, but nowadays we lease it for small wars approved by others. We are no longer mega. Why do some people find that so hard to admit? The spinning jenny is in a museum, the oil is drying up. Other people make things cheaper. Our friends in the City still coin it, and we grow our own food: we are modest capitalists with corn. Sometimes we are ahead of the game, sometimes behind. But what we *do* have, what we shall always have, is what others don't: an accumulation of time. Time. My keyword, you see.'

'I see.'

'If you're an old geezer in his rocker on the porch, you don't play basketball with the kids. Old geezers don't jump. You sit and make a virtue of what you have. And what you also do is this: you make the kids think that anyone, *anyone* can jump, but it takes a wise old buzzard to know how to sit there and rock.

'There are some people out there – classic historical depressives in my book – who think it's our job, our particular geopolitical function, to act as an emblem of decline, a moral and economic scarecrow. Like, we taught the world how to play cricket and now it's our duty, an expression of our lingering imperial guilt, to sit back and let everyone beat us at it. Balls, as it were. I want to turn around that way of thinking. I bow to no-one in my love of this country. It's a question of placing the product correctly, that's all.'

'Place it for me, Jerry.' Sir Jack's eyes were dreamy; but his voice lustful.

The consultant to the elect helped himself to another thumbful of snuff. 'You – we – England – my client – is – are – a nation of great age, great history, great accumulated wisdom. Social and cultural history – stacks of it, reams of it – eminently marketable, never more so than in the current climate. Shakespeare, Queen Victoria, Industrial Revolution, gardening, that sort of thing. If I may coin, no, copyright, a phrase, *We are already what others may hope to become*. This isn't self-pity, this is the

strength of our position, our glory, our product placement. We are the new pioneers. We must sell our past to other nations as their future!

'Uncanny,' muttered Sir Jack. 'Uncanny.'

PA-PA-PA-PA PUM PUM PUM

went Sir Jack as Woodie, cap under arm, opened the limo door, '*Pum pa-pa-pa-pa pumm pumm pumm*. Recognize it, Woodie?'

'Could it be the mighty Pastoral by any chance, sir?' The chauffeur still pretended a little uncertainty, earning his employer's nod and a further display of connoisseurship.

'Awakening of serene impressions upon arriving in the country. Some translators say "happy"; I prefer "serene". Meet me at The Dog and Badger in two hours.'

Wood drove off slowly towards the rendezvous at the other end of the valley, where he would pay the pub landlord to give his employer drinks on the house. Sir Jack straightened the tongues of his walking boots, hefted his blackthorn stave from hand to hand, then stood squeezing out a long slow fart like a radiator being bled. Satisfied, he tapped his stick against a stone wall regular as a Scrabble board, and set off through the late-autumn countryside. Sir Jack liked to speak in praise of simple pleasures – and did so annually as Honorary President of the Ramblers' Association – but he also knew that no pleasures were simple any more. The milkmaid and her swain no longer twirled the maypole while looking forward to a slice of cold mutton pie. Industrialization and the free market had long since disposed of them. Eating was not simple, and historic recreations of the milkmaid's diet involved the greatest difficulty. Drink was more complicated nowadays. Sex? Nobody except dunderheads ever thought that sex was a simple pleasure.

Exercise? Maypole-dancing had become work-out. Art? Art had become the entertainment business.

And it was all a jolly good thing too, in Sir Jack's opinion. *Pa-pa-pa-pa pum pum pum*. Where would Beethoven be if he were living today? Rich, famous, and under a good doctor, that's where. What a shambles it must have been that December night in Vienna. 1808, if memory served. Bloody hopeless patrons, under-rehearsed players, a dim and shivering audience. And which bright spark imagined it a good idea to première the Fifth and the mighty Pastoral on the same night? Plus the fourth concerto? Plus the Choral Fantasia. Four hours in an unheated hall. No wonder it was a disaster. Nowadays, with a decent agent, a diligent manager – or better still, with an enlightened patron who might dispel the need for these grubbing ten-percenters . . . A figure who would insist on adequate rehearsal time. Sir Jack felt for the mighty Ludwig, he truly did. *Pa-PA-pa-pa-pa-pum-diddy-um*.

And even a pleasure as supposedly simple as walking had its complications: logistic, legal, sartorial, philosophical. No-one just 'walked' any more, strode for striding's sake, to fill the lungs, to make the body exult. Perhaps no-one ever really had, except a few rare spirits. Just as he doubted whether in the old days anyone had ever really 'travelled'. Sir Jack had interests in many leisure organizations, and was sick to death of the self-opinionated claim that genteel 'travel' had been superseded by vulgar 'tourism'. What snobs and ignoramuses the complainers were. Did they imagine all those old-style travellers on whom they fawned were such idealists? That they hadn't 'travelled' for much the same reasons as today's 'tourists'? To get out of England, to be somewhere else, to feel the sun, to see strange sights and stranger people, to buy things, to quest for the erotic, to return home with souvenirs and memories and boasts? Exactly the same in Jack's book. All that had happened since the Grand Tour was the democratization of travel, and quite right too, as he regularly told his shareholders.

Sir Jack enjoyed marching out across land belonging to

He cross-fastened his hunter's collar against the rising wind, and set course for a gap in a distant hedge. A double brandy at The Dog and Badger, whose mutton-chopped host would patriotically waive the bill – 'A pleasure and an honour as always, Sir Jack' – then the limo back to London. Normally, he would fill the car with the Pastoral, but not today, perhaps. The Third? The Fifth? Dare he risk the Ninth? As he reached the hedge, a crow took silk and wing.

'OTHERS MAY LIKE

to surround themselves with yes-men,' said Sir Jack, as he interviewed Martha Cochrane for the post of Special Consultant. 'But I am known to value what I like to call no-people. The awkward squad, the nay-sayers. Isn't that so, Mark?' He beckoned to his Project Manager, a blond, puckish young man whose eyes followed his employer so quickly that at times they seemed to precede him.

'No,' said Mark.

'Ho, ho, Marco. Touché. Or, on the other hand, thank you for proving my point.' He leaned across his double-sided partners' desk, treating Martha to some benign *Führerkontakt*. Martha waited. She was expecting attempts to wrong-foot her, and Sir Jack's double-cube snuggery had already done so, with its wrenching stylistic change from the rest of Pitman House. Crossing the room, she had nearly turned an ankle in the tussocky shagpile.

'You will note, Miss Cochrane, that I emphasize the word people. I employ more women than most in my position. I am a great admirer of women. And it is my belief that women, when they are not more idealistic than men, are more cynical. So I am looking for what might be called an Appointed Cynic. Not a court jester, like young Mark here, but someone unafraid to speak their mind, unafraid to oppose me, even if they should not

expect their advice and their wisdom necessarily to be heeded. The world is my oyster, but I am seeking in this instance not a pearl but that vital piece of grit. Tell me, do you agree that women are more cynical than men?'

Martha thought for a few seconds. 'Well, women have traditionally accommodated themselves to men's needs. Men's needs being, of course, double. You put us on a pedestal in order to look up our skirts. When you wanted models of purity and spiritual value, something to idealize while you were away tilling the soil or killing the enemy, we accommodated ourselves. If you now want us to be cynical and disillusioned I dare say we can accommodate ourselves to that as well. Though of course we may not mean it, any more than we meant it before. We might just be being cynical about being cynical.'

Sir Jack, who interviewed in democratic shirt-sleeves, plucked his Garrick braces in a rubbery pizzicato. 'Now that is *very* cynical.'

He looked at her application file again. Forty, divorced, no children; a degree in history, then graduate work on the legacy of the Sophists; five years in the City, two at the Department of Heritage and the Arts, eight as freelance consultant. When he switched from her file to her face, she was already eyeing him back steadily. Dark brown hair cut in a severe bob, a blue business suit, a single green stone on her left little finger. The desk kept her legs out of his view.

'I must ask you some questions, in no particular order. Let's see . . .' Her fixed attention was oddly disconcerting. 'Let's see. You are forty. Correct?'

'Thirty-nine.' She waited for his lips to part before cutting him off. 'But if I said I was thirty-nine you'd probably think I was forty-two or -three, whereas if I say I'm forty you're more likely to believe it.'

Sir Jack attempted a chortle. 'And is the rest of your application as approximate to the truth as that?'

'It's as true as you want it to be. If it suits, it's true. If not, I'll change it.'

'Why do you think this great nation of ours loves the Royal Family?'

'Gun law. If we didn't have it, you'd be asking the opposite question.'

'Your marriage ended in divorce?'

'I couldn't stand the pace of happiness.'

'We are a proud race, undefeated in war since 1066?'

'With notable victories in the American Revolutionary War and the Afghan Wars.'

'Still, we defeated Napoleon, the Kaiser, Hitler.'

'With a little help from our friends.'

'What do you think of the view from my office window?' He waved an arm. Martha's eye was guided to a pair of floor-length curtains held back by gilded rope; between them was an evidently false window on whose glass was painted a prospect of golden cornfields.

'It's pretty,' she said non-committally.

'Ha!' replied Sir Jack. He marched across to the window, seized its trompe-l'oeil handles, and, to Martha's surprise, wrenched it upwards. The cornfields disappeared to reveal the atrium of Pitman House. 'Ha!'

He sat down again, with the complacency of one who has got the upper hand. 'Would you sleep with me to get this job?'

'No, I don't think so. It would give me too much power over you.'

Sir Jack snorted. Watch your tongue, Martha said to herself. Don't start playing to the audience - Pitman is already doing that for both of you. Not much of an audience anyway: the blond court jester; a hunky 'Concept Developer'; a small, bespectacled fellow of indeterminate function crouched over a laptop; and a mute PA.

'And what do you think of my mighty Project, such as it has been outlined?'

Martha paused. 'I think it will work,' she replied, and lapsed into silence. Sir Jack, suspecting an advantage, came round

from behind his desk and stood looking at Martha's profile. He tugged at his left earlobe and examined her legs. 'Why?'

As he asked the question, he wondered whether the candidate would address one of his subordinates, or even his empty chair. Or would she half-turn and squint awkwardly up at him? To Sir Jack's surprise, she did none of these. She stood up, faced him, crossed her arms easily over her chest, and said, 'Because no-one lost money encouraging others to be lazy. Or rather, no-one lost money encouraging others to spend well on being lazy.'

'Quality Leisure is full of activities.'

'Exactly.'

Sir Jack moved slightly between each of his next questions, seeking to disconcert Martha. But she remained standing, and simply turned to face him wherever he was. The rest of the interview board was ignored. At times, Sir Jack almost felt as if he were the one moving round in order to keep up with her.

'Tell me, did you have your hair cut in that way especially for this interview?'

'No, for the next one.'

'Sir Francis Drake?'

'A pirate.' (Thank you, Cristina.)

'Well, well. How about Saint George, our patron?'

'Patron saint also of Aragon and Portugal, I believe. And protector of Genoa and Venice. A five-dragon man, by the sound of it.'

'What if I suggested to you that England's function in the world was to act as an emblem of decline, a moral and economic scarecrow? For example, we taught the world the ingenious game of cricket, and now it's our job, our historical duty, an expression of our lingering imperial guilt, to sit back and let everyone else beat us at it, what would you say to that?'

'I'd say it doesn't sound much like you. Naturally I've read most of your speeches.'

Sir Jack smiled to himself, though such private gestures were always generously available for wider consumption. He had by

now completed his circumambulation, and eased himself back into his presidential chair. Martha also sat down.

'And why do you want this job?'

'Because you'll pay me more than I deserve.'

Sir Jack laughed openly. 'Any further questions?' he asked his team.

'No,' said Mark pertly, but the reference back was lost on his employer.

Martha was shown out. She paused in the Quote Room and pretended to cast her eye over the spotlit slab; there might be a furtive camera to be satisfied. In fact, she was trying to think what Sir Jack's office reminded her of. Half gentleman's club, half auction house, the product of imperious but erratic taste. It felt like the lounge of some country-house hotel where you met to commit half-hearted adultery, where the edge of nervousness in everyone else's demeanour disguised your own.

Meanwhile, Sir Jack Pitman pushed back his chair, stretched noisily, and beamed at his colleagues. 'A piece of grit *and* a pearl. Gentlemen - I speak metaphorically, of course, since in my grammar the masculine always embraces the feminine - gentlemen, I think I'm in love.'

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SEXUALITY

in the case of Martha

Cochrane:

1. Innocent Discovery. A pillow clamped between the thighs, mind throbbing, and the crack of light still hot beneath her bedroom door. She called it Getting a Feeling.
2. Technical Advance. The use of one finger, then two; first dry, then wetted.
3. Socialisation of the Impulse. The first boy who said he liked her. Simon. The first kiss, and wondering, where do the noses go? The first time, after a dance, against a wall, that she felt

something bodge into the curve of her hip; the fleeting idea that it might be some deformity, at any rate a reason for not seeing more of the boy. Later, seeing more of the boy: visual display, causing moderate panic. It'll never go in, she thought.

4. Paradox of the Impulse. In the words of the old song: Never had the one that she wanted, Never wanted the one that she had. Intense and unadmitted desire for Nick Dearden, whose forearm she never even brushed. Complaisant submission to Gareth Dyce, who fucked her three times in a row on a gritty carpet, while she smiled and encouraged him, wondering if this was as good as it got and half-embarrassed by the oddness of male weight-distribution: how he could be light and floaty down there, while pressing the air out of her lungs with his heavy boniness up here. And she hadn't even liked the name Gareth when she'd spoken it before and during.

5. The Funfair. So many rides on offer while serpentine strings of lights flashed, and swirly music blared. You flew high, you were stuck to the walls of a revolving drum, you defied gravity, you tested the possibilities and limits of the flesh. And there were prizes, or there seemed to be, even if, more often than you expected, the thrown hoop skimmed off the wooden cylinder, the gimcrack fishing rod hooked nothing, and the coconut was glued to its cup.

6. Pursuit of the Ideal. In various beds, and sometimes by renouncing or avoiding bed. The assumption that completeness was possible, desirable, essential - and attainable only in the presence and with the assistance of Another. The hope for that Possible in: a) Thomas, who took her to Venice where she found his eyes glowed before a Giorgione more than they did when she stood before him in her specially-bought night-blue bra and knickers while the back canal went slap-slap outside their window; b) Matthew, who really liked to shop, who could tell what clothes would suit her when they were still on the rail, who brought his risotto to a perfect pitch of sticky dampness, but couldn't do the same for her; c) Ted, who showed her the advantages of money and the softening

whose feminine endings are of particular interest to me, but that is another matter. Indeed, if you will permit, it is a joke. I say to you, in conclusion, that your Project must be very Olde, because then it will be truly novel and it will be modern! Gentlemen and ladies, I salute you!

A Pitco limousine took the French intellectual to central London, where he spent part of his fee on waders from Farlow, flies from House of Hardy, and aged Caerphilly from Paxton and Whitfield. Then he departed, still without notes, via Frankfurt, to his next conference.

THERE WERE MANY DIFFERENT OPINIONS

about Sir Jack Pitman, few of them compatible. Was he villain and bully, or born leader and force of nature? Inevitable and gross consequence of the free-market system, or a driven individual who nevertheless kept in touch with his essential humanity? Some ascribed to him a deep, instinctive intelligence which gave him equal feel for the tidal fluctuations of the market and the susceptibilities of those he dealt with; others found him a brute and unreflecting junction between money, ego and lack of conscience. Some had watched him put calls on hold while he proudly showed off his collection of Pratt ware; others had taken calls from him in one of his favourite negotiating positions, athwart his porphyry toilet, and heard their impertinences treated to ripostes of colonic wrath. Why such conflicting judgments? Naturally, there were divergent explanations. Some thought Sir Jack simply too big, too multi-faceted a being for lesser mortals, often of an envious aspect, to fully grasp; others suspected that a tactical withholding, which deprived the scrutineer of key or consistent evidence, lay behind his technique of dominance.

The same duality afflicted those who examined his business

dealings. Either: he was a chancer, a gambler, a financial illusionist who for that brief and necessary moment convinced you that the money was real and before your eyes; he exploited every laxness of the regulatory system; he robbed Peter to pay Paul; he was a mad dog, digging each new hole to use the soil for filling in the hole he had just left behind him; he was, in the still-echoing words of an Inspector from the Department of Trade and Industry, 'unfit to run a wheel-stall'. Or: he was a dynamic merchant venturer whose success and energy naturally incited malice and rumour among those who thought business was best transacted between small, dynastic firms playing by the venerable rules of cricket; he was an archetypal transnational entrepreneur working in the modern global market, who understandably minimized his tax liabilities – how else could you hope to remain competitive? Either: look at the way he used Sir Charles Enright to gain entrée to the City, fawned on him, flattered him, then turned round and chewed him up, dumping him from the board the moment Charles had his first heart attack. Or: Charlie was one of the old school, decent enough but frankly a bit off the pace, the firm was due for a damn good shake-up, the pension offer was more than generous, and did you know Sir Jack put Charlie's youngest through school at his own expense? Either: no-one who worked for him ever had a bad thing to say about him. Or: you have to admit Pitman's always been a master of the gagging writ and the secrecy clause.

Even something as seemingly unambiguous as the twenty-four storey, steel-and-glass, beech-and-ash, architectural fact of Pitman House yielded to variant readings. Was its location – in an enterprise zone reclaimed from green belt to the north-west of London – a canny piece of cost-cutting, or an indication that Sir Jack was bollock-scared of mixing it with the City's heavy hitters? Was the hiring of Slater, Grayson & White a mere kowtow to architectural modishness, or a clever investment? A more basic question was: did Pitman House even belong to Jack Pitman? He may have paid for the building of it, but there were stories that the last blip of recession had caught him badly

overstretched and he'd had to go cap in hand to a French bank for a sale and leaseback. But even if this were true, you could take it one of two ways: either Pitco was undercapitalized, or Sir Jack was one step ahead of the game as usual, and aware that tying up capital in the wasting asset of flagship offices was what mugs did.

Even those who loathed the owner (or lessee) of Pitman House agreed that he was good at getting things done. Or at least, good at getting others to get things done. Here he stood, beneath his chandelier, turning slightly to different members of his Co-ordinating Committee, tossing out orders. Profilers, especially those from his own newspapers, frequently mentioned how light on his feet he was for such a big man, and Sir Jack was known to profess an unfulfilled desire to learn the tango. He also, at such moments, compared himself to a gunslinger, turning to outdraw the next uppity young pup on the block. Or might he rather be a lion-tamer snapping his whip at a semi-circle of brawling cubs?

Martha, sceptically impressed, now watched him instruct his Concept Developer. 'Jeffrey, survey please. Top fifty characteristics associated with the word England among prospective purchasers of Quality Leisure. Serious targeting. I don't want to hear about kids and their favourite bands.'

'Domestic? Europe? Worldwide, Sir Jack?'

'Jeffrey, you know me. Worldwide. Top dollar. Long yen. Poll the Martians as long as they've got the price of the entrance ticket.' He waited for the appreciative laughter to subside. 'Dr Max, I want you to find out how much people know.'

He was turning again, middle finger notionally tapping holster, when Dr Max cleared his throat. The Official Historian was a recent appointment, and this was Martha's first sight of him: trim, tweedy, bow-tied and languidly pert. 'Might you be a little more spe-cific, Sir Jack?'

There was a heavy pause before Sir Jack rephrased his command. 'What they know - find it out.'

'Would that be, well, Do-mestic, Europe or Worldwide?'

'Domestic. What Domestic doesn't know the Rest of the World won't be shagged to find out.'

'If you don't mind my saying so, Sir Jack,' - though Martha could already tell from their employer's melodramatic frown that, yes, he minded very much - 'It seems rather a b-road b-rief.'

'That is why you receive a rather broad salary cheque. Jeff, hold Dr Max's hand, will you? Now, Marco, you are going to have to live up to your name.' The Project Manager knew enough to wait for Sir Jack's meaning. Sir Jack chuckled before he made the hit, 'Marco Polo.'

Again, the Project Manager, as if instructing Dr Max, replied with no more than a blue-eyed, cheeky-yet-subservient gaze. Sir Jack then moved across to what he called his Battle Table, thus announcing a new phase of the meeting. With a mere inward flex of a fleshy hand, he gathered his troops around him. Martha was closest, and he laid fingers on her shoulder.

'We are not talking theme park,' he began. 'We are not talking heritage centre. We are not talking Disneyland, World's Fair, Festival of Britain, Legoland or Parc Asterix. Colonial Williamsburg? Excuse me - a couple of old-style turkeys roosting on a picket fence while out-of-work actors serve gruel in pewter plates and let you pay by credit-card. No, gentlemen - I speak metaphorically, you understand, since in my grammar the masculine embraces the feminine, as I seem to be doing Miss Cochrane - gentlemen, we are talking quantum leap. We are not seeking twopenny tourists. It is world-boggling time. We shall offer far more than words such as Entertainment can possibly imply; even the phrase Quality Leisure, proud though I am of it, perhaps, in the long run, falls short. We are offering *the thing itself*. You are looking doubtful, Mark?'

'Only in the sense, Sir Jack, that as I understood it from our French *amigo* the other day, isn't it . . . I mean, his thing about preferring the replica to the original. Isn't that what we're up to?'

'God, Mark, there are times when you make me feel less than English, though England is the air I live and breathe.'

'You mean ...', Mark struggled with some schoolroom memories, 'something like we can approach the real thing only by means of the replica. Sort of, Plato?' he added, for himself as much as in appeal to the others.

'Warmer, Marky-Mark, tootsies getting toastier. Can I perhaps help you the final few yards down the track? Let me try. You like the countryside, Mark?'

'Sure. Yes. I like it. I like it enough. That's to say, I like driving through it.'

'I was in the countryside quite recently. *In* the countryside, I stress that. I do not wish to pull rank, but the point of the countryside is not to *go through* it but to *be in* it. I make this point every year when I address the Ramblers' Association. Even so, Mark, when you *go through* it, presumably, in your modest, inattentive way, you like the way it looks?'

'Yes,' said the Project Manager, 'I like the way it looks.'

'And you like it, I suppose, because you think it an example of Nature?'

'You could put it that way.' Mark wouldn't have done so himself, but he knew he was now enlisted in his employer's more bullying version of the Socratic dialogue.

'And Nature made the countryside as Man made the cities?'

'More or less, yes.'

'More or less, no, Mark. I stood on a hill the other day and looked down an undulating field past a copse towards a river and as I did so a pheasant stirred beneath my feet. You, as a person *passing through*, would no doubt have assumed that Dame Nature was going about her eternal business. I knew better, Mark. The hill was an Iron Age burial mound, the undulating field a vestige of Saxon agriculture, the copse was a copse only because a thousand other trees had been cut down, the river was a canal and the pheasant had been hand-reared by a gamekeeper. We change it all, Mark, the trees, the crops, the animals. And now, follow me further. That lake you discern on

the horizon is a reservoir, but when it has been established a few years, when fish swim in it and migrating birds make it a port of call, when the treeline has adjusted itself and little boats ply their picturesque way up and down it, when these things happen it becomes, triumphantly, a lake, don't you see? It becomes *the thing itself*.'

'Is that what our French *amigo* was driving at?'

'He was disappointing, I thought. I told Payroll to give him dollars instead of pounds, and cancel the cheque if he complained.'

'Pounds being the real thing, and dollars the replica, but after a while the real thing becomes the replica?'

'Very good, Mark. *Very* good. Worthy of Martha, to offer praise.' He squeezed his Special Consultant's shoulder. 'But enough of this jolly cut-and-thrust. The question we have to address is *where*.'

A map of the British Isles had been laid out on the Battle Table, and Sir Jack's Co-ordinating Committee stared at the jigsaw of counties, wondering if it were better to be completely wrong or completely right. Probably neither. Sir Jack, now perambulating behind their backs, gave them a hint.

'England, as the mighty William and many others have observed, is an island. Therefore, if we are serious, if we are seeking to offer *the thing itself*, we in turn must go in search of a precious whatsit set in a silver doodah.'

They peered at the map as if cartography was a dubious new invention. There seemed either too much choice or too little. Perhaps some daredevil conceptual leap was called for. 'You're not, by any chance, thinking ... Scotland, are you?' A heavily bronchial sigh indicated that, No, dunderhead, Sir Jack was not thinking Scotland.

'The Scillies?'

'Too far.'

'The Channel Islands?'

'Too French.'

'Lundy Island?'

'Refresh my memory.'

'Famous for its puffins.'

'Oh, fuck the puffins, for God's sake, Paul. And no boring mud-flats in the Thames estuary, either.'

What could he be thinking? Anglesey was out. The Isle of Man? Perhaps Sir Jack's idea was to construct his own purpose-built offshore island. That would not be untypical. Mind you, the thing about Sir Jack was that nothing, in a way, was untypical except what he didn't want to do.

'There,' he said, and his curled fist came down like a passport stamp. 'There.'

'The Isle of Wight,' they answered in straggly unison.

'Exactly. Look at her, snuggling into the soft underbelly of England. The little cutie. The little beauty. Look at the shape of her. Pure diamond, that's what struck me straight away. A pure diamond. Little jewel. Little cutie.'

'What's it like, Sir Jack?' asked Mark.

'What's it like? It's perfect on the map, that's what it's like. You been there?'

'No.'

'Anyone?'

No; no; no; no and no. Sir Jack came round to the other side of the map, parked his palms on the Scottish Highlands and faced his inner circle. 'And what do you know of it?' They looked at one another. Sir Jack pressed on. 'Let me help clarify such ignorance, in that case. Name five famous historical events connected with the Isle of Wight?' Silence. 'Name one. Dr Max?' Silence. 'Not your period, no doubt, ho, ho. Good. Name five famous listed buildings on the island whose renovation might cause ructions at Heritage.' 'Osborne House,' replied Dr Max in quiz-show mode. 'Very good. Dr Max wins the hair-drier. Name another four.' Silence. 'Good. Name five famous and endangered species of plant, bird or animal whose habitat might be disturbed by our saintly bulldozers?' Silence. 'Good.'

'Cowes Regatta,' a sudden voice suggested.

'Ah, the phagocytes stir. Very good, Jeff. But not, I think, a bird, plant, listed building or historical event. Any more offers?' A longer silence. 'Good. Indeed, perfect.'

'But Sir Jack . . . isn't it, well, presumably, full of *inhabitants*?'

'No, Mark, it is not full of inhabitants. What it is full of is grateful future employees. But thank you for volunteering to put your curiosity to the test. Marco Polo as I said. On your horse. Report back in two weeks. I understand there is some famously inexpensive bed-and-breakfast accommodation on the island.'

'SO WHAT DO YOU THINK?'

asked Paul as they sat in a wine lodge half a mile from Pitman House. Martha had a tumbler of mineral water, Paul a goblet of preternaturally yellow white wine. Behind him, on the oak-veneer panelling, hung a print of two dogs behaving like humans; around them, men in dark suits yelped and barked.

What did she think? For a start, she thought it surprising that he was the one who had asked her for a drink. Martha had become skilled at anticipating moves in predominantly male offices. Moves and non-moves. The fat pads of Sir Jack's fingers had been laid meaningfully upon her at moments of professional elucidation, but the touch registered to her as command rather than lust – though lust was not ruled out. Young Mark, the Project Manager, flashed his quick blue eyes at her in a manner she recognized as largely self-referring; he would be a flirt with no follow-through. Dr Max – well, they had shared sandwiches on the deck overlooking the artificial wetland more than once, but Dr Max was delightedly and transparently interested in Dr Max, and when he wasn't Martha Cochrane doubted she would be his preferred species. She had therefore expected an approach from Jeff, hunky, solid, married Jeff, with baby-seats strapped into his Jeep; surely he would be the first

Harold got the arrow in his eye, so perhaps the course of English history would have remained exactly the same.'

Subject was asked if there was anything he could add to his account.

Subject was silent for thirty seconds. 'They wore chainmail and pointy helmets with noseguards and had broadswords.' Asked which side he was referring to, Subject replied: 'Both sides. I think. Yes, because that would tie in with them all being Normans, wouldn't it? Unless Harold was a Saxon. But Harold's boys definitely weren't running about in leather jerkins or whatever. Hang on. They might have been. The poorer ones, the cannon-fodder.' (*Cautiously*.) 'Not that I'm saying they had cannon. The ones who weren't knights. I can't imagine everyone could afford chainmail.'

Subject was asked if that was all.

Subject (*excited*): 'No! The Bayeux Tapestry, I've just remembered. That's all about the Battle of Hastings. Or part of it is. It's also got the first sighting, or the first recording, of Halley's Comet. I think. No, the first representation, that's what I mean. Is that any use?'

Subject agreed that he was now at the full limits of his knowledge.

We believe that this is a fair and accurate account of the interview, and that the Subject is representative of the target group.

Dr Max uncapped his fountain-pen and leaked his reluctant initials on to the report. There had been many others like this, and they were beginning to depress him. Most people remembered history in the same conceited yet evanescent fashion as they recalled their own childhood. It seemed to Dr Max positively unpatriotic to know so little about the origins and forging of your nation. And yet, therein lay the immediate paradox: that patriotism's most eager bedfellow was ignorance, not knowledge.

Dr Max sighed. It wasn't just professional, it was also personal. Were they pretending – had they always been

pretending – those people who flocked to his lectures, called his phone-in, laughed at his jokes, bought his books? When he splashed down in their minds, was it as useless as a flamingo landing in a birdbath? Did they all know bugger all about bugger everything like this ignorant 49-year-old bugger in front of him, who considered himself cultured, aware, intelligent and well-informed?

'Bugger!' said Dr Max.

THE PRINTOUT OF JEFF'S SURVEY

was laid before Sir Jack on his Battle Table. Potential purchasers of Quality Leisure in twenty-five countries had been asked to list six characteristics, virtues or quintessences which the word England suggested to them. They were not being asked to free-associate; there was no pressure of time on the respondents, no preselected multiple choice. 'If we're giving people what they want,' Sir Jack had insisted, 'then we should at least have the humility to find out what that might be.' Citizens of the world therefore told Sir Jack in an unprejudiced way what in their view the Fifty Quintessences of Englishness were:

1. ROYAL FAMILY
2. BIG BEN/HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT
3. MANCHESTER UNITED FOOTBALL CLUB
4. CLASS SYSTEM
5. PUBS
6. A ROBIN IN THE SNOW
7. ROBIN HOOD AND HIS MERRIE MEN
8. CRICKET
9. WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER
10. IMPERIALISM

11. UNION JACK
12. SNOBBERY
13. GOD SAVE THE KING/QUEEN
14. BBC
15. WEST END
16. TIMES NEWSPAPER
17. SHAKESPEARE
18. THATCHED COTTAGES
19. CUP OF TEA/DEVONSHIRE CREAM TEA
20. STONEHENGE
21. PHLEGM/STIFF UPPER LIP
22. SHOPPING
23. MARMALADE
24. BEEFEATERS/TOWER OF LONDON
25. LONDON TAXIS
26. BOWLER HAT
27. TV CLASSIC SERIALS
28. OXFORD/CAMBRIDGE
29. HARRODS
30. DOUBLE-DECKER BUSES/RED BUSES
31. HYPOCRISY
32. GARDENING
33. PERFIDY/UNTRUSTWORTHINESS
34. HALF-TIMBERING
35. HOMOSEXUALITY
36. ALICE IN WONDERLAND
37. WINSTON CHURCHILL
38. MARKS & SPENCER
39. BATTLE OF BRITAIN
40. FRANCIS DRAKE
41. TROOPING THE COLOUR
42. WHINGEING
43. QUEEN VICTORIA
44. BREAKFAST
45. BEER/WARM BEER
46. EMOTIONAL FRIGIDITY

47. WEMBLEY STADIUM
48. FLAGELLATION/PUBLIC SCHOOLS
49. NOT WASHING/BAD UNDERWEAR
50. MAGNA CARTA

Jeff watched Sir Jack's expression move between wise self-congratulation and acrid dismay as he worked through the list. Then a fleshy hand dismissed him, and Jeff knew the bitterness of the messenger.

Alone, Sir Jack considered the printout again. It frankly deteriorated towards the end. He crossed off items he judged the result of faulty polling technique and pondered the rest. Many had been correctly foreseen: there would be no shortage of shopping and thatched cottages serving Devonshire cream teas on the Island. Gardening, breakfast, taxis, double-deckers: those were all useful endorsements. A Robin in the Snow: where had that come from? All those Christmas cards, perhaps. The Magna Carta was currently being translated into decent English. *The Times* newspaper was no doubt easily acquired; Beefeaters would be fattened up, and the White Cliffs of Dover relocated without much linguistic wrenching to what had previously been Whitecliff Bay. Big Ben, the Battle of Britain, Robin Hood, Stonehenge: couldn't be simpler.

But there were problems at the top of the list. Numbers 1, 2, and 3, to be precise. Sir Jack had put out early feelers to Parliament, but his initial offer to the nation's legislators, put at a working breakfast with the Speaker of the House of Commons, had been insensitively received; the word contempt might even have been used. The football club would be easier: he'd send Mark up to Manchester with a team of top negotiators. Little blue-eyed Mark who looked like a soft touch and then flattered you into signing your life away. No doubt there would be matters of local pride, civic tradition, and so on - there always were. Sir Jack knew that in such cases it was rarely just a question of price: it was price combined with the necessary self-deception that price was finally less important

than principle. What principle might apply here? Well, Mark would find one. And if they dug their little studs in, you could always buy up the club's title behind its back. Or simply copy it and tell them to fuck off.

Buck House would need a different approach: less carrot and stick, more carrot and carrot. The King and Queen had been taking a lot of flak lately from the usual mixture of cynics, malcontents and nay-sayers. Sir Jack's newspapers had been under orders to patriotically refute all such treasonable libels while reproducing them in mournfully extensive detail. Ditto that squalid business with Prince Rick. King's cousin in drug-crazed lezzie sex-romps – was that the headline? He'd fired the journalist, of course, but sadly dirt had a tendency to adhere. Carrot and carrot; they could have a whole bunch of carrots if that was what it took. He would offer them improved pay and conditions, less work and more privacy; he would contrast the carping ingratitude of their current subjects with the guaranteed adoration of their future ones; he would stress the decay of their old kingdom and the bright prospects of a precious jewel set in a silver sea, Mark II.

And how would that jewel glitter? Sir Jack prodded a forefinger down Jeff's list again, and his loyal growl intensified with each item he'd crossed off. This wasn't a poll, it was bare-faced character assassination. Who the *fuck* did they think they were, going around saying things like that about England? His England. What did *they* know? Bloody tourists, thought Sir Jack.

CAREFULLY, AWKWARDLY,

Paul laid out his life before Martha. A suburban upbringing on a mock-Tudor estate: prunus and forsythia, mown grass and neighbourhood watch. Car-washing on Sunday mornings; amateur concerts in village churches. No, of course not every Sunday: that was just how it

felt. His childhood had been peaceful; or boring, if you preferred. Neighbour would report neighbour for using a sprinkler during a hosepipe ban. At one corner of the estate there was a mock-Tudor police station; in its front garden stood a mock-Tudor bird-box on a long pole.

'I wish I'd done something bad,' said Paul.

'Why?'

'Oh, so that I could confess it to you, and you would understand, or forgive, or whatever.'

'That's not necessary. Anyway, it might make me like you less.'

Paul was silent for a few moments. 'I used to wank a lot,' he said with an air of hopefulness.

'Not a crime,' said Martha. 'So did I.'

'Damn.'

He showed her photographs: Paul in nappies, in shorts, in cricket pads, in black tie, his hair gradually darkening from straw to peat, his glasses patrolling the outer parameters of fashion, his adolescent plumpness fading as the anxieties of adulthood took hold. He was the middle child of three, between a sister who mocked him and a feted younger brother. He had been good at school, and good at escaping notice. After college, he had joined Pitco as a management trainee; then steady promotion which offended nobody until one day he was in the gents and realized that the figure next to him, so broad it seemed to lever out the wings of the stand-up, was Sir Jack Pitman himself, who must have decided to forsake the splendour and privacy of his porphyry toilet for an exercise in democratic urination. Sir Jack was humming the second movement of the 'Kreutzer' Sonata, which made Paul so nervous that his pee had dried up. For some reason he never understood, he started telling Sir Jack a story about Beethoven and the village policeman. He didn't dare look at the Chairman, of course, just told the story. At the end of it, he heard Sir Jack zip himself up and wander off, whistling the third movement, the *presto*, very inaccurately, Paul couldn't help

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SEXUALITY

in the case of Paul Harrison would be briefer than in the case of Martha Cochrane:

— inchoate yearnings for girls in general, and since girls in general, or at least girls en masse in his particular vicinity, wore white ankle socks, green plaid skirts to mid-calf because their mothers knew they would grow into them, and white blouses with green ties, this was his initial paradigm.

— specific yearning for Kim, a friend of his sister's, who was learning the viola, who came round to the house one Sunday morning and made him realize (which he had not done on the mere evidence of his sister) that girls not dressed in school uniform could make the lips parch, the mind fog, and the underpants bulge in a way that girls at school never could. Kim, who was two years older than he was, took no notice of him, or appeared not to, which amounted to the same thing. He once said to his sister, nonchalantly, 'How's Kim?' She had looked at him carefully, then giggled almost enough to make herself throw up.

— the discovery of girls in magazines. Except that they clearly weren't girls but women. Women with large perfect breasts, medium-sized perfect breasts, and small perfect breasts. The sight of them made his brain press outwards against his skull. They were all of unimpeachable beauty, even the rough, slaggy-looking ones; perhaps especially them. And the parts which weren't their breasts, and which initially rendered him quite dumb with wonder, were also surprisingly various in layout and physiology, but never less than wholly perfect. These women seemed to him as inaccessible as goat crags to a mole. They were the deodorized, depilated aristocracy; he was a smelly, ragged peasant.

— he still loved Kim though.

— but he found that he could also love magazine women at the same time. And among them he had his favourites and his

fidelities. The ones he thought would be kind and understanding, and show him how to do it; and then the others, who once he had learnt how to do it would *really* show him how to do it; and then a third category, of fauns, waifs and innocents, whom, in the fullness of time, he would show how to do it. He tore out photo-spreads of the women who pierced his heart, and kept them under his mattress. To avoid crushing them (an impracticality as well as a sacrilege) he stored them in a stiff-backed manilla envelope. After a while he had to buy another one.

— as the girls at school grew older, their skirts rose from mid-calf to knee level. He hung around in groups of boys looking at groups of girls. He didn't think he would ever, ever be able to handle being alone with a girl (who wasn't his sister). It was much easier to be alone with magazine women. They always seemed to understand him when he had sex with them. And another thing: you were meant to feel sad after sex, but he never did. Just disappointment that he had to wait a few minutes before he could crank the old system up again. He bought a third manilla envelope.

— one day in the playground Geoff Glass told him an intricate, confidential story about a travelling salesman away from home for long periods of time and what he did when he couldn't find a woman. There was this, and then there was that, and sometimes for a change, because he didn't want the landlady spying on him, he would do it in the bath. Well, you know what it looks like in the bath — whereupon Paul, not wanting the story to stop, had said 'Yes' instead of 'No', whereupon Geoff Glass started shouting to the playground, 'Harrison knows what it looks like in the bath.' He realized that sex meant pitfalls.

— he realized this further when he came home from school and discovered that his mother, in the course of spring-cleaning, had decided to turn his mattress.

— for a time he kept in cryptographic form, in the back of a maths textbook where his mother would never look, a graph of dermal eruption plotted against the sex he had with the lost

magazine women. The conclusions were inconclusive, or at least not dissuasive. He found that he remembered Cheryl and Wanda and Sam and Tiffany and April and Trish and Lindie and Jilly and Billie and Kelly and Kimberley in startling detail. Sometimes he took their memories into the bath with him. In bed, he didn't have to worry about keeping the light on. He worried instead about whether he would ever meet a real woman, or girl, who would inspire in him the same ferocious carnality. He understood how men died for love.

— someone told him that if you did it left-handed, it felt like someone else doing it to you. Perhaps; except that it felt like someone else's left hand, and you wondered why they didn't use their right.

— then, quite unexpectedly, there was Christine, who didn't mind the fact that he wore glasses, and at seventeen years and one month was three months older than him, which she thought was a nice sort of difference. He agreed, as he did with everything she said. He found himself, in the parallel universe of real life, allowed to do the things he had previously dreamed of. With Christine he burst into a world of condom-unrolling and menstruation, of being allowed to put his hands anywhere (anywhere within reason, and nowhere dirty) while helping baby-sit her youngest brother; of dizzying joy and social responsibility. When she pointed at some bauble in a lighted shop window and cooed with a strange longing he found uniquely feminine, he felt like Alexander the Great.

— Christine wanted to know where they were going. He said, 'I thought the cinema.' She burst into tears. He realized that agreement and misunderstanding could easily co-exist.

— when he mentioned condoms to Lynn, she said 'I hate them', and fucked him just like that, towards the end of a party, both of them drunk. He discovered that being drunk meant he could go on a long time without coming. On a later occasion, he discovered that the correlation and the benefit did not increase exponentially. His parents considered Lynn a bad influence, which she certainly was, and why he liked her. He

would do anything for her, which is why she quickly tired of him.

— after he broke up with Christine, there were semi-encounters, near-misses, yearnings which disappeared into self-contempt, liaisons he wanted to get out of before he'd got into them. Women who looked at him as if to say: you'll do for now. Others who took him firmly by the arm from the moment of the first kiss, and who made him feel, as their fingers squirmed in the crook of his arm, that he was being marched first to the altar and then to the grave. He began to look at other men with envy and incomprehension. None but the brave deserved the fair, according to some stupid old poet. Real life wasn't like that. Who got what they deserved? Shits and philanderers and horrible pushy bastards nabbed the fair while the brave were away at battle. Then the brave came home and got second pick. People like Paul had to make do with the leftovers. They were meant to come to terms with this, to settle down and breed foot-soldiers for the brave, or innocent daughters for the shits and philanderers to despoil.

— he went back to Christine for several hours, which was clearly a mistake.

— but Paul resisted his tacit destiny, both in a general sense, and in the person of Christine. He didn't believe in justice where sex and the heart were concerned: there was no system whereby your merits as a human being, companion, lover, husband or whatever could be fairly assessed. People — specifically women — gave you a quick look and passed on. You couldn't very well protest, try handing over a list of your hidden selling points. But if there was no system, that logically meant there was luck, and Paul was a tenacious believer in luck. One minute you're a mid-ranking Pitco employee, the next you're standing beside Sir Jack in the gents and he happens to be whistling the right tune.

— when he first set eyes on Martha, with her sculpted bob, blue suit, and calm yet disconcerting silences, when he found himself thinking You've a dark brown voice to match your dark

brown hair and you can't possibly be forty, when he watched her turn elegantly and dance her cape in the nose of the pawing, snorting Sir Jack, he thought: she seems very nice. He realized that this was rather an inadequate response, and probably not one he should ever confide in her. Or if he did, without the following annotation: after he'd left home and gone back to buying magazines for a while, he increasingly found, as he gazed at a double-page woman laid out for him as the personification of availability, that sidling into his head would come the thought, '*She* seems very nice.' Perhaps he wasn't really cut out for magazine sex. Fuck me, the women were meant to urge, and he kept replying, 'Well, I'd really like to get to know you better first.'

— in the past he had noticed how being with a woman changed your sense of time: how lightly poised the present could be, how trudging the past, how elastic, how metamorphic the future. He knew even better how not being with a woman changed your sense of time.

— so when Martha asked him what he'd thought of her when they first met, he wanted to say: I felt you would change my sense of time irrevocably, that future and past were going to be packed into present, that a new and indivisible holy trinity of time was about to be formed, as never before in the history of the created universe. But this wasn't completely true, so instead he cited the clear feeling he had in Sir Jack's double-cube office and later as he sat across from her in the wine lodge and realized she was slightly guiding the conversation. 'I thought you were very nice,' he said, all too aware that it was not the sort of hyperbole employed by shits and philanderers and assorted horrible pushy bastards. Yet it appeared to have been the right thing to say, or to have thought, or both.

— Martha made him feel more intelligent, more grown-up, funnier. Christine had laughed abidingly at his jokes, which in the end made him suspect she had no sense of humour. Later, he knew the humiliation of the raised eyebrow and the implicit 'Don't try unless you know how to tell them. For a while, he

gave up making jokes except under his breath. With Martha he started again, and she laughed when she found something funny, and not when she didn't. This seemed extraordinary and wonderful to Paul. Also symbolic: he had previously been living his life under his breath, not daring to voice it. Thanks to Sir Jack, he had a proper job; thanks to Martha he had a proper life, a life out loud.

— he couldn't believe how falling in love with Martha made things simpler. No, that wasn't the right word, unless 'simpler' also included the sense of richer, denser, more complicated, with focus and echo. Half his brain pulsed with gawping incredulity at his luck; the other half was filled with a sense of long-sought, flaming reality. That was the word: falling in love with Martha made things real.

A TOURIST MECCA SET IN A SILVER SEA

Two years ago an enterprising leisure group launched a new venture off the south coast of England. It has swiftly become one of the most coveted destinations for upmarket vacationers. Staff writer Kathleen Su asks whether the new Island state may prove a role model for more than just the leisure business.

It is a classic springtime day outside Buckingham Palace. The clouds are high and fleecy, William Wordsworth's daffodils are blowin' in the wind, and guardsmen in their traditional 'busbies' (bearskin hats) are standing to attention in front of their sentry boxes. Eager crowds press their noses to the railings for a glimpse of the British Royal Family.

Promptly at 11 o'clock, the tall double windows behind the balcony open. The ever-popular King and Queen appear, waving and smiling. A ten-gun salute splits the air. The guardsmen present arms and cameras click like old-fashioned turnstiles. A quarter of an hour later, promptly at 11.15, the tall windows close again until the following day.

All, however, is not as it seems. The crowds and the cameras are for real; so are the clouds. But the guardsmen are actors, Buckingham Palace is a half-size replica, and the gun salute electronically produced. Gossip has it that the King and Queen themselves are not real, and that the contract they signed two years ago with Sir Jack Pitman's Pitco Group excuses them from this daily ritual. Insiders confirm that an opt-out clause

does exist in the royal contract, but that Their Majesties appreciate the cash fee that accompanies each balcony appearance.

This is showtime, but it's also big business. Along with the first Visitors (as they call tourists hereabouts) came the World Bank and the IMF. Their approval – coupled with the enthusiastic endorsement of the Portland Third Millennium Think Tank – means that this ground-breaking enterprise is likely to be much copied in years and decades to come. Sir Jack Pitman, whose brain-child the Island was, takes a back seat nowadays, while still keeping a beady eye on things from his exalted position as Governor, a historic title going back centuries. The public face of Pitman House is currently its CEO Martha Cochrane. Ms Cochrane, a trim forty-something with an Oxbridge brain, a sharp wit, and an array of designer suits, explained to the *Wall Street Journal* how one of the traditional problem areas of tourism has always been that five-star sites are too rarely in easy reach of one another. 'Remember the frustration of hauling yourself from A to B to Z? Remember those nose-to-tail tourist buses?' Visitors from the US to Europe's prime locations will recognize the tune: poor infrastructure, inefficient tourist thruput, inconsiderate opening hours – everything the traveller doesn't need. Here even the postcards come pre-stamped.

Once upon a time this used to be the Isle of Wight, but its current inhabitants prefer a simpler and grander title: they call it The Island. Its official address since declaring independence two years ago is typical of Sir Jack Pitman's roguish, buccaneering style. He named it England, England. Cue for song.

It was also his original stroke of lateral thinking which brought together in a single hundred-and-fifty-five square mile zone everything the Visitor might want to see of what we used to think of as England. In our time-strapped age, surely it makes sense to be able to visit Stonehenge and Anne Hathaway's Cottage in the same morning, take in a 'ploughman's lunch' atop the White Cliffs of Dover, before passing a leisurely

afternoon at the Harrods emporium inside the Tower of London (Beefeaters push your shopping trolley for you!). As for transport between sites: those gas-guzzling tourist buses have been replaced by the eco-friendly pony-and-cart. While if the weather turns showery, you can take a famous black London taxi or even a big red double-decker bus. Both are environmentally clean, being fuelled by solar power.

This great success story began, it's worth recalling, under a hail of criticism. There were protests at what some described as the virtually complete destruction of the Isle of Wight. This was clearly an exaggeration. Key heritage buildings have been saved, along with much of the coastline and parts of the central downland. But almost one hundred percent of the housing stock – described by Professor Ivan Fairchild of Sussex University and a leading critic of the project, as 'dinky interwar and mid-century bungalows whose lack of stand-out architectural merit was compensated for by their extraordinary authenticity and time-capsule fittings' – has been wiped out.

Except that you can still see it if you wish. In Bungalow Valley, Visitors may wander through a perfectly-recreated street of typical pre-Island housing. Here you will find front gardens where rockeries drip with aubretia and families of plaster 'gnomes' (dwarf statues) congregate. A path of 'crazy paving' (recycled concrete slabs) leads to a front door filled with crinkly glass. Ding-dong chimes echo in your ear as you pass into a living zone of garish carpeting. There are flying ducks on striped wallpaper, 'three-piece suites' (sofas with matching chairs) of austere design, and French windows giving on to a 'crazy-paving' patio. From here there are further vistas of aubretia, hanging baskets, 'gnomes' and antique satellite dishes. It's all cute enough, but you wouldn't want too much of it. Professor Fairchild claims that Bungalow Valley is not so much a recreation as a self-justifying parody; but he concedes the argument has been lost.

The second ground for complaint was that the Island targets high rollers. Even though most vacation costs are pre-paid,

immigration officers examine arrivals not for passport irregularities or vaccination stamps but for credit-worthiness. Travel companies have been advised to warn vacationers that if their credit rating is not to the satisfaction of the Island authorities, they will be sent back on the first airplane. If there are no seats available on flights, those who are unwelcome are put on the next cross-channel ferry to Dieppe, France.

Such apparent élitism is defended by Martha Cochrane as merely 'good housekeeping'. She further explains: 'A vacation here may look expensive, but it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Besides, after you've visited us, you don't need to see Old England. And our costings show that if you attempted to cover the "originals" it would take you three or four times as long. So our premium pricing actually works out cheaper.'

There is a dismissive tone to her voice when she pronounces the word 'originals'. She is referring to the third main objection to the project, one initially much discussed but now almost forgotten. This is the belief that tourists visit premier sites in order to experience not just their antiquity but also their uniqueness. Detailed studies commissioned by Pitman House revealed that this was far from being the case. 'Towards the end of the last century,' Ms Cochrane explains, 'the famous statue of David by Michelangelo was removed from the Piazza della Signoria in Florence and replaced by a copy. This proved just as popular with visitors as the "original" had ever been. What's more, ninety-three percent of those polled expressed the view that, having seen this perfect replica, they felt no need to seek out the "original" in a museum.'

Pitman House drew two conclusions from these studies. First, that tourists had hitherto flocked to 'original' sites because they simply had no choice in the matter. In the old days, if you wanted to see Westminster Abbey, you had to go to Westminster Abbey. Second, and more laterally, that if given the option between an inconvenient 'original' or a convenient replica, a high proportion of tourists would opt for the latter. 'Besides,' adds Ms Cochrane with a wry smile, 'Don't you

think it is empowering and democratic to offer people a wider choice, whether it's in breakfast food or historic sites? We're merely following the logic of the market.'

The project could not have had a more spectacular vindication. Both airports – Tennyson One and Tennyson Two – are approaching capacity. Visitor thurput has outperformed the most optimistic expectations. The Island itself is packed yet calmly efficient. There is always a friendly 'bobby' (policeman) or 'Beefeater' (Tower of London guard) from whom to ask the way; while the 'cabbies' (taxi-drivers) are all fluent in at least one of the major tourist languages. Most speak English too!

Maisie Bransford, of Franklin Tn, vacationing with her family, told the *Journal*, 'We'd heard that England was kind of dowdy and old-fashioned, and not really up with the cutting edge of the modern world. But we've been mighty surprised. It's a real home from home.' Paul Harrison, chief adviser to Martha Cochrane, and in charge of day-to-day strategy, explains that, 'There are two guiding principles here. Number one, client choice. Number two, guilt avoidance. We never try to bully people into having a good time, into thinking they're enjoying themselves when in fact they aren't. We just say, if you don't like these premier sites, we've got others.'

A good example of client choice is how you spend your money – literally. As Ms Cochrane points out, Pitman House could easily have eliminated any awareness of financial disbursement, either by all-inclusive packages, or by the instant crediting of a final account. But research indicated that the majority of vacationers enjoy the act of spending, and, just as importantly, that of being seen to spend. So, for those addicted to plastic, there is an Island Charge Card, diamond-shaped rather than oblong, which takes up the credit limit of your card back home.

But there is also, for the fiscally adventurous, the head-scratching complexity of real old English currency. What a rich and pocket-stretching array of copper and silver you will find at your command: farthings, ha'pennies, pennies, groats, tanners,

shillings, florins, half-crowns, crowns, sovereigns and guineas. Of course, it is possible to play the traditional English pub game of shove-ha'penny, or shuffleboard, with a plastic counter, but how much more satisfying to feel the weight of a glinting copper coin against your thumb. Gamblers from Las Vegas to Atlantic City know the heft in the hand of the silver dollar. Here at the Island Casino you can play with a velvet purseful of Angels, each worth seven shillings and sixpence, and each impressed with the figure of Saint Michael slaying the Dragon.

And what dragons have Sir Jack Pitman and his team slain here on the Island? If we look at the place not just as a leisure business – whose success seems assured – but as the miniature state it has effectively been for the past two years, what lessons might it hold for the rest of us?

For a start, there is full employment, so there is no need for burdensome welfare programs. Radical critics still claim that this desirable end was produced by undesirable means, when Pitco shipped the old, the longterm sick and the socially dependent off to the mainland. But Islanders are not heard to complain, any more than they complain about the lack of crime, which eliminates the need for policemen, probation officers and prisons. The system of socialized medicine, once popular in Old England, has been replaced by the American model. Everyone, visitor or resident, is obliged to take out insurance; and the air-ambulance link to the Pitman wing of Dieppe hospital does the rest.

Richard Poborsky, analyst for the United Bank of Switzerland, told the *Wall Street Journal*: 'I think this development is very exciting. It's a pure market state. There's no interference from government because there is no government. So there's no foreign or domestic policy, only economic policy. It's a pure interface between buyers and sellers without the market being skewed by central government with its complex agendas and election promises.

'People have been trying to find new ways to live for centuries. Remember all those hippie communes? They always

failed, and why? Because they failed to understand two things: human nature, and how the market works. What's happening on the Island is a recognition that man is a market-driven animal, that he swims in the market like a fish in the sea. Without making any predictions, let's just say that I think I've seen the future, and I think it works.'

But this is to look ahead. The Island Experience, as the billboards have it, is everything you imagined England to be, but more convenient, cleaner, friendlier, and more efficient. Archaeologists and historians might suspect that some of the monuments are not what traditionalists would call authentic. But as Pitman House surveys confirm, most people here are first-time visitors making a conscious market choice between Old England and England, England. Would you rather be that confused figure on a windswept sidewalk in dirty Old London Town, trying to find your way while the rest of the city bustles past ('Tower of London? Can't help you there, guv'), or someone who is treated as the center of attention? On the Island, if you want to catch a big red bus, you find that two or three come along in a jolly convoy before you can sort out the groats in your pocket and the dispatcher can raise her whistle to her lips.

Here, in place of the traditional cold-fish English welcome, you will find international-style friendliness. And what about the traditional chilly weather? That's still around. There is even a permanent winter zone, with robins hopping through the snow, and the chance to join the age-old local game of throwing snowballs at the bobby's helmet, and then running away while he slips over on the ice. You can also don a war-time gas-mask and experience the famous London 'pea-soup' fog. And if it rains, it rains. But only outdoors. Still, what would England, 'original' or otherwise, be without rain?

Despite all our demographic changes, many Americans still feel a kinship with, and curiosity about, the little land William Shakespeare called 'this precious stone set in the silver sea'. This was, after all, the country from which the *Mayflower* set sail (it's

Thursday mornings at 10.30 for 'The Setting Sail of the *Mayflower*'). The Island is the place to satisfy this curiosity. The present writer has visited what is increasingly referred to as 'Old England' a number of times. From now on, only those with an active love of discomfort or necrophiliac taste for the antique need venture there. The best of all that England was, and is, can be safely and conveniently experienced on this spectacular and well-equipped diamond of an Island.

Kathleen Su travelled incognito and solely at the expense of the *Wall Street Journal*.

FROM HER OFFICE

Martha could experience the whole Island. She could watch the feeding of the One Hundred and One Dalmatians, check throughput at Haworth Parsonage, eavesdrop on snug-bar camaraderie between straw-chewing yokel and Pacific Rim sophisticate. She could track the Battle of Britain, the Last Night of the Proms, The Trial of Oscar Wilde and the Execution of Charles I. On one screen King Harold would glance fatally towards the sky; on another posh ladies in Sissinghurst hats pricked out seedlings and counted the varieties of butterfly perching on the buddleia; on a third hackers were pock-marking the fairway of the Alfred, Lord Tennyson golf course. There were sights on the Island Martha knew so intimately from a hundred camera angles that she could no longer remember whether or not she had ever seen them in reality.

On some days she seemed hardly to leave her office. But then, if she chose to operate an open-door policy with employees, she had only herself to blame. Sir Jack would no doubt have instituted a Versailles system, with hopeful petitioners clustering in an ante-room while a Pitmanesque eye

Robin's Band, like reluctant actors, were pulled from the Cave to take numerous bows. A helicopter ambulance dodged in to transport the Colonel's Number Two straight to Dieppe Hospital. Meanwhile, Mad Mike himself, bound with thick rope, was displayed as a hostage.

The applause continued. It had definite possibilities, Martha thought. She and Paul would have to talk it through with Jeff. The Concept needed further Development, of course, and it was a pity about the Band's over-enthusiasm; but cross-epoch conflict clearly had strong Visitor Resonance.

Sir Jack cleared his throat and turned to Martha. Ceremoniously, he placed his tricorne on his head. 'I shall expect your resignation in the morning.'

Had he lost all touch with reality?

THE NEXT MORNING,

when Martha opened her office door, Sir Jack Pitman was sitting behind her desk, thumb casually hooked through gilded lanyard. He was on the telephone; or at least, he was speaking into the telephone. Behind him stood Paul. Sir Jack pointed to a low chair drawn up on the other side of the desk. As at her first interview, Martha declined to follow instruction.

After a minute or so, having issued orders to someone who might or might not have been at the other end of the telephone, Sir Jack touched a button and said, 'Hold my calls.' Then he looked up at Martha. 'Surprised?'

Martha did not reply.

'Well, not unsurprised, then.' He chuckled, as at some obscure reference.

Martha was almost there when Sir Jack rose heavily and said, 'But my dear Paul, I forget. This is *your* chair now. My

congratulations.' Aping some court chamberlain or parliamentary usher, he stiffly held the chair for Paul, then pushed it in under his thighs. Paul, Martha noted, at least had the shame to look embarrassed.

'You see, Miss Cochrane, you never learned the simple lesson. You remind me of the hunter who went after the grizzly bear. You know the story?' He did not wait for Martha to respond. 'It bears retelling, anyway. *Bears*, that's rich, excuse my unintended jocundity. It must be a product of my mood. So: a hunter heard that there was a bear on an island off the coast of Alaska. He hired a helicopter to take him over the water. After a search he found the bear, a great, big, wise old bear. He lined him up in his sights, got off a quick shot - *peeeeeooooow* - and made the terrible, the unforgivable mistake of merely wounding the animal. The bear ran off into the woods, with the hunter in pursuit. He circled the island, he criss-crossed it, he sought bear tracks up hill and down dale. Perhaps Bruin had crawled off into some cave and breathed his furry last. At any event, no bear. The day was beginning to draw in, so the hunter decided that enough was enough, and made his weary way back to where the helicopter was waiting. He got to within a hundred yards or so of it and noticed the pilot waving to him in a rather excited fashion. He stopped, put down his gun to wave back, and *that* was the moment when the bear, with a single swipe of its extraordinary paw' - Sir Jack sketched the gesture in case Martha could not imagine it - 'took off the hunter's head.'

'And the bear lived happily ever after?' Martha was unable to resist the jibe.

'Well, I'll tell you this, the hunter fucking didn't, Miss Cochrane, the hunter fucking didn't.' Sir Jack, rearing up before her, seemed more ursine by the moment, rocking and bellowing. Paul chuckled like a reinstated sycophant.

Ignoring Sir Jack, she said to the newly appointed Chief Executive Officer, 'I give you six months at the most.'

'Is that accurate flattery?' he replied coldly.

'I thought ...' Oh, forget it, Martha. You thought you'd assessed the situation. Various situations. You hadn't. That's all.

'Pardon me for intruding upon a moment of private grief.' Sir Jack's sarcasm was lascivious. 'But there are a few contractual points to make clear. Your pension rights are revoked as per contract due to your gross misconduct over the incident at the Hood Cave. You have twelve hours to clear your desk and your quarters. Your leaving present is an economy-class one-way ferry ticket to Dieppe. Your career is at an end. But just in case you are inclined to disagree, the fraud and embezzlement charges we have prepared will lie on the record for future activation if necessary.'

'Auntie May,' said Martha.

'My mother had only brothers,' replied Sir Jack smugly.

She looked at Paul. He wouldn't accept her eye. 'There's no evidence,' he said. 'Not any more. It must have disappeared. Been burnt or something.'

'Or eaten by a bear.'

'Very good, Miss Cochrane. I'm glad to see you retain your sense of humour despite everything. Of course I have to warn you that were you to make any allegations, public or private, which I might deem harmful to the interests of my beloved Project, then I should not hesitate to use all the powers at my considerable command to discourage you. And knowing me as you do, you will be aware that I would not content myself with merely defending my interests. I would be *very* pro-active. I'm sure you understand.'

'Gary Desmond,' said Martha.

'Miss Cochrane, you *are* off the pace. Early retirement was clearly beckoning anyway. Tell her the news, Paul.'

'Gary Desmond has been appointed editor-in-chief of *The Times*.'

'At a generous salary.'

'Correct, Miss Cochrane. Cynics say that everyone has their price. I am less cynical than some I could mention. I think everyone has a proper sense of the level at which they would

like to be remunerated. Is that not a more honourable way of looking at things? You yourself, I seem to remember, demanded certain salary conditions when you first came to work for me. You wanted the job, but you named your price. So any criticism of the estimable Mr Desmond, whose journalistic record is second to none, would be pure hypocrisy.'

'About which you ...' Oh, forget it, Martha. Let it go.

'You seem to be leaving a lot of sentences unfinished this morning, Miss Cochrane. Stress, I expect. A long sea voyage is the traditional remedy. Alas, we can only offer a short Channel crossing.' He pulled an envelope from his pocket and tossed it in front of her. 'And now,' he said, placing his tricorne on his head and drawing himself up less like a rearing grizzly than a ship's captain pronouncing sentence on a mutineer, 'I hereby declare you *persona non grata* on the Island. In perpetuity.'

Responses came to Martha's mind, but not her lips. She gave Paul a neutral glance, ignored the envelope, and left her office for the final time.

SHE SAID GOODBYE

to Dr Max, to Country Mouse, to the Pragmatic Pagan. Dr Max, who sought neither happiness nor salvation. Did he seek love? She presumed not, but they hadn't exactly discussed it. He claimed he wanted only pleasure, with its beautifully etched discontents. They kissed cheeks, and she got a whiff of cloned *eau de toilette*. As she turned to go, Martha suddenly felt responsible. Dr Max might have constructed his own shiny carapace, but she saw him at that moment as something vulnerable, innocent, decorticated. Who would protect him now that she was gone?

'Dr Max.'

'Miss Cochrane?' He stood before her, thumbs in the pockets

of his eucalyptus waistcoat, as if expecting another student question he could biff around.

'Look, you remember when I called you in a couple of months ago?'

'When you were planning to sack me?'

'Dr Max!'

'Well, you were, weren't you? An h-istorian acquires a certain nose for the mechanisms of power in the course of his studies.'

'Will you be all right, Dr Max?'

'I imagine so. The Pitman papers will take a lot of sorting. And then of course there's the biography.'

Martha smiled at him, and shook her head rebukingly. The rebuke was self-directed: Dr Max needed neither her advice nor her protection.

In the church of St Aldwyn she gazed at the lottery-line numbers. No jackpot this week, yet again, Martha. She sat on a dank, initialled petit-point hassock and seemed almost to sniff the wet light. Why was she drawn here? She didn't come to pray. There was no neat spirit of repentance. The sceptic come to heel, the blasphemer whose cataracts dissolve: her case did not replicate the old clergy-pleasing story. Yet was there a parallel? Dr Max did not believe in salvation, but perhaps she did, and felt she might find it among the remnants of a greater, discarded system of salvation.

— So, Martha, what are you after? You can tell me.

— What am I after? I don't know. Perhaps a recognition that life, despite everything, has a capacity for seriousness. Which has eluded me. As it eludes most people, probably. But still.

— Go on.

— Well, I suppose life must be more serious if it has a structure, if there's something larger out there than yourself.

— Nice and diplomatic, Martha. Banal, too. Triumphantly meaningless. Try again.

— All right. If life is a triviality, then despair is the only option.

— Better, Martha. Much better. Unless what you're meaning is that you've decided to seek God as a way of avoiding anti-depressants.

— No, not that. You misunderstand. I'm not in a church because of God. One of the problems is that the words, the serious words, have been used up over the centuries by people like those rectors and vicars listed on the wall. The words don't seem to fit the thoughts nowadays. But I think there was something enviable about that otherwise unenviable world. Life is more serious, and therefore better, and therefore bearable, if there is some larger context.

— Oh come on, Martha, you're boring me. You may not be religious, but you're certainly pious. I liked you more the way you used to be. Brittle cynicism is a truer response to the modern world than this . . . sentimental yearning.

— No, it's not sentimental. On the contrary. I'm saying life is more serious, and better, and bearable, even if its context is arbitrary and cruel, even if its laws are false and unjust.

— Now this is the luxury of hindsight. Tell that to the victims of religious persecution down the centuries. Would you prefer to be broken on the wheel or have a nice little bungalow on the Isle of Wight? I think I can guess the answer.

— And another thing . . .

— But you didn't answer my last point.

— Well, you might be wrong. And another thing. An individual's loss of faith and a nation's loss of faith, aren't they much the same? Look what happened to England. Old England. It stopped believing in things. Oh, it still muddled along. It did OK. But it lost seriousness.

— Oh, so now it's a nation's loss of faith, is it? This is pretty ironic stuff coming from you, Martha. You think the nation does better if it has some serious beliefs, even if they're arbitrary and cruel? Bring back the Inquisition, wheel on the Great Dictators, Martha Cochrane proudly presents . . .

— Stop. I can't explain without mocking myself. The words

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 shoed 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

expire as Harris caught himself and melodramatically lowered his voice. 'Of course, the vicar has always denied . . .' they would be offered, or 'Them's you meet all claim they never knew old Edna, but she'd wash 'em at birth and wash 'em after death, and in between . . .'

From time to time Mr Mullin the schoolmaster would chide Jez Harris, suggesting that folklore, and especially invented folklore, should not be the subject of monetary exchange or barter. The schoolmaster was tactful and shy, so kept to generality and principle. Others in the village put things more plainly: for them, Harris's fabulation and cupidity were proof of the farrier's unAnglian origins.

But in any case Harris would decline the reprimand, and with various winks and scalp-scratchings draw Mr Mullin into his own narrative. 'Now, don't you be a-scared, Mr Mullin, Sir. Never breathed a word about you and Edna, not a word, I'd draw this very scythe across my giblets if ever my gullet started bleating about that business . . .'

'Oh, come off it, Jez,' the schoolmaster would protest, though his use of the Christian name was a virtual admission of defeat. 'I just mean don't get carried away with all the guff you give them. If you want some local legends I've got lots of books I can lend you. Folk collections, that sort of thing.' Mr Mullin had been an antiquarian dealer in his previous life.

'Old Mother Fairweather and all that, you mean? Fact is, Mr Mullin, Sir,' – and here Harris gave a look of modest smugness – 'I've tried 'em on that stuff and it don't go down so well. They prefer Jez's stories, that's the truth. You and Miss Cochrane can read your books by candlelight together . . .'

'Oh, for God's sake, Jez.'

'Must have been a comely one in her time, that Miss Cochrane, don't you think? They do say someone stole one of her petticoats off the line last Monday sevensnight when old Brock the badger were playing by the light of the moon on Gibbet Hill . . .'

Not long after this encounter Mr Mullin, earnest and

embarrassed, all pink face and leather elbow patches, knocked at Martha Cochrane's back door and declared his ignorance in the matter of the stolen underclothes, about whose loss he had been truly unaware until, until . . .

'Jez Harris?' asked Martha with a smile.

'You don't mean . . .?'

'I think I'm probably a little old for anyone to be interested in my washing.'

'Oh, the . . . the *rogue*.'

Mr Mullin was a timid, fussy man whose pupils called him Chiff-Chaff. He accepted a cup of peppermint tea and, not for the first time, allowed his complaints against the blacksmith to take slightly higher ground. 'The thing is, Miss Cochrane, in one way I can't help being on his side, telling whoppers to all those snoopers and nosey-parkers who won't even let on what they're up to. Let the deceiver be himself deceived – I'm sure that's the tag, even if I can't quite put my finger on it for certain at the moment. Could it be Martial . . .?'

'But on the other hand . . .'

'Yes, thank you, but on the other hand, I wish he wouldn't *invent* these things. I've got books of myths and legends he's welcome to. There's all sorts of tales to choose from. He could lead a little tour if he wished. Take them up to Gibbet Hill and talk about the Hooded Hangman. Or there's Old Mother Fairweather and her Luminous Geese.'

'They wouldn't be *his* stories, would they?'

'No, they'd be *our* stories. They'd be . . . *true*.' He sounded unconvinced himself. 'Well, maybe not true, but at least recorded.' Martha merely looked at him. 'Anyway, you see my point.'

'I see your point.'

'But I feel you're on his side, Miss Cochrane. You are, aren't you?'

'Mr Mullin,' said Martha, sipping her peppermint tea, 'when you get to my age you often find that you aren't on anyone's

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 transferrable. 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 modernising 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 straggliness, 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 milkiness 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 disenchanted 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 aircrashes 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 moralising 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 wiseacres 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.

"Bloody golden eggs again!"

England, England
by Julian Barnes
London: Jonathan Cape, 1998

"That England, that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself."
-- *Richard II*, II.i.40

"It's not a state-of-Britain novel. It's to do where Britain is in the longer spread of history. At least, that's what I think its going to be about." -- Julian Barnes in a 1995 interview discussing his plans for his latest novel.

In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Julian Barnes writes that seizing the past is like attempting to grasp hold of a greased piglet. If so, then seizing a nation's past must be like trying to tackle an oiled hippopotamus. If you do manage to put a hand on the behemoth, you may find Sir Jack Pitman sitting on its back. Sir Jack is an eccentric tycoon in Julian Barnes's new novel *England England*, and he is also the enterprising force behind the construction of the "Project," a theme park on the Isle of Wight which strives to contain all things "English." Replicas of major tourist spots are concentrated in one convenient location on "The Island," as it is soon known, creating a "sort of fast-forward version of England: one minute it was Big Ben, the next Anne Hathaway's cottage, then the White Cliffs of Dover, Wembley Stadium, Stonehenge, [the king's] Palace, and Sherwood Forest" (164). As the Project's growing success produces the steady decline of "Old England," Sir Jack Pitman renames it England, England (179).

England England is covered with Barnes's ironic, questioning fingerprints. Set in an undated future, the Island recreates British history and culture based on surveys and consumer polls, sometimes constructing history from mere myth in order to attract the public. The tycoon owner of family newspapers is caught in an unspeakable act reminiscent of a good Dan Kavanagh novel. Actors mistake fiction for reality as they begin to believe they are the historical characters they play. The Royal Family, exhausted by scandal, moves to the Island's replica of Buckingham Palace with promises of tax-exemption, no paparazzi, and a light work schedule further reduced by the hiring of look-alike actors to wave from the Palace windows. The success of this ironic, pseudo-England drains Old England of tourism and economic health, leaving behind a quasi-idyllic country renamed "Anglia."

"The longer spread of history" represented on the island of England, England is really just a collection of historical highlights, of false and true memories, of scenes or incidents which, when placed together, give off the impression of the nation's past. This view of history is found in much of Barnes's work. In *Staring at the Sun*, Jean Serjeant views her memories as a "series of magic lantern slides," encapsulated "Incidents" within



her life (5). The slides are similar to the cross channel ferry telescopes in *Flaubert's Parrot* which clear and fade the view of the coastline depending on what perspective is taken. *England, England* picks up the theme of a pieced together history in the novel's opening metaphor (and the cover illustration) of a child's puzzle of England.

The child is Martha Cochrane, and her story frames the novel, providing Barnes a chance to foreshadow the Project's scope and establish metaphors and themes, all to be commented on from Martha's more removed perspective at the end of the novel. Her answer to the question, "What's your first memory?" is "I don't remember" (3), so she lies about her first memory, claiming it was of sitting on the kitchen floor putting together a child's puzzle of England. "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" (3), she states, establishing a sense of fakery and copied truth which is carried throughout the novel and is seen most clearly in the Project. When Dr. Max, the Project's official historian, describes a local myth involving a woman's Mary Poppin-ish fall from a cliff, no one asks him to cite his source. Truth is less important than the need for an Island attraction, the "Island Breakfast Experience," which includes "an engraved Certificate of Descent stamped with Sir Jack's signature and date" (119-123). Countless such examples of history's malleability are found on the Island, each shifting the theme in a new, but entirely believable way.

Barnes presents the narrative *England, England*, through numerous short passages which reveal some aspect or background of the history of Sir Jack Pitman's great project and its major players. Individual sections sometimes adopt a unique style, as well, such as a list or, in one case, a newspaper column. In this way, Barnes embeds the puzzle metaphor at a structural level, highlighting events or pieces of the Project's development which then appear to join together to provide one large picture, the essence of what truly happened. The style reminds us that Barnes is in control of the story, our guide through events. We give ourselves over to him in full faith that what he says is true, that he is not like the Project's development team, creating truths from myth.

England, England, is divided into three main sections. The first, named "England," deals with Martha Cochrane's childhood memories and establishes the philosophy of history repeated in various forms throughout the novel. The middle (and longest) section is titled "England, England" and details the Project's development and implementation. There are several sub-plots involving Martha, hired as the Project's official cynic, Sir Jack, Dr. Max, Paul (Sir Jack's "idea catcher"), and a power struggle over control of the Island. The final section "Anglia" is Martha's return to "Old England" which has declined in power, stature, and population as the Island's popularity grew. Anglia seems to have returned to a simpler time, to fiefdoms and pastures, paved roads giving way to forests and villages.

During the course of the novel's last section, Barnes shows us that Anglia is just as fake, based on just as many fuzzy, distant memories and false truths as England, England. When reporters (poorly disguised as hikers) come to Anglia, local inhabitant Jez Harris (himself formerly Jack Oshinsky of Milwaukee, junior legal expert with an American electronics firm) often invents local myths and histories, nurturing the folksy view of Anglia. When Mr. Mullin, the local school teacher (former antiques dealer) offers Jez books of folk stories, Jez answers, "I've tried 'em on that stuff and 'it don't go down so well. They prefer Jez's stories, that's the truth" (244). "I wish he wouldn't invent these things," Mr. Mullin complains to Martha.

"I've got books of myths and legends he's welcome to. There's all sorts of tales to choose from. He could lead a little tour if he wished. Take them up to Gibbet Hill and talk about Hooded Hangman. Or there's Old Mother Fairweather and her Luminous Geese."

"They wouldn't be his stories, would they?"

"No, they'd be our stories. They'd be . . . true." He sounded unconvinced himself. "Well, maybe not true, but at least recorded" (245).

Barnes is not fooled by the return of old England to an idyllic Anglia. He can still see the underlying falsehood of a nation's constructed history, no matter how many folk tales are culled in support of it.

So where does this leave us? Perhaps that depends on which ferry telescope you choose to look through. Many of the telescopes may focus on Barnes's intricate plot (much more happens in the novel than I've touched on, but the book is far too rich for me to summarize), his concern with his character's sexual experiences, his portrayal of the Royal family, his commentary on the state of post-imperial England, or other items on the shoreline. But these themes are just pieces of the novel. Together, they constitute Barnes's primary theme of history.

Cynicism may tell us that all history is just "a memory of a memory of a memory, mirrors set in parallel" (6), and perhaps history is this way, varied and molded, a distant image in a foggy mist. But can we live without it? "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," Martha contemplates. "[E]ven 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 memory" (6-7). *England, England* is pure, distilled Barnes writing with confidence and power, exceeding all hopes or expectations.

-- Ryan Roberts, © 1999

„Bloody golden eggs again!“, Url: < <http://www.julianbarnes.com/resources/bloody-eggs.html>>, access: 30/03/2012.