

# ONE

*YOU NOW HAVE ONE CHOICE.*

*You . . .* I'm hanging out of the window of my office, sneaking a cigarette and trying to read *Margins* in the dull winter light, when there's a noise I haven't heard before. All right, the noise – crash, bang, etc. – I probably have heard before, but it's coming from underneath me, which isn't right. There shouldn't be anything underneath me: I'm on the bottom floor. But the ground shakes, as if something's trying to push up from below, and I think about other people's mothers shaking out their duvets or even God shaking out the fabric of space-time; then I think, Fucking hell, it's an earthquake, and I drop my cigarette and run out of my office at roughly the same time that the alarm starts sounding.

When alarms sound I don't always run immediately. Who

does? Usually an alarm is just an empty sign: a drill; a practice. I'm on my way to the side door out of the building when the shaking stops. Shall I go back to my office? But it's impossible to stay in this building when this alarm goes off. It's too loud; it wails inside your head. As I leave the building I walk past the Health and Safety notice board, which has pictures of injured people on it. The pictures blur as I go past: a man who has back pain is also having a heart attack, and various hologram people are trying to revive him. I was supposed to go to some Health and Safety training last year, but didn't.

As I open the side door I can see people leaving the Russell Building and walking, or running, past our block and up the grey concrete steps in the direction of the Newton Building and the library. I cut around the right-hand side of the building and bound up the concrete steps, two at a time. The sky is grey, with a thin TV-static drizzle that hangs in the air like it's been freeze-framed. Sometimes, on these January afternoons, the sun squats low in the sky like an orange-robed Buddha in a documentary about the meaning of life. Today there is no sun. I come to the edge of the large crowd that has formed, and I stop running. Everyone is looking at the same thing, gasping and making firework-display noises.

It's the Newton Building.

It's falling down.

I think of this toy – have I seen it on someone's desk recently? – which is a little horse mounted on a wooden button. When you press the button from underneath, the horse collapses to its knees. That's what the Newton Building looks like now. It's sinking into the ground, but in a lopsided way; one corner is

now gone, now two, now . . . Now it stops. It creaks, and it stops. A window on the third floor flaps open, and a computer monitor falls out and smashes onto what's left of the concrete courtyard below. Four men with hard hats and fluorescent jackets slowly approach the broken-up courtyard; then another man comes, says something to them, and they all move away again.

Two men in grey suits are standing next to me.

'Déjà vu,' one of them says to the other.

I look around for someone I know. There's Mary Robinson, the head of department, talking to Lisa Hobbes. I can't see many other people from the English Department. But I can see Max Truman standing on his own, smoking a roll-up. He'll know what's going on.

'Hello, Ariel,' he mumbles when I walk over and stand next to him.

Max always mumbles; not in a shy way, but rather as if he's telling you what it will cost to take out your worst enemy, or how much you'd have to pay to rig a horse race. Does he like me? I don't think he trusts me. But why would he? I'm comparatively young, relatively new to the department, and I probably seem ambitious, even though I'm not. I also have long red hair and people say I look intimidating (because of the hair? Something else?). People who don't say I look intimidating sometimes say I look 'dodgy' or 'odd'. One of my ex-housemates said he wouldn't like to be stuck on a desert island with me, but didn't say why.

'Hi, Max,' I say. Then: 'Wow.'

'You probably don't know about the tunnel, do you?' he says. I shake my head. 'There's a railway tunnel that runs under

here,' he says, pointing downwards with his eyes. He sucks on his roll-up, but nothing seems to happen, so he takes it out of his mouth and uses it to point around the campus. 'It runs under Russell over there, and Newton over there. Goes – or used to go – from the town to the coast. It hasn't been used in a hundred years or so. This is the second time it's collapsed and taken Newton with it. They were supposed to fill it with concrete after last time,' he adds.

I look at where Max just pointed, and start mentally drawing straight lines connecting Newton with Russell, imagining the tunnel underneath the line. Whichever way you do it, the English and American Studies Building is on the line, too.

'Everyone's all right, at least,' he says. 'Maintenance saw a crack in the wall this morning and evacuated them all.'

Lisa shivers. 'I can't believe this is happening,' she says, looking over at the Newton Building. The grey sky has darkened and the rain is now falling more heavily. The Newton Building looks strange with no lights on: it's as if it has been stubbed out.

'I can't either,' I say.

For the next three or four minutes we all stand and stare in silence at the building; then a man with a megaphone comes around and tells us all to go home immediately without going back to our offices. I feel like crying. There's something so sad about broken concrete.

I don't know about everyone else, but it's not that easy for me just to go home. I only have one set of keys to my flat, and that set is in my office, along with my coat, my scarf, my gloves, my hat and my rucksack.

There's a security guard trying to stop people going in through the main entrance, so I go down the steps and in the side way. My name isn't on my office door. Instead, it bears only the name of the official occupier of the room: my supervisor, Professor Saul Burlem. I met Burlem twice before I came here: once at a conference in Greenwich, and once at my interview. He disappeared just over a week after I arrived. I remember coming into the office on a Thursday morning and noticing that it was different. The first thing was that the blinds and the curtains were closed: Burlem always closed his blinds at the end of every day, but neither of us ever touched the horrible thin grey curtains. And the room smelled of cigarette smoke. I was expecting him in at about ten o'clock that morning, but he didn't show up. By the following Monday I asked people where he was and they said they didn't know. At some point someone arranged for his classes to be covered. I don't know if there's departmental gossip about this – no one gossips to me – but everyone seems to assume I'll just carry on my research and it's no big deal for me that he isn't around. Of course, he's the reason I came to the department at all: he's the only person in the world who has done serious research on one of my main subjects, the nineteenth-century writer Thomas E. Lumas. Without Burlem, I'm not really sure why I am here. And I do feel something about him being missing; not loss, exactly, but something.

My car is in the Newton car park. When I get there I am not at all surprised to find several men in hard hats telling people to forget about their cars and walk or take the bus home. I do

try to argue – I say I’m happy to take the risk that the Newton Building will not suddenly go into a slow-motion cinematic rewind in order that it can fall down again in a completely different direction – but the men pretty much tell me to piss off and walk home or take the bus like everybody else, so I eventually drift off in the direction of the bus stop. It’s only the beginning of January, but some daffodils and snowdrops have made it through the earth and stand wetly in little rows by the path. The bus stop is depressing: there’s a line of people looking as cold and fragile as the line of flowers, so I decide I’ll just walk.

I think there’s a shortcut into town through the woods, but I don’t know where it is, so I just follow the route I would have driven until I leave the campus, playing the scene of the building collapsing in my mind over and over again until, realising I’m remembering things that never even happened, I give up thinking about it at all. Then I consider the railway tunnel. I can see why it would be there: after all, the campus is set on top of a steep hill and it would make sense to go under rather than over it. Max said it hadn’t been used for a hundred years or so. I wonder what was on this hill a hundred years ago. Not the university, of course, which was built in the 1960s. It’s so cold. Perhaps I should have waited for the bus. But no buses pass me as I walk. By the time I get to the main road into town my fingers have frozen inside my gloves and I start examining roads off to the right, looking for a shortcut. The first one is marked with a no through road sign, partially obscured by seagull shit; but the second looks more promising, with red-brick terraced houses curling around to the left, so I take it.

I thought this was just a residential road, but soon the red-brick houses stop and there's a small park with two swings and a slide rusting under a dark canopy of tangled but bare oak-tree branches. Beyond that there is a pub and then a small row of shops. There's a sad-looking charity shop, already shut, and the kind of hairdresser that does blue rinses and sets for half price on a Monday. There's a newsagent and a betting shop and then – aha – a secondhand bookshop. It's still open. I'm freezing. I go in.

It's warm inside the shop and smells slightly of furniture polish. The door has a little bell that keeps jangling for a good three seconds after I close it, and soon a young woman comes out from behind a large set of bookshelves, holding a can of polish and a yellow duster. She smiles briefly and tells me that the shop will be closing in about ten minutes, but I am welcome to look around. Then she sits down and starts tapping something into a keyboard connected to a computer on the front desk.

'Have you got a computerised catalogue of all your books?'  
I ask her.

She stops typing and looks up. 'Yeah. But I don't know how to use it. I'm only filling in for my friend. Sorry.'

'Oh. OK.'

'What did you want to look up?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'No, tell me. I might remember dusting it.'

'Um . . . OK, then. Well, there's this author called Thomas E. Lumas . . . Have you got any books by him?' I always ask this in secondhand bookshops. They rarely do have anything

by him, and I've got most of his books already, but I still ask. I still hope for a better copy of something, or an older one. Something with a different preface or a cleaner dust jacket.

'Er . . .' She screws up her forehead. 'The name sounds sort of familiar.'

'You might have come across something called *The Apple in the Garden*. That's his famous one. But none of the others are in print. He wrote in the mid to late nineteenth century, but never became as famous as he should have been . . .'

'*The Apple in the Garden*. No, the one I saw wasn't that one,' she says. 'Hang on.' She walks around to the large bookcase at the back of the shop. 'L, Lu, Lumas . . . No. Nothing here,' she says. 'Mind you, I don't know what section they'd have put him in. Is it fiction?'

'Some is fiction,' I say. 'But he also wrote a book about thought experiments, some poetry, a treatise on government, several science books and something called *The End of Mr. Y*, which is one of the rarest novels . . .'

'*The End of Mr. Y*. That's it!' she says, excited. 'Hang on.'

She goes up the stairs at the back of the shop before I can tell her that she must be mistaken. It is impossible to imagine that she actually has a copy up there. I would probably give away everything I own to obtain a copy of *The End of Mr. Y*, Lumas's last and most mysterious work. I don't know what she's got it confused with, but it's just absurd to think that she has it. No one has that book. There is one known copy in a German bank vault, but no library has it listed. I have a feeling that Saul Burlem may have seen a copy once, but I'm not sure. *The End of Mr. Y* is supposed to be cursed, and although I obviously



don't believe in any of that stuff, some people do think that if you read it you die.

'Yeah, here it is,' says the girl, carrying a small cardboard box down the stairs. 'Is this the one you mean?'

She places the box on the counter.

I look inside. And – suddenly I can't breathe – there it is: a small cream clothbound hardback with brown lettering on the cover and spine, missing a dust jacket but otherwise near perfect. But it can't be. I open the cover and read the title page and the publication details. Oh, shit. This is a copy of *The End of Mr. Y*. What the hell do I do now?

'How much is it?' I ask carefully, my voice as small as a pin.

'Yeah, that's the problem,' she says, turning the box around. 'The owner gets boxes like this from an auction in town, I think, and if they're upstairs it means they haven't been priced yet.' She smiles. 'I probably shouldn't have shown it to you at all. Can you come back tomorrow when she's in?'

'Not really . . .' I start to say.

Ideas beam through my mind like cosmic rays. Shall I tell her I'm not from around here and ask her to ring the owner now? No. The owner clearly doesn't know that the book is here. I don't want to take the risk that she will have heard of it and then refuse to sell it to me – or try to charge thousands of pounds. What can I say to make her give me the book? Seconds pass. The girl seems to be picking up the phone on the desk.

'I'll just give my friend a ring,' she says. 'I'll find out what to do.'

While she waits for the call to connect, I glance into the box. It's unbelievable, but there are other Lumas books there, and a

couple of Derrida translations that I don't have, as well as what looks like a first edition of *Eureka!* by Edgar Allan Poe. How did these texts end up in a box together? I can't imagine anyone connecting them, unless it was for a project similar to my PhD. Could someone else be working on the same thing? Unlikely, especially if they have given the books away. But who would give these books away? I feel as though I'm looking at Paley's watch. It's as if someone put this box together just to appeal to me.

'Yeah,' the girl is saying to her friend. 'It's like a small box. Upstairs. Yeah, in that pile in the toilet. Um . . . looks like a mix of old and new. Some of the old ones are a bit musty and stuff. Paperbacks, I think . . .' She looks into the box and pulls out a couple of the Derrida books. I nod at her. 'Yeah, just a real mix. Oh, do you? Cool. Yeah. Fifty quid? Seriously? That's a lot. OK, I'll ask her. Yeah. Sorry. OK. See you later.'

She puts the phone down and smiles at me. 'Well,' she says. 'There's good news and bad news. The good news is that you can have the whole box if you want, but the bad news is that I can't sell individual books from the box, so it's all or nothing really. Sam says she bought the box herself from an auction, and the owner hasn't even seen it yet. But apparently she's already said she hasn't got the space to shelve loads more stuff . . . But the other bad news is that the whole box is going to cost fifty pounds. So . . .'

'I'll take it,' I say.

'Seriously? You'd spend that on a box of books?' She smiles and shrugs. 'Well, OK. I guess that's fifty pounds, then, please.'

My hands shake as I get my purse out of my bag, pull out

three crumpled ten-pound notes and a twenty and hand them over. I don't stop to consider that this is almost the only money I have in the world, and that I am not going to be able to afford to eat for the next three weeks. I don't actually care about anything apart from being able to walk out of this shop with *The End of Mr. Y*, without someone realising or remembering and trying to stop me. My heart is doing something impossible. Will I collapse and die of shock before I've even had a chance to read the first line of the book? Shit, shit, shit.

'Fantastic, thanks. Sorry it was so much,' the girl says to me.

'No problem,' I manage to say back. 'I need a lot of these for my PhD, anyway.'

I place *The End of Mr. Y* in my rucksack, safe, and then I pick up the box and walk out of the shop, clutching it to me as I make my way home in the dark, the cold stinging my eyes, completely unable to make sense of what has just happened.

## TWO

BY THE TIME I GET to my flat it's almost half past five. Most of the shops on the street are starting to close, but the newsagent opposite glows with people stopping for a paper or a packet of cigarettes on their way home from work. The pizza restaurant underneath my flat is still dark, but I know that the owner, Luigi, will be somewhere in there, doing whatever needs to be done so that the place can open at seven. Next door the lights are out in the fancy-dress shop, but there's a soft light upstairs in the Café Paradis, which doesn't close until six. Behind the shops, a commuter train clatters slowly along the brittle old lines and lights flash on the level crossing at the end of the road.

The concrete passageway that leads to the stairs up to my front door is cold, as usual, and dark. There is no bicycle, which

means that Wolfgang, my neighbour, isn't in. I don't know how he gets warm in his place (although I think the huge amount of slivovitz that he drinks probably helps), but in mine it's a struggle. I've no idea when the two flats were constructed, but they are both too large, with high ceilings and long, echoey corridors. Central heating would be wonderful, but the landlord won't put it in. Before I take my coat off, I put the box of books and my rucksack down on the large oak kitchen table, switch on my lamps, and then drag the electric fire down the hall from the bedroom and plug it in, watching its two metal bars blush dimly (and, it always seems to me, apologetically). Then I light the gas oven and all the rings on the hob. I close the kitchen door and only then take off my outdoor things.

I'm shivering, but not just from the cold. I take *The End of Mr. Y* carefully out of my bag and put it down on the table. It seems wrong, somehow, sitting there next to the box of other books and my coffee cup from this morning, so I move the box of books and put the coffee cup in the sink. Now the book is alone on the table. I pick it up and run my hand over it, feeling the coolness of the cream cloth cover. I turn it over and touch the back, as if it might feel different from the front; then I put it down again, my pulse going like ticker tape. I fill my little espresso maker and put it on one of the blazing gas rings, and then I pour out half a glass of the slivovitz Wolfgang gave me and down it in two gulps.

While the coffee heats up, I check the mousetraps. Both Wolfgang and I have mice in our flats. He talks about getting a cat; I have these traps. They don't kill the mice; they just hold them for a while in a small plastic oblong until I find them and

release them. I don't think the system works: I put the mice outside and then they come straight back in, but I couldn't kill them. Today there are three mice looking bored and pissed off in their little see-through prisons, and I take them downstairs and release them into the courtyard. I didn't think I'd mind having mice in the flat, but they do eat everything, and one time one ran over my face while I was lying in bed.

When I get back upstairs, I take four large potatoes from the box in the vegetable rack and wash them quickly before salting them and putting them in the oven on a low heat. That's about as much cooking as I can cope with now; and I'm not even hungry. My sofa is in the kitchen, since there's no point having it in the empty sitting room, where there is no heat. So, as the room starts to steam up and fill with the smell of baking potatoes, I finally take off my trainers and curl up with my coffee, a packet of ginseng cigarettes and *The End of Mr. Y*. And then I read the opening line of the preface, first in my head, and then aloud, as another train rattles along outside: 'The discourse which follows may appear to the reader as mere fancy or as a dream, penned on waking, in those fevered moments when one is still mesmerised by those conjuring tricks that are produced in the mind once the eyes are closed.'

I don't die. But then I didn't really expect to. How could a book be cursed, anyway? The words themselves – which I don't take in properly at first – simply seem like miracles. Just the fact that they are there, that they still exist, printed in black type on rough-cut pages that are brown with age; this is the thing that amazes me. I can't imagine how many other hands have touched this page, or how many pairs of eyes have seen it. It was published

in 1893, and then what happened? Did anyone actually read it? By the time he wrote *The End of Mr. Y*, Lumas was already an obscure writer. He'd been notorious for a while in the 1860s, and people had known his name, but then everyone lost interest in him and decided he was mad, or a crank. On one occasion he turned up at the place in Yorkshire where Charles Darwin was receiving what he called his 'water cure': he said something rude about barnacles and then punched Darwin in the face. This was in 1859. After that, he seemed to retreat into ever more esoteric activities, visiting mediums, exploring paranormal events, and becoming a patron of the Royal London Homoeopathic Hospital. After about 1880, he seemed to stop publishing. Then he wrote *The End of Mr. Y* and died the day after it was published, after everyone else who'd had something major to do with the book (the publisher, the editor, the typesetter) had also died. Thus the rumoured 'curse'.

But there may have been other reasons for the idea of the curse. Lumas was an outlaw. He favoured the evolutionary biologist Lamarck (who said that organisms pass on learned characteristics to their offspring) over Darwin (who said they don't), when even people like Samuel Butler – once described as 'the greatest shit-stirrer of the nineteenth century' – were coming around to the idea that we are all, actually, Darwinian mutants. He wrote letters to *The Times* criticising not only his contemporaries, but every major figure in the history of thought, including Aristotle and Bacon. Lumas became very interested in the existence of a fourth spatial dimension and wrote various supernatural stories about it, somehow managing to upset people who did not believe in the existence of another dimension. His

response was ‘But they are merely stories!’, although everyone knew that he used his fiction mainly as a way of working out his philosophical ideas. Most of his ideas were about the development and nature of thought, particularly scientific thought, and he often described his fictional works as ‘experiments of the mind’.

One of his most interesting stories, ‘The Blue Room’, tells of two philosophers who attend a party in a mansion. Somehow they get lost on their way to play billiards with the host and end up in a blue room in the (supposedly) haunted wing of the house. This room has two doors, on its north and south walls, and a spiral staircase in the middle. One of the philosophers says they should go up the stairs, but the other thinks they should leave via one of the doors. They can’t reach an agreement and instead end up speculating about the existence of ghosts. The first one argues that, as there are no such things as ghosts, they have nothing to fear. The second agrees that there is nothing to fear: he has never seen a ghost, and therefore has concluded that they don’t exist. Satisfied that there are no ghosts, and enthused by their agreement, the philosophers leave the room via the door they came in and try to make their way back to the party. However, the blue wing of the house seems to be arranged in a peculiar way. Once they leave the room they find a corridor leading to a spiral staircase. When they go down it, they end up back in the blue room. When they try the other door, the same thing happens. But when they go up the staircase, they simply find one of the doors. Whichever way they go, they end up back in the blue room.

There have been a few academic papers written about Lumas



as a historical figure, and maybe ten about his novel, *The Apple in the Garden*. There have been no biographies. Back in the 1990s, a couple of Californian Queer theorists claimed him, or at least his journals, in which one can find, among other things, half-finished homoerotic sonnets about some of Shakespeare's male characters. But I don't know what happened to the Queer theorists. Perhaps they lost interest in Lumas. Most people do. As far as I know, hardly anything has ever been written about *The End of Mr. Y*. What has been written has all been by Saul Burlem.

'The Curse of Mr. Y' was the subject of Burlem's paper at the conference in Greenwich eighteen months ago, delivered to an audience of four people, including me. Burlem hadn't then read *The End of Mr. Y*, but instead talked about the probable invention of the 'curse' story. He had a rough, sandpaper voice, and a slight stoop that somehow wasn't unattractive. He talked about the idea of the curse as if it were a virus, and discussed Lumas's body of work as if it were an organism attacked by this virus, destined, perhaps, to become extinct. He talked about information becoming contaminated by unpopularity, and eventually concluded that Lumas's book had indeed been cursed, not in a supernatural sense, but by the opinions of people who wanted him discredited.

There was a reception afterwards, in the Painted Hall. It was packed in there: a popular scientist had been giving a talk at the same time as Burlem, and he was holding court in the large Lower Hall, underneath an image of Copernicus. I had considered going to his talk instead, but I was glad I'd chosen Burlem's. The other people from Burlem's talk – two guys who looked a bit like a pair of tax inspectors except for their almost white-blond hair, and a

sixtyish woman with pink-streaked grey hair – hadn't hung around, so Burlem and I started on the red wine, drinking too fast, hiding away in the far corner of the Upper Hall. Burlem was wearing a long grey wool trench coat over his black shirt and trousers. I can't remember what I was wearing.

'So would you read it, then?' I asked him, referring, of course, to *The End of Mr. Y*.

'Of course,' he said, with his odd smile. 'Would you?'

'Absolutely. Especially after this.'

'Good,' he said.

Burlem didn't seem to know anyone in the Lower Hall, and neither did I. Neither of us attempted to leave our corner and mingle: I'm not very good at it and often offend people by accident; I don't know what Burlem's reason was – maybe he just hadn't been offended by me yet. The whole time I was in the Painted Hall I felt a bit like part of a huge box of chocolates, with the browns, creams, golds and reds of the vast paintings seeming to melt around me. Perhaps Burlem and I were the hard centres that no one was interested in. No one else came to the Upper Hall the whole time we were there.

'I can't believe more people didn't come to your talk,' I said.

'No one knows Lumas exists,' he said. 'I'm used to it.'

'I suppose you were up against Mr. Famous, as well,' I said.

Burlem smiled. 'Jim Lahiri. He's probably never heard of Lumas, either.'

'No,' I agreed. I'd read Lahiri's best-selling popular science book about the end of time, and knew he wouldn't approve of Lumas even if he had heard of him. Popular science can say some pretty wild things these days, but the supernatural is still

out, as is Lamarck. You can have as many dimensions as you want, as long as none of them contains ghosts, telepathy, anything that fucks with Charles Darwin, or anything that Hitler liked (apart from Charles Darwin).

Burlem picked up the bottle of wine, refilled both our glasses, and then frowned at me. ‘So why are you here? Are you a student? If you’re working on Lumas, I should probably know who you are.’

‘I’m not working on Lumas,’ I said. ‘I write these little articles for a magazine called *Smoke*. You may not have heard of it. I’ll probably write one on Lumas after this, but I don’t think that counts as “working on” in your sense.’ I paused, but Burlem didn’t say anything. ‘He’s a great person to write about, though, even on a small scale. His stuff’s pretty compulsive. I mean, even without the controversies and the curse, it’s still amazing.’

‘It is,’ said Burlem. ‘That’s why I’m working on a biography.’ After he said the word ‘biography’, he looked first at the ground and then up at the painted ceiling high above our heads. I must have been frowning or something, because when he looked back at me he smiled in a crooked, apologetic way. ‘I hate biography,’ he said.

I laughed. ‘So why are you writing one?’

He shrugged. ‘Lumas got me hooked. The only way to write about his texts seems to be to write a biography of his life. It might sell. There’s a vogue for digging up these nineteenth-century eccentrics at the moment and I might as well cash in on it. The department could do with some funding. I could do with some bloody funding.’

‘The department?’

‘Of English and American Studies.’ He told me the name of the university.

‘Have you started on it?’ I asked him.

He nodded. ‘Yeah. Unfortunately there’s only one biographical detail about Lumas that really does it for me.’

‘The punch?’ I suggested, thinking of Darwin, imagining, for some reason, a huge splashing sound as he fell over after Lumas hit him.

‘No.’ He looked up at the ceiling again. ‘Have you read Samuel Butler at all?’

‘Oh, yes,’ I nodded. ‘Yes – that’s actually how I came to read Lumas. There was a reference in Butler’s *Notebooks*.’

‘You were reading Butler’s *Notebooks*?’

‘Yeah. I like all the stuff about the sugared Hamlets.’

Actually, what I like about Butler is the same thing I like about Lumas: the outlaw status and the brilliant ideas. Butler’s big thing was consciousness; he thought that since we evolved from organic vegetable matter, our consciousness must at some point have emerged from nothing. If we had developed out of nowhere like this, then why couldn’t machines? I’d been reading about this only a couple of weeks before.

‘Sugared Hamlets?’ said Burlem.

‘Yeah. These sweets they were selling in London. Little sweets in the shape of Hamlet holding a skull, dipped in sugar. How great is that?’

Burlem laughed. ‘I bet Butler thought that was hilarious.’

‘Yeah. That’s why I like him. I like his sense of the absurd.’

‘So presumably you know the rumours about him and Lumas?’

‘No. What rumours?’

‘That they were lovers; or at least that Lumas was infatuated with Butler.’

‘I had no idea,’ I said. Then I smiled. ‘Does it matter?’

‘Probably not. But it leads to the biographical detail I’m most interested in.’

‘Which is?’

‘Have you read *The Authoress of the Odyssey*?’

‘No.’ I shook my head. ‘*The Authoress . . .*?’

‘You must read it. It’s Butler arguing that *The Odyssey* was written by a woman. It’s fucking brilliant.’ Burlem ran his hand through his hair and went on: ‘Butler published his own translation of *The Odyssey* alongside it, with some black-and-white plates showing photographs he took of old coins, and landscapes relevant to *The Odyssey*. One of the landscapes, supposedly the basis for the tidal inlet up which Ulysses swam, has a man and a dog in the distance. In the introduction to the book, Butler goes out of his way to apologise for this, and to say that they only appeared when he developed the negative; that they weren’t supposed to be there.’

‘Wow,’ I said, not sure where this was leading. ‘So . . .’

‘The man in the picture is Lumas. I’m sure of it.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t even know if they travelled together. But the way the man appears in the developed photograph, previously unseen . . . You can’t see the figure well enough to tell who it is but . . . What if it was Lumas? What if it was even his ghost, but before he was dead? I may be a little drunk. Sorry. He had a dog, though, called Erasmus.’

At this point Burlem did a jerky thing with his head, as if he was trying to get water out of one of his ears. He frowned, as if considering a difficult question, and then made another face, suggesting that maybe the question didn't matter, anyway. Then he raised an eyebrow, smiled, walked over to the table and got another bottle of wine. While he did that, I looked at the vast image beyond him, painted on the back wall. The scene showed what seemed to be a king descending from heaven, alighting on some reddish, carpeted stairs. The stairs almost appeared to be part of the room rather than the painting, and the figures in the image looked like they might be using them to step into reality; into the present.

'Lumas can drive you a bit crazy,' he said, when he returned.

'I like the idea of the photograph, though,' I said. 'It reminds me of that story of his, "The Daguerreotype".'

'You've read that?'

I nodded. 'Yeah. I think it's my favourite.'

'How on earth did you get hold of it?'

'I got that one on eBay. It was in a collection. I've got almost all of Lumas's books, apart from *The End of Mr. Y*. I found a lot of them on secondhand-book sites.'

'And this is all for a magazine article?'

'Yeah. I do it pretty intensively. For a month I'll live and breathe, say, Samuel Butler. Then I'll find some link from him to take me to the next piece. The column is called Free Association. I started with the Big Bang about three years ago.'

Burlem laughs. 'And what did that lead to?'

'The properties of hydrogen, the speed of light, relativity, quantum mechanics, probability theory, Schrödinger's cat, the

wavefunction, light, the luminiferous ether – which is my personal favourite – experiment, paradox . . .’

‘So you’re a scientist? You understand all that stuff?’

I laughed. ‘God, no. Not at all. I wish I did. I probably shouldn’t have started with the Big Bang, but when you do, that’s what you get. At some point I went from artificial intelligence to Butler, and now here I am with Lumas. While I’m working on him I’ll probably decide on what link I’m going to follow through next so I can order all the books. I might do something about the history of photography, actually, following through from “The Daguerreotype”. Or I might follow it through to the fourth dimension, and that Zollner book, although that takes me back to science again.’

In ‘The Daguerreotype’, a man wakes up to find a copy of his house in a park across the road, with a large group of people gathered around it. Where has the house come from? People immediately accuse the man of losing his mind and arranging to have a copy of his house built in the park overnight. He points out that this is impossible. Who could have a whole house built overnight? Also, the house in the park does not seem new. It is in fact an exact copy of the ‘real’ house, down to some scuffing on the door panels, and some tarnish on the brass knocker. The only thing that’s different is that his key doesn’t work, and the keyhole seems to be blocked by something. The man initially tries to ignore the house, but soon it takes over his life and he has to try to work out where it has come from. Because of the house in the park he loses his job as a teacher, and his fiancée runs off with someone else. The police also become involved and accuse the man of all sorts of crimes. The house has some

strange properties as well, the main one being that no one can get into it. It is possible to look through the windows at the things inside – a table, a vase of flowers, a bureau, a piano – but no one can smash the windows or break down the door. The house behaves like a solid shape, as if it had no space inside.

One day, when the man in the story has almost lost his wits, a mysterious old man comes to his (real) house with a box full of equipment. He tells the man that he has heard of his predicament and thinks he knows what has happened. He takes out a velvet-lined folding case and explains to the man about the daguerreotype, and how it works. The man is initially impatient. Everyone knows how daguerreotypes work! But then his visitor makes an impossible claim. If humans, three-dimensional beings, can create two-dimensional versions of the things around us, would it be too impossible to assume that four-dimensional beings could make something like a daguerreotype machine of their own, but one that produces not flat, two-dimensional copies of things, but three-dimensional ones?

The man is angry and throws the photographer out of the house, thinking that there must be another explanation. However, he is unable to find one and later comes to the conclusion that his visitor must have been right. He finds the man's card and resolves to call on him immediately. But when the maid lets him into the man's house, he finds something very strange. The photographer seems to be standing in the drawing room, holding the daguerreotype machine. But it's not the real man; it's a lifeless copy.

'You know what I love about "The Daguerreotype"?' Burlem said.



‘What?’

‘The unresolved ending. I like it that the man never does find his answer.’

Up until that moment there had been no music in the Painted Hall, just the crackle of voices and laughter echoing around the large rooms. But someone must have remembered that they were supposed to have music on, and the first heavy notes of Handel’s *Dixit Dominus* seeped into the hall, followed by the first line, with all the choral voices tumbling over themselves: *Dixit Dominus Domino meo, sede a dextris meis.*

‘So,’ Burlem said, raising his voice over the music, ‘you work full-time at this magazine, then?’

‘No. I just write my column every month.’

‘Is that all you do?’

‘For the moment, yes.’

‘Can you live on that?’

‘Just about. The magazine’s doing pretty well. I can afford my rent and a few bags of lentils every month. And some books, too, of course.’

The magazine started as a small thing, edited by this woman I met at university. Now there’s a distribution deal and it’s given away in every big record shop in the country. It has proper advertising now, and a designer who doesn’t use glue to put the layouts together.

‘What did you do at university? Not science, I take it.’

‘No. English lit and philosophy. But I am seriously thinking of going back to do science. I think I’m probably going to apply to do theoretical physics.’ I explained that I wanted to be able to actually understand things like relativity, and Schrödinger’s cat,

and that I wanted to try to revive the dear old ether. I think I was feeling a bit drunk, so I wittered on about the luminiferous ether for some time. Burlem was familiar with it – it turned out that he ran the nineteenth-century Literature and Science MA at the university – but I still went on at length about how fascinating it was that for ages people couldn't work out how light could travel in a vacuum, considering that sound couldn't (you can see a bell in a vacuum, but you can't hear it go ding). In the nineteenth century people believed that light travelled through something invisible – the luminiferous ether. In 1887 Albert Michelson and Edward Morley set out to prove that the ether existed, but in the end they had to conclude that it didn't. While talking to Burlem I couldn't, of course, remember the date of this experiment, or the names of the scientists, but I did remember the way Michelson referred to the lost object of his experiment as the 'beloved old ether, which is now abandoned, though I personally still cling a little to it'. I got a bit excited about how much poetry there was in theoretical physics, and then I went on for a bit about how much I like institutions: especially ones with big libraries.

And then Burlem interrupted and said: 'Don't do that. Fuck theoretical physics. Come and do a PhD with me. I'm assuming you don't already have one?'

It was the way he said it. Fuck theoretical physics.

'What would I do it on?' I said.

'What are you interested in?'

I laughed. 'Everything?' I shrugged. 'I think that's my problem. I want to know everything.' I must have been drunk to admit that. At least I didn't go further and say that I want

to know everything because of the high probability that if you know everything, there'll be something to actually believe in.

'Come on,' Burlem said. 'What's your thing?'

'My thing?'

He took a gulp of wine. 'Yeah.'

'I don't think I know what my thing is yet. That's the whole point of the magazine column. It's about free association. I'm good at that.'

'So you start at the Big Bang and work your way through science until you end up at Lumas. There must be a connection between all the things you've written about.'

I sipped some more wine. 'Lumas's ideas about the fourth dimension are particularly interesting. I mean, he didn't exactly pre-empt string theory, but . . .'

'What's string theory?'

I shrugged. 'Don't ask me. That's why I want to do theoretical physics. At least, I think I do.'

Burlem laughed. 'For fuck's sake. Come on. Find the connection.'

I thought for a moment. 'I suppose almost everything I've written about has had some connection with thought experiments, or "experiments of the mind", as Lumas called them.'

'Good. And?'

'Um. I don't know. But I quite like the way you can talk about science without necessarily using mathematics, but using metaphors instead. That's how I've been approaching all my columns. For each of these ideas and theories, you find there's a little story that goes with it.'

'Interesting. Give me an example.'

‘Well, there’s Schrödinger’s cat, of course. Everyone can understand that a cat in a box can’t be alive and dead at the same time – but hardly anyone can understand the same principle expressed mathematically. Then there are Einstein’s trains. All of his thoughts about special relativity seem to have been expressed in terms of trains. I love that. And whenever people want to understand the fourth dimension nowadays, they still go back to *Flatland*, which was written in 1880-whatever. I suppose you can look at Butler that way, too. *Erewhon* is basically a thought experiment intended to work out ideas about society and machines.’

‘So write a proposal. Do a PhD on these experiments of the mind: I’d be very interested in supervising that. Work in some more novels and poetry. I’d recommend looking at Thomas Hardy and Tennyson, as well. Make sure you don’t get too carried away. Set a time frame, or some other sort of limit. Don’t do a history of thought experiments from the beginning of time. Do, say, 1859 to 1939 or something. Start with Darwin and end with, I don’t know, the atom bomb.’

‘Or Schrödinger’s cat. I think that was in the thirties. The bomb is too real; I mean, it’s where the thought experiment becomes reality, really.’

‘Maybe.’ Burlem ran his hand over the stubble on his face. ‘So, anyway, what do you think? I reckon we could sign you up pretty easily. You have an MA?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Superb. So let’s do it. I can get you some teaching as well, if you want.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Seriously,’ Burlem gave me his card. At the top it had his name in bold and then: Professor of English Literature.

So I wrote the proposal and fell in love with my idea. But then . . . I don’t know. When I went to start working with Burlem, he seemed to have gone cold on the idea of Lumas. My proposal had been accepted, of course – I was planning to look at the language and form of thought experiments, from *Zoonomia* to Schrödinger’s cat – and everything was fine with Burlem until I mentioned Lumas. When I did, he stopped making eye contact with me. He looked out of the window, now my window, and said nothing. I made some joke relating to our conversation at the conference, something like ‘So, has the curse claimed any more victims, then?’, and he looked at me and said, ‘Forget that paper, OK? Leave Lumas until later.’ He recommended that I start by focusing on the actual thought experiments: Schrödinger’s cat, Einstein’s *Relativity* and Edwin A. Abbot’s book *Flatland*. He also persuaded me to leave out *Zoonomia*, Charles Darwin’s grandfather’s book about evolution, and begin later, in 1859, when *The Origin of Species* was published. He also reminded me to look at some more poetry. I had no idea what was wrong with him, but I went along with it all. And then, a week later, he was gone.

So now here I am, unsupervised, like an experiment with no observer – Fleming’s plate of mould, perhaps, or an uncollapsed wavefunction – and what am I doing? I’m reading Lumas. I’m reading *The End of Mr. Y*, for God’s sake. Fuck you, Burlem.