

# Martha

**Barbara Latham**

You could have first seen them together in the park, when they had not yet met. But I doubt you would have given thought to any connection between them – just two women, among many, dotted around near a sandpit. But for Martha it was different – a longing that stirred in her was given focus that day. After weeks of frustrated hopes for summer, then a wet dreary week which had defied all expectations of the calendar for sun, came a glorious day. It was out into that soft caressing sun, which comes only to bring blessings, not to drain, that Martha took her child, Ruth, to the park. The baby seemed happy in her mother's pleasure and crawled contentedly near her or sat transfixed by the teeming sandpit. For a time there was not a child fighting and parents sat lazily around, some lying further away and occasionally turning a page. The huge trees overhead in full leaf showed them all the art of summer suspension. They were hanging in luxurious fullness but utterly still – not even waiting, simply still. Martha was enjoying herself at last. A woman arrived with her school children, her very long straight hair beautiful in the sunshine, her energy and love for the children setting her apart from the women at rest. She no doubt prided herself on being different, her clothes suggested it, but she was lovely and Martha couldn't stop watching as the woman continued her song with the children. Then the mother lounged entwined along a piece of wood while the three, two of them stripped apart from the briefest of knickers and the youngest quite naked, went to the sandpit amidst shoes, shirts and hats; and when her son came to show her a "find" the smile across the log for him was so soft and full of love that Martha melted and longed for such a look.

Sometimes she could feel that smile for Ruth, but mostly when she was asleep and no woman had a smile like that for her. As Martha watched the figure on the log with her poised long neck she

could imagine herself brushing the thick hair while it shone. If Ruth were more fragile and graceful might it be possible to give her daughter all the surging tenderness she sometimes felt for certain delicate, fine women? Martha didn't think so, and Ruth at six months had ways of her own. She was a solid pack and one end or the other was always messy: no, it was rather more for herself than her child that Martha could project a more ethereal appearance (but she only realised that some years after her first attraction to the woman in the park.) She was handsome herself but perhaps Martha, always considered capable, wanted her vulnerability to show and be met. However, Martha was tired of put-me-down "perhaps" that gave someone else the satisfaction of an explanation, but which didn't begin to meet what she was living through, and all she knew as she lay in the sun was a longing for that mother with three children. Perhaps Martha had better be left to show what she did experience but, firstly, for those who like framework of facts, let me fill in some details.

David came to England to flee his wife but also as a step on the way to much coveted research in South America. After years of fidelity, two children and final impotence, he was in a fling of promiscuity, and one of his more casual affairs was with Martha's flatmate. When he tried to find himself some coffee in the morning, after sleeping at the flat a second time, he discovered Martha. David was lovely but Martha didn't notice then, she was too busy with her lecture notes. When he bumbled and asked helpless questions about the gas stove she showed him only impatience not obliging offers of attention. He began to pursue her and when it was clear her flatmate was too engaged with another man to care, Martha went out to dinner.

Despite her resistance she was attracted and when it was agreed that anything permanent was out of the question, he with the mess of his marriage still hanging around and she from determination to keep fighting for her hard won independence, they began a wonderful love affair. During the winter's long Sunday evenings, as they curled into one warm ball against the bleakness of the world outside she would sometimes find herself understanding, after all, why people still married. And several times while making love she ached to conceive his child. But those moments passed and were, she believed, quite forgotten soon afterwards. Eight or nine months passed with each utterly caught up in the other and neither asking anything of tomorrow. Butterflies danced in the giddy spring and they laughed in the park, lost to the day and being together, never asking is this forever as the summer passed, until one day he rang excitedly to ask her out to dinner. That night Martha returned to her own flat without him and wrote:

My dancing heat came out and passed three roses down our street, gliding in effortless ease towards my love who called to me, and I went to meet him there. All in a light leap to see you there but you stood still, stopped, stepped aside and looked warily. You did not come out, caught up, to dance away with me. Dropped in lumpen solidness down darkest wells of my return to bruised self sufficient enclosed flesh you did not catch. Left, remembering three roses in a littered street. Left, vowing never to venture out again.

David's research job had come through at last and he wanted to simply leave. David fell from the sun to hurry off and she spun alone to a heady stop. She stood quite still and her stomach dropped but she was unable to feel such emptiness and held, at least, her grasp in the womb. Although they were never lovers again, she realised as he was leaving that she was pregnant. She went to him, all crumpled, wanting to tell him and to share her longing to hold onto their love, but he was resolute in cutting out. As she curled like a kitten on his sofa ready, for the moment to surrender to helplessness, it was clear he wanted no pets but to pack his few possessions and go. She left and made an appointment for an abortion. The appointment was never kept and Ruth was born the following April.

Dave wrote when he arrived in South America and Martha found a lover for a week. She stood suspended, opened to powers of destruction. Her opened womb poised high and wide brought forth a foetus for the lover to beat with every thrust as deep as he could; she turned his power to annihilation. But the effort against wiping out was greater. Why not let it flow to weep in blood, so she could see all her sorrow drain away – the last of her love flushed down lavatories – she did not know. But as the weeks passed, despite times of exhaustion and fear she would not cope, she was buoyant as she carried her sexuality bulging before her. She always enjoyed defiance and as the months went by, despite passing despair at having no nest – no protection, she expanded with secret pride around the growing child. Then glazed eyed, unmoving, she sat as if slugged soft clay has been formed to give her thickened flesh – a miraculous enough transformation but one still waiting the master touch. And when it came she found herself flung into giving birth in pain and ecstasy. Although well prepared she was amazed that such things could really happen; that she could ride the peaks of overwhelming bodily sensation and watch a slimy child appear. She managed to add three months maternity leave to the three months summer break before she went back to teach part-time at her college. And she did write once to David to let him know that

since she had gone ahead with the pregnancy knowing he would not want that, she in no way expected him to feel responsible but thought, nevertheless, he should know he had a daughter. His reply hurt and she hated herself for writing at all or for harbouring hidden hopes. He not only agreed with her entirely but seemed bitter that she had done it and bitter too that she had told him of Ruth's existence. The affair had been the best in his life but he was free and in South America, with two children and one woman in another country bugging him already.

Martha's six months at home (and she still feels bruised by them) were strange. Her working friends told her it was boredom and perhaps it was – that perhaps again. But, and Martha has a big but to that explanation: Ruth's gaze, then her first smiles, quite melted her and often she was overwhelmed by the love flooding through her for the child. Ruth called to disturb her sleep and dreams. As Martha lent across to the basket the crying gave way to a rising pant and gasped impatience until, with an unerring "ump", the tiny mouth closed on the nipple in the dark and Martha thought wryly that once as lovers she and Dave had made contact like that. Flesh melted in the comfort of the tiny tug on the breast then evaporated into sleep; she woke to find the tiny creature lying there quite perfect in the half light with her face so soft against Martha's nakedness. One round hand, with its one fat wrinkle at the wrist, had not left in sleep the breast it had patted in pleasure. By the sucking child she had been stilled and satisfied as she had once been by a lover: her love for the child revived too well the love she had thought she had cut off from its father. It had its sting and it did not sustain as she went about her days in the way her love for David had done. She somehow hovered near despair. She and Dave had had substantial lives to go out to in the world, and she hadn't simply hung around the love for six months as she did with the child, filling in time in a small flat. Domestic life did not interest her and the obvious chores required by the baby certainly didn't keep her occupied. Her friends all worked. Hours and hours seem to have been spent walking the streets, yet often not managing to walk into solid contact with the world about and out of the fuzz that so easily crept through her head. When her eyes, blurred by the fuzz, found it hard to focus clearly she would finally slam the front door and escape out into the world. But where in the world did she have to go? Round and round the streets hoping that Ruth might attract a smile at least? Through the unreal quality of so many hours the welcome contact with the milkman, dustmen, and the local shops shone out as landmarks through the day. Each asked after Ruth and recognised Martha as the mother. But sometimes it was embarrassing to find she had grossly over laden trivial exchange with too much detail about herself. What was this need to establish herself in some way which carried her away, quite away, from her usual

restraining sense of tact? She, who had been so critical of her sister holding too hard to her husband's worldly identity, seemed driven by the same demon to be recognised by the world as having a place and to make herself feel she was a proper mother – a status which eluded although she had the child. Even at first when the baby had slept a great deal leaving her “free” to read and work on her still unfinished thesis she felt unreal, as if suspended midair with her newborn child. It had been one thing to leave the world before to soar off in dreams of her own, it was quite different to find herself hanging with no solid ground beneath her feet. The only thing holding her anywhere, it seemed, was this stranger who, though she could command such love, anchored her nowhere. Here, then, was Martha's “but” to the confidence of her friends that said it was just boredom; she was also as if stunned by the fact that she had become a mother. What was it that she had become? A shadow, rather than a substantial mother maybe, but a woman in love with a baby certainly. While Ruth slept each sweet and sentimental song would bring back and back that she had given birth, and bring a longing to hold again her young love – the child she had only wanted asleep. And always she struggled with the legacy of her love for Dave – stopping to tease into words and clarity the wistful moments of pain that might otherwise have simply passed. Sometimes she hated the passion which had unlocked so much, and promised much more, and had sobered to living a decent life as a single parent. As she searched confusedly for the playground of her care-free days and wondered why she had destroyed it to take on the consequences of her love, she also knew that spring flowers always die and are not ours to keep alive, but being so hard to leave behind we grip on to nostalgia. When the roses of August were there again, and she turned thirty, misty tears that did not fall clouded eyes searching out the vanished year. By calendar twelve months had passed since he had gone, but what had gone? Sometimes she could be half convinced she knew, in pinning her reactions down to what this week she could see, or to her own past explanations, yet more often now she realised it couldn't be grasped to show or hold. For the rest the day simply followed what had been and questions had the decency, at least, to sometimes go away.

It was October when Martha saw the woman with her children again. She had caught a bus and taken Ruth to Highgate Cemetery. Avoiding Marx's tomb she could avoid people to lose herself in the autumn mist while Ruth sat playing with the leaves. an unexpected gentle kiss lay softly on the autumn day when the rain had passed and she thought of him. After the mist the distant hill became all clear and crisp but she could not see a lost love's heart not into hers for him. She stood quite still, certain this had been before, and re-lived another autumn. He had gone and she

had stayed to carry on with her own life; last autumn she had been pregnant. It seemed as if all the rest of her days would be one long process of slowly moving to new positions from which to view that decision – too many days of passing through haze and trying to make sense of the clarity of vision, and passion, which had been hers. He had gone, she had stayed – how simple it sounded. Softly with the falling of the leaves the summer will end, and death is always waiting. Poised there in still sadness on that abyss autumn's riches seemed the greater – the final brilliant splendour of ivy on the tall grave a bright foil to the threatening gloom of death. Three children crept in held breath quiet up to squirrels with jaws so fast about the acorn nuts, and then looked up delighted at the pattern of black birds massing and circling themselves against a bright, if clouded, sky. Martha's attention was fully engaged by the children and her gaze followed them running, laughing, into their mother's arms. The long fine arms of the woman from the park. The family began to play hide and seek around the gravestones half aware that Martha and Ruth watched and admired, but Martha didn't mind, she took home from the autumn day some of the joy that had been created round her.

Martha aspired to be that mother she imagined it possible for the other to be. However, vague aspirations were given their first shaking in the middle of winter, when the two saw each other again and spoke at last. It was bitterly cold and Martha was striding through the trees at the park with Ruth on her back. She heard children fighting but took little notice until she came to the mother sobbing against the tree: "I just can't do it! It just isn't possible to enjoy three children," and she beat against the tree! The children skulked about the trees nearby looking uncertain but unrepentant of their ill humour. Martha was embarrassed by her intrusion and disconcerted, but the younger of the boys called cheerfully to Ruth. The children, grateful for diversion, were attracted to Ruth's smile (and she continues to win them over still as they spend hours playing with her) and so the two women finally met. That was the beginning, later they moved into a house together, and as they share this autumn the fragments of Martha's early days as mother finally come to form a story. A story for her, sometimes, gentle friend.