

PART ONE

Not only is nothing good or ill but thinking makes it so,
but nothing is at all, except in so far as thinking has made
it so.

Samuel Butler

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 Burlum 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.