

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Memory Box

Margaret Forster

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Margaret Forster

Dedication

Title Page

Chapter I

Chapter II

Chapter III

Chapter IV

Chapter V

Chapter VI

Chapter VII

Chapter VIII

Chapter IX

Chapter X

Chapter XI

Chapter XII

Chapter XIII

Chapter XIV

Chapter XV

Chapter XVI

Copyright

About the Book

A dying woman leaves a sealed box for her baby daughter. Years later, as a young woman, the daughter Catherine finds the mysterious box, addressed to her, full of unexplained objects - three feathers, an exotic seashell, a painting, a mirror, two prints, an address book, a map, a hat, a rucksack, and a necklace - and she finally starts to unpack, literally and metaphorically, the story of a woman whom she never knew but who has cast a long shadow over her life. Having a 'perfect', beautiful, dead mother has been a heavy burden to carry, and one she has tended to resent. But now she sets off on the trail of her 'perfect' mother, trying to unravel the truth about a woman who turns out to be more complex, reckless and surprising than her family have painted her. And Catherine has to face up to the truths about herself and the damage that guilt and silence have done to her own relationships. Only when she has come to terms with her dead mother, can she move on, to take up the challenges of her own young life.

About the Author

Born in Carlisle, Margaret Forster is the author of many successful and acclaimed novels, including *Have the Men Had Enough?*, *Lady's Maid*, *Diary of an Ordinary Woman*, *Is There Anything You Want?* and most recently *Isa & May*, as well as bestselling memoirs (*Hidden Lives* and *Precious Lives*) and biographies. She is married to the writer and journalist Hunter Davies, and lives in London and the Lake District.

ALSO BY MARGARET FORSTER

Dame's Delight
Georgy Girl
The Bogeyman
The Travels of Maudie Tipstaff
The Park
Miss Owen-Owen is At Home
Fenella Phizackerley
Mr Bone's Retreat
The Seduction of Mrs Pendlebury
Mother Can You Hear Me?
The Bride of Lowther Fell
Marital Rites
Private Papers
Have the Men Had Enough?
Lady's Maid
The Battle for Christabel
Mothers' Boys
Shadow Baby
Diary of an Ordinary Woman
Is There Anything You Want?
Keeping the World Away Over
Isa & May

Non-Fiction

The Rash Adventurer
William Makepeace Thackeray
Significant Sisters
Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Daphne du Maurier

Hidden Lives
Rich Desserts & Captain's Thin
Precious Lives
Good Wives?

Poetry

Selected Poems of Elizabeth
Barrett Browning (Editor)

For Joan White, of Loweswater

MARGARET FORSTER
The Memory Box

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

I

SUSANNAH WAS APPARENTLY perfect, as the dead so often become. She was, it seemed, perfectly beautiful, perfectly good, and perfectly happy during her comparatively short life. It was that last bit which made me determined not to have anything to do with her. The idea of anyone being 'perfectly happy' struck me, even as a child, as absurd. How could anyone but a moron be perfectly happy? It made me picture her as someone with a fat smile on her smug face all the time. It made me squirm to imagine this happy-clappy woman, and I did not want to acknowledge her. She wouldn't have liked me. No one was ever going to describe me as a perfect anything (except maybe a perfect nuisance) and certainly not as being perfectly happy. My face more often has a frown on it than a smile - 'So serious,' people say of me, as if being serious is a crime. And my nature, far from being sunny, is woefully cynical - 'How suspicious you are,' everyone tells me. True. I am suspicious, and lack spontaneity.

Not Susannah. She was apparently a wonderfully spontaneous person. She was said to meet life with open arms, ever buoyant and optimistic. They told me she was happy right up to her death, that everyone marvelled at her serenity. I do not believe a word of this. I think it was an image made up in a misguided attempt to comfort me. How, after all, could she be happy, knowing she was likely to die

soon, when she was a mere thirty-one years old and I, her baby, her only and much-longed-for child, barely six months old? Prove to me such a woman was happy then, and I will prove to you she was insane. But nobody has ever spoken to me properly of the circumstances of this distinctly unhappy death. These seem forgotten in the general overview of her life, which I suppose is some kind of tribute to her. Perhaps her death was too tragic for those who loved her to dwell on. It was not, as it turned out, all that tragic for me. I had only just over a year without a mother, and even then I had a grandmother and was not without mothering. I nearly always had a woman's loving arms around me; I was kissed and cuddled and sung to by a comforting mother figure. I was never in the least deprived of maternal love.

My father was lucky. He undoubtedly grieved for his young, happy wife, but he was young himself, and attractive and kind, and he very quickly fell in love again and married. I am sure that in terms of months and weeks and days and hours he suffered dreadfully, but he did not sink into absolute despair. Susannah's mother, my devoted Scottish grandmother, looked after me, helped by her other daughter, my Aunt Isabella, and he managed to go on working and have some semblance of private life. He sold the house he and Susannah had lived in and rented a small flat in Edinburgh's New Town. Weekdays he stayed there, weekends he came to be with me at my grandmother's house. This system worked well, to everyone's satisfaction, I gather, but in any case it was short-lived. He married Charlotte shortly after the first anniversary of Susannah's death had passed and I was given another mother who adored me and whom I quickly adored. He was happy ever after and so far as anyone could tell, and I include myself, never yearned for his dead first wife.

I have a feeling that the existence of the memory box may have troubled him from the beginning. He didn't give

it to me until my twenty-first birthday even though it had been in our house all that time, waiting for me to open it. Charlotte knew about it, of course, but neither she nor my father could bring themselves to mention it. I think they thought it would be morbid to do so, and they were afraid of its significance. Neither of them knew exactly what was in the box and though Susannah was so famous for being happy, and therefore could reasonably be counted upon not to have put anything in it which would be distressing, they could not be sure of how I would react to the legacy. I was a highly imaginative child, and they simply didn't know how to introduce this memory box into my life. It was too big a thing to make light of, and yet if they didn't make light of it, its importance might terrify me. Susannah had left no instructions as to when it should be given to me, at what age I should receive it. They thought it best to wait until I was grown up and give it to me on my eighteenth birthday. But I was not at home then, and so they put the presentation off.

Their apprehension strikes me now as curious. What exactly were they afraid of? Did they think I might be shocked, and if so why? It suggests to me an unexpected lack of trust on the part of my father. Charlotte never knew Susannah, so she cannot be blamed for his hesitation. The box, or rather the contents of the box, had, it seemed, been a secret. Susannah had kept them to herself, and maybe this had hurt and somehow alarmed him. She had apparently become obsessed with what she might put in it, almost feverish with a kind of awful excitement, or so my father told Charlotte, who later told me. She had pointed out that the box would have represented to Susannah the future of which she was being robbed and that therefore it was natural she should guard it fiercely, keep it entirely to herself. (Charlotte was good in that way, always trying to put herself into other people's minds.) At any rate, both of them were visibly uneasy, almost guilty, when eventually on

the morning of my twenty-first birthday they told me about it. It was clear they were relieved when I showed little interest in it. I said I didn't want to open it, or even see it.

This was a lie, and yet not a lie. I always sensed what would please my parents and whereas, when I was younger, I had often deliberately used my knowledge to torment them, by then I was more anxious to please and make amends for a tempestuous adolescence. I especially wanted to please my mother. I watched her face as I said I felt spooked by the idea of receiving a present from beyond the grave. I saw the tension in her eyes fade and felt I'd passed some kind of test. I was Charlotte's and always had been and would not acknowledge Susannah's claims. Even my father seemed relieved, though afterwards it struck me as just a little feeble that he did not attempt to persuade me - after all, he alone knew what the wretched box had meant to Susannah. But he was clearly glad to have the subject over with, and perhaps he thought he had been wise to wait until I was an adult before mentioning it at all. But if that's the case, I am not sure he was right - not in the long term. The box did in fact arouse my curiosity even if I found I wanted to suppress the instinct. Aged ten, say, I don't think I would have been able to. I'm sure I would have been too excited at the thought that it might contain all sorts of treasures; and then around fifteen I'd have found it irresistibly romantic and would have been ready to weep on discovering dried roses, or some such, pressed between the pages of meaningful poems. But at twenty-one I was very self-centred; my curiosity was only slight and I could more easily deny it. I did feel a kind of nausea, in fact, at the notion of a dying woman selecting what to put in a box for me. And besides there was something sentimental about the whole idea of the box that I found repugnant.

But there was no doubt that it forced me to think of Susannah. Growing up, I could hardly have thought of her less, wanting Charlotte to be my only mother, and believing

her to be so, against all the evidence. I was always furious if anyone referred to her as my stepmother, though Charlotte herself would try to calm me by pointing out that whether I liked it or not that was what she was. Luckily, this didn't happen often because hardly anyone knew Charlotte was not my biological mother. When my father married her, he had also moved from Edinburgh to Oxford, and all those who came to know him there assumed Charlotte was indeed what I called her - my mother. It rarely came out that she was not, though no deliberate evasion of the truth was practised. If anyone had cared to look, they would have seen photographs of Susannah holding me, a few weeks old, in our house. If asked, my parents wouldn't have hesitated to reply that this was Susannah, my father's first wife, who had died tragically when I was a baby. I was the one who sometimes lied. 'It's some relation,' I would say, and feel only vaguely ashamed.

I never liked the constant reminders of Susannah which I was given, especially by my grandmother, when I was young. It irritated me to be told stories about her, or hear comparisons - 'You're just like Susannah, she used to laugh just like that.' I would stop laughing immediately and consciously try to alter my laugh afterwards for as long as I remembered. The words 'It's odd, you're nothing like Susannah' were what I wanted to hear, or even better, 'It's odd, you're so like Charlotte.' What was truly odd was that for a while, when I was rather a plump child, before I grew tall and thin, there was an actual physical resemblance between Charlotte and me and none at all with Susannah. She was blonde, fair-skinned, blue-eyed and quite petite; I was dark, brown-eyed, and rather olive-skinned - just like Charlotte (though also, which I discounted, like my paternal grandmother and my father). I was quite triumphant when, shortly before she died, my grandmother was moved to say, rather sadly, 'There's nothing of Susannah in you, you're all your father's side.' I was glad. I

didn't want to be like a dead woman. If I had to be 'like' someone in our family, I wanted it to be someone living.

My father and Charlotte had no children. They had wanted them, in Charlotte's case passionately, but they had none. They were sad about this, and so was I. Naturally (at least, I think it is natural) I wanted brothers and sisters, but I'd smirk with pleasure and feel proud whenever Charlotte said how lucky she was to have me. Looking back, as I am doing now, I see how brave and sensible she was about her own infertility. She didn't make an issue of it. It was hard for her, when she had so wanted a large family, such as she herself belonged to, not to have even one child. But she had me from eighteen months and I believe that I was young enough for her to come to feel, as I felt, that she really was my mother. If I had rejected her, or if she had not been able to love me, it would have been different, but we bonded, as they say, perfectly. Even her own family seemed to forget I was not actually hers. She had two sisters and two brothers who between them had eleven children and I was absorbed effortlessly into this band of cousins. They all came to stay regularly. I think my father found these visits, some of them lengthy (one of the brothers was in the RAF and we had his children to stay for long holidays when he was stationed far away), a bit of a strain, but my mother loved the house to be full of children, and not just because it gave me companionship.

It was a large house with plenty of room for everyone. My father had converted it himself, thinking of all kinds of ingenious ways to modernise it without destroying the more attractive features of its Edwardian character. From the outside, it was impossible to tell, unless you were an architect (as he was), how the dark rooms had been made light. I loved that house. Everyone else's seemed dull or cramped by comparison, claustrophobic and fussy, whereas ours was all pale wood floors, and glass skylights and doors, and white paint. It was spacious and sparsely

furnished, and full of greenery. Converted in the early Seventies, it was ahead of its time, or ahead of what became the fashion, in being Scandinavian in taste. My Scottish grandmother thought it was comfortless, cold and austere, but the cousins admired it. The top floor was turned into a kind of permanent dormitory for them, complete with bathroom and kitchen, and they could hardly bear to leave at the end of the holidays. I slept up there with them, excited at first to be part of a huge gang.

I don't know what happened to that feeling. I don't even know what happened to most of those cousins. The closeness, I now realise, was all Charlotte's doing - she created the atmosphere in which those relationships flourished. Left to myself, I have not bothered to keep in touch with any of my cousins except Rory, and he was never part of that gang. Rory came to stay on his own or with his mother and had nothing to do with Charlotte's side of the family. He was my sole cousin on Susannah's side, the son of her sister, my Aunt Isabella. It was Rory who looked like Susannah, a fact our grandmother constantly remarked upon - 'Sideways genes,' she said, not that I knew what she meant. All I knew was that unlike my other cousins he didn't go in for sport and noisy games, and I wasn't in awe of him as I was of them. But it took a long time for me to feel more drawn to him than to them. By the time I was seven or eight years old, however, Rory's so-called wickedness was already becoming deeply attractive and I was fascinated by him.

It was Rory who found a way into the attics. I had never been in the least curious about what lay under the roof of our house, though I knew well enough there was something above the top floor. From time to time bits of old furniture would arrive - things left in wills to one or other of my parents - and they would groan and look at each other and ask whether they should sell whatever it was, or put it in the attics. Usually they decided to wait a decent interval

before getting rid of the item, and someone would come to help my father cart it up the stairs. Rory was intrigued by what was stored up there. He thought there might be hidden treasure we could discover. I jeered at him for getting silly ideas from reading 'kids' books (whereas I was very proud of reading practical how-to-do-this-and-that books). But he persisted in imagining what lay above our heads, and so persuasive was he that against all my strong common sense I almost came to believe there might indeed be wonderful things, long since forgotten and waiting to be discovered. Eventually I agreed it was worth looking and said I'd ask my father. But that was the last thing Rory wanted - he was all for secrecy and making an adventure of it and somehow he drew me into his plan.

He insisted we should go exploring at night. We were sleeping on the top floor. With just the two of us there it seemed quite echoey, we seemed lost among all the beds. But Rory liked that, he liked things to be a bit creepy. We slept next to each other and he said he'd wake me when it was time. But he didn't need to; I didn't sleep and longed for him to nudge me and say we should go. When eventually he did - he'd been waiting for the noises below that would indicate that my parents had gone to bed - I bounded up, excited in spite of myself. Rory exaggerated every movement, pausing dramatically to listen every few steps, and I remember I found my heart thudding ridiculously. He led the way to the end of the huge room and to the top of the stairs and then pointed upwards. There was a handle, painted white and quite distinct, in the middle of the wooden ceiling. He had earlier fetched a tall stool, and now I held it while he clambered up and pulled the handle. Smoothly, silently, a metal ladder unfolded.

We went up into two attics separated by a thin wall with a small door in it. I think this plywood wall corresponded with a valley in the roof. The wall itself was only about five feet high, and the door was tiny, so that we felt like Alice in

Wonderland as we crawled through (I couldn't imagine how an adult could have managed it, but maybe they didn't; maybe the attics were always approached separately from different ends). Rory had a torch and shone it round each attic in turn. They were full of the old bits of furniture, mostly chairs, dark wooden things with velvet padded seats, and small tables with spindly legs. But there were chests and boxes too and we peered inside some of them, only to find they were packed with brocade curtains and musty old clothes. It was very disappointing and not even Rory could sustain my interest. I went back down the ladder on my own, to his annoyance, and left him to close the trapdoor, which he managed only after a great struggle.

But what we missed up there was the memory box, my box. It was in the further attic all the time, the one I hadn't had the patience to inspect thoroughly. Rory had shone his torch round and all we had seen were books, dozens of big volumes stacked up round the walls, and lots of huge rolls of what looked like paper (and I now know were maps and architectural drawings). I only found the box, hidden behind these piles, when I came to sell the house. I had to force myself then to inspect the attics, as well as every other room, to make decisions about where everything should go.

And that was only a little over a year ago, a terrible year, too terrible to dwell on, so I won't. My father, aged only sixty-five, and my mother - Charlotte, that is - only fifty-nine, both died within eight months of each other. The shock was agonising, my sense of outrage violent. This double blow seemed to me an injustice far more monstrous than the death of Susannah when I was a baby.

I don't know which death hit me hardest. My mother's, I think, because it took so long, and I had time to realise what was happening, but my father's was the more unbelievable, and in some ways more painful. He died first, of a stroke, without any warning. My mother went on living

in the family house in the brief interval between my father's death and the onset of her own terminal illness. She had no desire to sell it, to leave and move somewhere smaller where there would be no reminders of him. She wanted to be reminded of him: in fact, she found every reminder a comfort, her only comfort apart from me. Perhaps eventually, as she aged, she would have been obliged to move. I might even have tried to persuade her to do so since the house was so very large for one person, but she didn't have time to grow old. She died in hospital, slowly, and it was left to me to dispose of our beloved home and its contents.

There was always the option of living in the house myself, but I never considered this. It wasn't anything to do with its size, there were other reasons. The house was in Oxford. I didn't wish to live in Oxford, desirable though many people think it is. Being in that house after she and my father died was torture to me. The memories she wrapped round herself like a warm blanket pricked me like a hair shirt. Forced to enter it, to get things occasionally for my mother when she was in hospital, I had been overwhelmed by a longing to be back in my early childhood with my parents, loved by them and loving them. All the time I was fighting my way through crowds not of ghosts but of sensations. I felt slightly faint even putting my key in the lock, and once I was through the front door and had closed it behind me, hearing that distinctive click it made, and the light rattle of the brass letter box, I felt a kind of unpleasant excitement. The power of houses has always bewildered me - that mere bricks and mortar should possess such atmosphere is uncanny.

After my mother died, the hardest thing I had to do, far harder than organising her funeral, was go into our old home. I wept then as I had not done before. For a whole month, I was obliged to go there day after day until every bit of furniture, every object, every book and picture, every

piece of clothing, every last curtain and cushion was sorted out and ready to be collected by all manner of people. Someone suggested that I should employ a house clearance company, but I saw it as my duty to Charlotte to do the job myself, and I did it. This was, of course, how I found the box, though I very nearly missed it. I left the attics until last, and almost succumbed to the temptation to let the owner of a second-hand shop nearby do this final part of the clearing out, since I knew, or thought I knew, there was only junk up there. But then I recollected that glimpse, so long ago, of what had looked like drawings or plans. They might be work of my father's and if so I felt I should at least look at them.

I was very tired that last day, when I made myself go up there. The ladder didn't glide down easily as it had done all those years ago for Rory. It was stuck through disuse, I suppose, and I had to yank it hard. I had difficulty, too, clambering up through the remarkably small gap and realised only when I'd hauled myself through that there must be a far bigger entry into the other attic or no furniture could ever have been taken up. I should have looked for another trapdoor. But once in the attics everything was as I remembered - chairs, little tables, chests of clothes. The second-hand dealer could come for them, his lucky day (because some might be of value). The rolls of paper were indeed old architectural drawings, though none was signed and I didn't know if they were my father's. I began pulling them along, covering myself with dust, ready to drop them through the trapdoor so that I could take them into the garden and make a bonfire.

My father could never throw anything away - he was a hoarder, everything had to be kept, either in case it came in useful (however unlikely), or simply because he was fond of whatever it was. He was very fond of all his old plans and drawings - the very paper seemed precious to him. When I was little, he used to let me help him roll up the huge

sheets he worked on and I loved to do it. 'Slowly now, Catherine,' he'd say, and, 'Keep it even, keep it even, don't press too hard.' I'd roll up the paper at one end, struggling to do it neatly and keep pace with his rolling at the other, and together we would achieve the perfect roll he wanted. I found it hard to be slow and methodical and careful. I was all rush, and wondered why I couldn't be like my father. When I 'helped' him do such simple jobs he'd smile at me and say I'd done well. He knew, even then, when I was only five or six, that I was not like him and he made allowances for my clumsiness and impatience all the time. Later, when I used to get upset because I wasn't the person I wanted to be, wasn't like him or Charlotte, he'd comfort me and say nobody could help their nature, all they could do was try to curb what they didn't like about themselves. My grandmother, if she was around and heard him, would sigh and say, 'Some people have a lot of curbing to do,' or, more puzzlingly, 'Some people I knew never learned to curb their waywardness.'

But I couldn't keep these dusty old rolls of crackly paper. And they were too personal to give away, even if anyone had wanted them, so I had decided I would have to burn them, however upsetting this proved to be. (I didn't have time, though, in the end, and took them with me after all.) It was in moving these rolls that I found the box. What I actually saw was something that looked like a tarpaulin wrapped round a roughly cylindrical bundle and tied very securely. My attention might not have been caught if it had not been for an incongruous pink label attached to the cord knotted round this parcel. On the label, written in ink which had faded but was still decipherable, was my own name - 'For my darling Catherine Hope, in the future', it said.

I felt instantly cold. Cold, and also apprehensive. Yet there was nothing frightening in itself about this pretty pink label, which was decorated all round the edge with

tiny drawings of flowers, the petals of each one carefully coloured in. It looked, this package, as if inside its wrapping there would be a present, to be uncovered and put under a Christmas tree or on a table with a birthday cake, and yet I was afraid of its innocence. I crouched down beside it in the dim light of the attic, wondering what I should do. I would have to take it with me and open it, but I was afraid not only of further grief but of pathos, which I dreaded even more. How could this not turn out to be a pathetic task? Whatever my indifference towards Susannah, I could not help but be affected by the sight of her box. I wished passionately she had not done this. Who had thought of it, or was it her own idea? And what had she imagined was the purpose of her legacy? To tell me about herself? To make some kind of statement? To try to share in my unknown future? But she must have known I would be surrounded by information about her, that I would have photographs and memorabilia, that my father and her family would talk about her. What she could not have guessed was that I hadn't wanted to know very much. My extreme contentment with Charlotte might have hurt her – and thinking that suddenly made me wonder if there was another motive behind the leaving of this box. It could be a sort of weapon, to be used from beyond the grave. A way of combating my denial. Was it screaming, 'I was your mother! Listen to me!'

I knew I was being melodramatic. The box wasn't screaming at all. It had been stuck quietly here, muffled by its shroud of thick material, for nearly thirty years. It had been silent all that time, exerting no influence whatsoever, except perhaps over my father. I imagine every now and again he remembered its existence and fretted about it. Fingering the label, I realised he must have detached it from the box itself and tied it on to the cord when he had wrapped the box in this protective covering. Why had he done that? To alert me, to make sure it could be recognised

for what it was when the time came? I struggled to remember precisely what he had said that morning of my twenty-first birthday. He'd briefly described how Susannah had kept this memory box absolutely private. She had told him she was preparing it for me, 'in case', but he had had no part in it. She didn't want to discuss it, nor did she want help in deciding what should go in it. It had occupied her when she was too weak to move much from her bedroom and he had never seen what went inside. He had urged me, unconvincingly, to try to think of it as a happy experience. Susannah wanted to be secretive, and since by then she had so little privacy left in her life he had not pried. After she died, and he went through the miserable business of clearing her things out, he had been surprised how heavy the box was. But he hadn't looked inside. He'd sealed the edges with masking tape and wrapped it in waterproof material, and put it in the basement of their Edinburgh house until it was sold. It went with the rest of the furniture into storage during the time I lived with my grandmother and he lived in his flat, and then, when he married Charlotte and moved to his new job in Oxford, it went with them. Every now and again he and Charlotte had discussed when I should be told about the box, but for years the time had not seemed right.

I could understand this. I wasn't an easy child. All sorts of things upset me, even if on the surface I seemed strong and tough. I had nightmares regularly - I can't recall what they were about, except there was a lot of blood in them - and was for years a poor sleeper, often ending up in my parents' bed. It was natural that they should fear the effect of giving to me a box full of unknown objects left by a dying woman who very possibly was not always in her right mind. And then later, as a young adolescent, I was given to violent rages alternating with spells of studied gloom - all very typical, but hardly the best background to cope with such a legacy in a balanced way. I don't blame my parents at all

for their hesitation. And I was sure that for years at a time they actually forgot about this wretched box - it was literally out of sight, out of mind, up here in this attic.

Now the box would have to go with me. I shrank from having to touch it at all, but finally grabbed the cord where it was knotted at the side and dragged it to the trapdoor. I'd left a pile of cushions at the foot of the ladder so that I could throw down on to them any fragile objects I might find which were worth keeping. So far, I'd only selected one rather pretty old lamp. There was plenty of room for the box. It fell through the gap satisfactorily, and I climbed down after it. I was in a hurry by then. The estate agent who was to sell the house was coming to collect the keys and he was due any minute. I wanted the handover to be rapid so I had to be ready to zoom off. My car was already laden with stuff, the boot and back seat entirely filled, and only the passenger seat next to me was empty. The box had to go there. I shoved it in, then secured it by using the safety belt strapped through part of the cord. Doing this - hurriedly, roughly - I dislodged the pink label. It lay on the gravel beside the front wheel of the car and my stomach lurched. I stared, mesmerised, at the piece of innocuous cardboard and willed myself to pick it up. I couldn't leave it there, to flutter pathetically in the wind and be rained upon or trampled by some stray dog. I snatched it up and put it in my pocket, then slammed the door shut just as the estate agent turned into the drive.

I would never see our house again. I'd told the estate agent, untruthfully, that I was leaving the country and had given him full powers to sell the house as soon as possible to the first buyer who came up with the asking price (fixed by him). If it failed to reach that price, he was to reduce it as he thought fit - I wanted no consultations, I wanted nothing more to do with it. He would see to the final clearance. I think he was startled by my abruptness, and had been disposed to stay and chat. I left him standing on

the front step looking bewildered and waving his hand slowly. I didn't wave back. I didn't look back through my mirrors either, and drove far too fast until I turned on to Woodstock Road. It was done. Our house was left abandoned and the sooner I got used to it the better. Better to think of it obliterated, with all it had meant to me in the past, than to imagine it inhabited by other people. I would destroy its power by annihilating its memory.

It wasn't a long drive back to London, and it was a route with which I was very familiar, but that day the journey seemed unending. I hated driving with that sinister box lumped beside me. I thought about bombs and the comparison seemed appropriate until I realised I couldn't have it both ways: the box could not be both explosive *and* pathetic. I was getting in a state on its account and, as Charlotte would sensibly have pointed out, making it the object of all my distress over leaving our house. I reminded myself I'd been miserable and depressed before ever I found it in the attic. I was alone, at the age of thirty-one, Susannah's age when she died. That parallel was not lost on me. She could never have anticipated that I would be so old when I finally received her gift. It suddenly struck me that the box might be full of things suitable for a young girl, or a teenager. This cheered me a little. It would be easier to deal with the contents if they turned out to be toys or even mementoes of my babyhood. Perhaps all I would find would be my first rattle, my first bonnet, and so on. My common sense told me this was unlikely, Susannah had surely been too imaginative to want to fill a box with such sentimental tokens, but I found the idea strangely comforting.

I think I'd always known that she was imaginative, that she had left behind her many clues to this, which as a child I absorbed without understanding. There was my kaleidoscope, the first toy I remember loving. I had soft toys, the usual teddy bears and pandas, and dolls, but it is the kaleidoscope which I remember carrying round with me

and hugging to myself when I was only about three or four. 'She isn't old enough for it yet,' my grandmother had apparently said to my father. 'She won't be able to close one eye and look properly.' But I could, and he knew I could. In that respect, if not others, I had the necessary patience and balance. He gave it to me. 'Shake it,' he said, 'and look in the little window and you'll see something pretty.' I shook and shook, fiercely (as I did most things), and then, quite cautiously for me, I squinted through the glass opening and was dazzled by the myriad patterns which swirled before me. I shook and looked, and shook and looked, with such concentration that I developed a red ring round my right eye from pressing the kaleidoscope to it. My father took it away, but I screamed till I could have it back and finally some compromise was reached. Susannah made that kaleidoscope, actually made it, my father once told me, in a rare moment of nostalgia, when she was pregnant and well and happy. Other pregnant women knitted. Susannah made a kaleidoscope for a child who would not be old enough to use it for years.

Reaching Hanger Lane and becoming part of London's ceaseless traffic dulled my senses in more ways than one. I relaxed into the stop-start halting progress round the North Circular Road and the highly emotional frame of mind I'd been in gave way to idle speculation as to where I would choose to live when the Oxford house (already I was thinking of it like that, as 'the Oxford house', not 'our' house) was sold. I was going to be rich. In my terms, anyway. The Oxford house was certain, or so I'd been told, to fetch what I thought of as a fortune, and there was a cottage in Cornwall which now belonged to me, as well as life insurance policies and a hefty sum in the bank. The inheritance tax would, I'd been warned, be substantial, but still I would have plenty of money. The news had given me little pleasure at first, but gradually I was adjusting to it. I would be able to buy a house of my own wherever I wanted

and that realisation excited me. I cared about my surroundings. My flat had never been simply a roof over my head. I had loved decorating and furnishing it, and had spent time and taken infinite trouble making it as beautiful as I could. I was aware that I'd tried to imitate my father's style, with the wooden floors I'd had laid and the use of cream and white paints and pale grey fabrics - the whole aim to give an impression of space and light. Every time I came back to my home I was soothed by the atmosphere I'd created.

But my flat was not perfect. For a start, it had no garden. It was a maisonette, two floors at the top of an ugly house in Crouch End. No garden and no views, except of other dreary houses and a long, narrow street crowded with parked cars most of the time. Now I would be able to buy a house somewhere green and leafy and set about making it truly beautiful. I would search for it thoroughly. It would give me a purpose in life and, sad to say, that is what I knew I had singularly lacked for a long time. Work had recently failed to excite me as it had once done, and my personal life was a disaster. What a contrast with Susannah's happy, purposeful life at thirty-one. She had loved my father, and he had loved her, since they were final-year students. My birth was, according to my grandmother, in what I thought of as a sickly phrase, 'the icing on the cake'. I'd never liked thinking of myself as icing, sweet and sticky. I'd had this image of myself melting slowly in someone's mouth. Anyway, my arrival completed Susannah's famous happiness. That, and the hanging of a picture she'd painted in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition the year before.

She wasn't really an artist. Like my father, she'd qualified as an architect, which was how they met, and unusually for that time - there were not many women architects - she did well in the all-male practice she joined. In fact, she won a prize - something my father never did -

designing a shopping centre. I always got the impression that she'd been much more ambitious than my father and that this had created a slight problem, or what would have become one if her poor health had not held her back. I'm not quite sure how I picked this up (though, when I think about it now, it is remarkable how much I did pick up considering I made such a thing of not asking direct questions). It must have been from Charlotte's family, which is surely odd. I remember these aunts and uncles of mine, who of course were not really my relatives at all, sitting round the dinner table, when they brought the various cousins to stay, and one of them saying they'd been to 'that shopping centre' and my father saying how he admired it and had this aunt - no, I think it was an uncle - noticed how cleverly Susannah had solved the space problem, how ingenious she'd been. I must have been quite old because I remember asking what 'ingenious' meant and saying was it the same as 'genius'. My father laughed and said that wasn't a bad guess and then someone asked, 'Was she a genius, Susannah?' and there was a kind of silence while they waited for an answer. I don't recall precisely what the answer was but I did register the praise it was full of and I was uncomfortable when my father added words to the effect that Susannah had been much more talented than he was and would have 'risen to the top'. I thought of a cake, and laughed. If Charlotte was there, and she must have been, unless she was in the kitchen, she said nothing.

But Susannah never had the chance to rise to any top. Her health deteriorated and she had to work from home and, though the pretence was kept up that her career still flourished, it didn't. She turned to painting and everyone was glad to see her do so - less tiring, less of a strain for her. She painted watercolours, mostly landscapes. The one chosen in the Summer Exhibition was of a meadow. It hung in my father's study, though not in a prominent position. When I was a child, I could see nothing in it. It looked

virtually blank to me, an expanse of flat green with a few dots in the background that might or might not have been cows. If I was told where this meadow was, I have forgotten. My father never commented on its merits, never passed any comment at all.

I sent it to be auctioned, together with all the other pictures I didn't want to keep when I cleared out the Oxford house, and was quite surprised to learn later that somebody had paid £200 for it. Part of me had felt bad about selling it, but another, stronger part defiantly insisted the painting was of no special significance just because it was Susannah's and had been hung in a Royal Academy Summer Exhibition - everyone knows that half of that is dross. There was nowhere in my flat I could have hung it and I had nowhere, no attics, in which to store it. I had done the sensible thing, but it was true I felt faintly guilty all the same, even though no one else knew what I'd done. I had salvaged too much as it was, and looked with despair at all the clutter I'd laboriously carried in from my car. My lovely rooms looked offended, strewn as they were with bags and boxes. It upset me to see this disorder and I couldn't rest until I'd dragged the lot into my spare room and closed the door on it.

Except for the memory box. This I took into my sitting-room and put down on the floor in front of the sofa. The sooner I got the opening over, the better. I would need a knife or scissors to cut the cord - the knots looked far too corroded with age to undo easily. Pausing to wash my hands, as though I were about to perform a surgical operation and had to take meticulous care with hygiene, I hacked away at the cord with the bread knife and then cut through the tough waterproof outer covering. Then I got a surprise. I'd assumed that the box itself would be a wooden or strong cardboard crate, of the packing-case variety, but what I found was an old-fashioned hatbox. It was large and round, about two feet tall and eighteen inches or so in