

The Scent of Cinnamon

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Also by Charles Lambert

Little Monsters (Picador, 2008)

CHARLES LAMBERT

The
of *Scent*
Cinnamon
& Other Stories



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The Scent of Cinnamon

DEAR MRS PAYNE

I have been given your name by the Reverend Ware, vicar of the English community here. I am a blunt man, and I shall come straight to the point. Ware tells me that you have recently lost your husband and are without means. He has suggested to me that you may be interested in marriage with a man who can provide you with the security and affection you require. He has indicated to me that I may be such a man. I have every reason to trust Ware's judgement in these matters, above all because he knew you as an unmarried girl and speaks highly of your breeding, modesty and intelligence. For my part, I offer you a man of thirty-seven years, of which nineteen have been passed outside his own country. I have a farm that would comfortably contain an English county. I am fit, healthy and, if Ware is to be trusted also in this matter, of sufficiently pleasing appearance to make my appeal for your

hand appropriate and possessing of some possibility of success.

I enclose a photograph. The dog's name is Jasper. I look forward to receiving your reply.

Yours sincerely
Joseph Broderick

It would do, he thought. He looked at the photograph for a moment and saw a man, a liver-spotted dog, a house, then folded the sheet of paper around it and slid them both into the envelope. Miriam Payne, he murmured, writing these words in his small clear forward-sloping hand, and beneath them an address in Cornwall, a county he had never seen. *Miriam Payne* he repeated in a stronger voice, then: *Miriam Broderick*. Yes. It would do.

The reply arrived six weeks later and was brief.

Dear Mr Broderick

Thank you for your letter and the photograph enclosed, both of which have given me much food for thought. I shall say at once that I am prepared to consider your offer. However, before doing so, I too shall be frank. I would like you to answer me one question, which may appear impertinent but is, I believe, quite the opposite. Dear Mr Broderick, have you ever been in love?

I also enclose a photograph. As you see, I have no dog. I am not sure that I like dogs, nor that dogs like me.

Yours sincerely
Miriam Payne

The woman in the photograph was younger than Joseph had expected. Her hair was long, caught up on one side by a clip of some kind and loose at the other to hang across her shoulder. He couldn't tell its colour but imagined it deep and dark and heavy, a lustrous red. Her eyes and eyelashes were also dark. Although she wasn't smiling, the set of her mouth suggested that smiling were its purpose; even solemn, its owner had small dimples in both cheeks. She was dressed in widow's weeds, which made her form hard to decipher, but she appeared to be slender and even elegant. Her hands, crossed on her lap, were small but strong. He closed his eyes and she was still sufficiently there for him to move her and place her beside him, on the other side from Jasper, in front of the house he had built for himself and a wife he had never had. He saw them together and felt his heart beat faster, as though he had chased a runaway sheep across a field. He replied that same day.

Dear Mrs Payne

Thank you for your letter and photograph, both of which considerably eased my mind. The fact that you are prepared to consider my offer fills me with hope and, if I may admit such a feeling, trepidation. As to your question, which is more than pertinent, I can answer without

shame that I have never been fortunate enough to have known love, convinced though I am to possess the faculty for it.

I look forward with some anxiety to your reply.

Yours sincerely

Joseph Broderick

Another six weeks passed. Broderick began to see the house he had built with his own hands through other eyes, through the dark and deep-set eyes of the woman in the photograph. The tamped earth floors, shiny with wear as if waxed, the stone and whitewashed walls, the bareness of the shuttered uncurtained windows, which before he hadn't noticed or had maybe thought appropriate to his single life, as hard and bare as his surroundings, now distressed and embarrassed him. The straight-backed chairs became uncomfortable, unyielding. How could a lady sit on them? How could a lady live in a house so male and austere and unadorned?

He would have asked another woman what could be done to make his house acceptable, but there was no married woman in the neighbourhood he could trust to take him seriously. There was no one with the taste required; the women around had neither breeding nor education. Besides, he would look ridiculous if Miriam decided not to marry him, a single middle-aged man, alone in a house full of frills and ribbons. He could have asked Reverend Ware, who had an eye for such things, but didn't.

And what would she bring herself, if she did decide to come, he wondered. Paintings, embroidery, cushions perhaps. A musical instrument of some kind. Perhaps the wisest choice would be to wait in the bare house and allow her to mould it into the place she could most comfortably consider her own, her new married home in her new world. And then he imagined her trunks stacked neatly beside her on the quay, a dozen iron-bound trunks, his cart weighed down with them. Sometimes the vision of her was so vivid it seemed that she was already there beside him and he would shake his head until she had gone, and then feel desolate.

When her second letter arrived, his hand began to tremble. Jasper barked and clawed at his waist. 'It's all right, lad,' Broderick said. 'It's all right.'

And it was.



The day that Miriam Payne was due to arrive on the spice boat, Joseph Broderick hitched his best horse to the cart and set off before dawn. He was wearing a stiff white collar and the brown serge suit he had bought for the funeral of his first and only friend, a Welshman who had helped him stake out and fence and stock the farm before dying of pleurisy twelve years before. Six years later Broderick had given the dead man's name, Jasper, to his dog, who now sat beside him as the cart jolted over farm tracks towards the road that would take them down to the

harbour. The suit was too hot and tight around the waist; he had put on weight since the funeral.

By the time the sun was up he was sweating. By early morning he had stripped down to his vest and braces, and unbuttoned his trousers at the waist. He rode on, feeling sweat dry against his skin. The pleurisy that killed Jasper Preece had begun like this, it occurred to him, and he pulled over to the side to put on his shirt and jacket, his stiff white collar and carefully knotted tie. We all die one way or another, he thought, as the heat sank into his bones, from fire or ice. From passion or the lack of it.

When a back wheel of the cart slipped into a rut and refused to budge, he swore beneath his breath and jumped down to the dusty road, taking off his jacket once more and placing it, folded, on the seat, sliding his braces from his shoulders. He heaved the cart backwards and forwards, shouting at the horse to move. It took almost half an hour before it was back on the road. Overcome by sudden weakness, he sat down on the verge beside the cart. His left arm had begun to ache, strained, he supposed, by the heaving. A moment later, the ache grew worse, a sharp stabbing pain that rose from his wrist to his shoulder. He felt the tightness move over to the heart. His hand went up to his collar, to loosen it and allow him to breathe.

He opened his eyes to see Jasper bound away from him, bark from the far side of the road. The sun was higher; he must have fallen asleep. The rest had done him good, he found, he felt stronger than before. He spurred the horse on, the dog following at a distance. The road

became easier on the approach to the town; perhaps he would not be as late as he had thought.

But she was the only person waiting when he reached the harbour. Even the spice boat that had brought her the last leg of her journey had gone to the next port along the coast. She was standing in a grey and white dress, beside a pair of large brown leather suitcases, and when she saw him she raised an arm and waved. It was almost noon. She was quite alone on the waterfront of the otherwise empty harbour. Her hair was redder than he had dared imagine. In the late morning light it looked like a beacon. He jumped down from the cart and almost ran towards her, Jasper barking behind him, ignoring her. She held out her hand as he pulled up, oddly shy; she smiled and nodded, a brief but certain nod, and he understood that he would do. He took her hand in his and stood there like a fool as she stepped so close he could feel the warmth of her body on his own; she kissed his cheek, first one and then the other, like a Frenchwoman. 'Joseph Broderick,' she said, her head on one side. 'Miriam Payne,' he answered. 'I shall call you Joseph,' she said, and smiled. 'And I shall call you Miriam.'

He was shivering, from fever or fear or excitement he couldn't tell, as he swung the two suitcases into the cart and gave her his arm, thrilled to see how easily she took it, as though she had known him all her life; as though they were already married. She had no gloves, her hands were coloured by the sun. He noticed this and thought, she will like the farm. She belongs here.

Only Jasper seemed discontent. He had halted a yard or

two away from them both and sat down suddenly on his haunches, his tongue lolling out at the side, his head cocked. 'Come on then, get a move on,' Joseph shouted across to the dog as soon as he and Miriam were seated together, the cases in the space behind them. Jasper stood up and sidled towards the cart, the hair on the base of his spine raised up in a brush, then scrambled up over the side, curling into a tight ring at the back, shucked down in the farthest corner, his muzzle beneath his tail.

'You'll need to wear a hat,' Joseph said, half turning to Miriam, 'you aren't used to this kind of sun in Cornwall,' but the thought that she might cover her head distressed him as he spoke. He fancied he could smell the spices she had travelled with, the scent of cinnamon and cloves, in her clothes and hair. 'Oh no,' she said, 'I love the sun. I can't believe the sun will do me harm.'

He knew then that he had been right not to adorn the house with curtains and rugs. She would take him as he was, the bareness and the hard-trodden earth, as smooth by now as wax.

It was late afternoon when they reached the farm. He had expected they would talk, but she seemed content to sit beside him, her hand occasionally at rest on his arm, the other hand brushing her hair from her face as the breeze displaced it. She wore no jewels, he noticed, and was glad. She asked him once for water and he reached behind for the flask. As she drank, he watched her throat, the life in it. When she gave him back the flask he drank from it hungrily without wiping the neck, his blood rushing. She had taken the cork from his hand; she closed the flask with

a swift firm gesture and returned it to its place behind their seat as though she had done this all her life. Miriam Broderick, he thought. Together, they rode on in silence, refreshed, until the house was in sight on the skyline.

He raised his arm and pointed. 'That's where I live,' he said, without any sense of breaking the silence, because what he had said was needed.

'Where we live,' she corrected him.

She allowed him to help her from the cart, placing her hands on his as he circled her waist and lifted her up and then down to the ground. How light she was! He thought she would wait beside him while he stepped up on the wheel to take her suitcases, but she walked across to the house, her hands lifting her hair from her neck in two great waves of red, and opened the door. She seemed to shimmer in the heat against the whitewashed wall of the house, more like a flame than a living person. He saw her pause for a second then step inside, into the darkness. He put the suitcases down beside the cart and, releasing the horse, was about to lead it to the trough to drink. First the horse, he thought, then us. But the horse shied away. Jasper had jumped from the cart and was edging towards him, almost on his belly, as though afraid of a beating. Joseph bent down and cradled the dog's head in his hands, startled when the dog bared its teeth and pulled away. He was putting it off, he knew that; he was putting off the moment when he and Miriam would be alone together in the house. He was scared of both of them and of what they might do.

But he was wrong to worry. As soon as he had entered

the room, she walked across and took both his hands in his and stared into his eyes.

'We are man and wife from this moment on,' she said. 'We are Miriam and Joseph.'

'Miriam,' he repeated in a voice so quiet he wondered how she could have heard. She kissed his mouth.

'I am God's gift to you,' she said. 'That's what Miriam means, did you know that? God's gift.'

'I don't believe in God,' he said.



The next morning, Jasper had gone. While Miriam dressed, Joseph walked round and then behind the house, calling the dog's name. He shouldn't have been worried; Jasper had often disappeared for a day or two, even three. He shouldn't have cared about the dog at all, with the memory of the skin of Miriam against his own, her lips on his; more than a memory, as he bore the woman's scent on his hands and in his hair, both utterly new and known, familiar to him. He tasted her, sweet and acrid, in his mouth like some strange spice he had only heard of, some strange preserving spice that warded off death. Yet, after the dog's behaviour the day before, he *was* worried. He hadn't liked the way the animal had cringed and snarled, nor the brush of raised fur above its tail. He called and called, without result. Finally, he went back to the house. In the kitchen, Miriam was setting the table for two.

'He'll come back,' he said. 'Dogs can be jealous.'

'I told you dogs didn't like me,' she said.

That morning Joseph showed her around the farm. He took her from barn to dipping trough to shearing house in a delirium of passion he had never imagined possible, as though he had died and been reborn in a place without hardship or solitude, where he was precious to someone else. Often, she stopped his chattering by laying a finger on his mouth, and then her lips. They leant against the back wall of one of the outbuildings and made love, her skirt lifted up. Her hair was in his mouth, her fingers laced behind his head, her low moans in his ear.

The first day passed like this, and the second too, and there was still no sign of Jasper. At the end of a week, when the dog had not returned, Joseph said: 'I should go down into the town, to see what news there is.' He didn't mention Jasper. They were sitting together outside the house, beneath a sort of canopy Joseph had made from wood, covered by Miriam with fine lawn sheets the warm breeze lifted and furled.

'You mustn't worry about him,' she said.

Joseph paused. 'I suppose I ought to speak to Reverend Ware as well,' he said, 'about our marriage.'

'Oh, that can wait,' she said. She leant back in her chair and lifted her arms. She was wearing a loose smock and the sleeves fell back so that he could see the soft pale skin of the underside of her upper arms. He knelt beside her and buried his face in her lap. 'I love you,' he said.



Almost a month passed before Joseph rode into town. He

had begged her to come, but Miriam had refused; she had too much to do at home. She hadn't wanted him to go at all; and really there was no need, apart from a sense of restlessness, almost unease that Joseph had begun to feel. It seemed to him that the work of the farm took no time at all. Each afternoon was as warm and sunny as the one before, each morning cool and fresh. His days and nights were devoted to Miriam, yet walking around the house and the nearest fields, as they did each evening, there was no sign of neglect, no fence in disrepair, no animal at need. He must be getting up and working in his sleep, Joseph thought.

In the end she said it would do them good to spend a few hours apart. She wrote him a list of items she needed for her dressmaking and mending, silk thread, buttons, elastic; he would have to go to shops he had never been into before. He would show them the list, he decided, rather than say the words, which struck him as shameful. And then he would go to the Reverend, who would have heard of Miriam's arrival by now and must have wondered where they were.

He hadn't mounted the horse since Miriam's arrival. It snorted and bucked as he walked towards it with the saddle in his arms, as though it had never been ridden before. Not until it was cornered against the fence did it allow the saddle to be slung across its back.

He was three or four miles from the farm when he saw Jasper, sniffing at the broken wheel of an abandoned cart. He didn't recognise the dog at first, but Jasper must have recognised him because it staggered away from the cart

towards the ditch and stood there, staring at Joseph, before moving off. The ribs and haunches of the dog jutted out from beneath the skin, which was covered with dust, an almost uniform grey-brown, and burrs. One of the ears was torn and bleeding, the wound coated with flies. The dog panted in the heat, reeling slightly as it walked beside the road, heading in the same direction as the horse. Joseph called out, but the force of his voice was broken by distress and the dog appeared not to hear. It was only when Joseph drew level and leapt from the saddle no more than a yard away that Jasper reacted. The dog sank down on its belly, its front legs stretched out before it, its teeth bared. As Joseph approached it made a long slow growl, increasing in pitch to an anguished whine from the back of the throat. 'Jasper,' the man coaxed, trembling, his hand held out. 'Jasper.' The dog backed away, wriggling off without raising itself from the dust of the road, its belly dragging, the whine in the throat like the slow turning of a ratchet. It shook its head and the swarm of flies rose from the wound on the ear, resettled.

Joseph straightened up, shaking his head, then stood there and watched as the dog slunk off. He waited until the dog had gone a dozen yards before calling its name once more. At that, the dog turned back and stared at him, and Joseph turned his eyes away, abashed. Finally, with a heavy heart, he remounted his horse, which pulled away from him as he swung his leg across the saddle. He glanced at the broken cart behind him, left to rust and rot. It must have been close to here that his own cart had got

stuck in the rut, he thought, and his hand rose to his heart.

The harbour town seemed as empty as it had the day of Miriam's arrival. The air was heavy with the scent of cardamom and ginger, cinnamon and cloves; he looked across the water for the spice boat, his vision blurred by images of Miriam, because there was nothing to be seen but her, his fingers in her hair, his hands around her waist; the air was filled with her. He was wandering towards the row of traders' shops, intoxicated, when a notice posted on a wall attracted his attention and he walked across to read it. It spoke of a shipwreck that had taken place in those waters a month before; there had been no survivors. His eyes skimmed down the list of the dead, out of habit; there was no one he cared for but Miriam. The whole world might be dead, he thought, for all it mattered, as long as she and he were alive.

And then he saw her name.

Ten minutes later he stood before the Reverend Ware, shouting and waving his arms. The man was talking to a group of old women about the weather, how it had turned for the worse in the past few days, such terrible storms they had had. Joseph grabbed at the cloth of the Vicar's sleeve, but his cold hand made no purchase. He might as well not have been there. Only once, the Vicar turned his eyes in Joseph's direction and flinched, as though he had seen a ghost.

The Number Worm

DOUGAL IS ALMOST asleep when he feels the first faint prickle, high up on his back. He lies still for a while, too tired to move, and waits for the sensation, almost but not quite an itch, to fade. When the prickle intensifies, he lifts his hand and stretches round, behind his neck, and down, as far as he can reach. The itch seems to shuffle away from his touch, as though someone is drawing the tip of a nettle leaf across the skin. He'd ask Miranda to scratch him, but she isn't here. He rolls onto his stomach to approach the itch from beneath and feels a weal, as thick as the edge of a coin. The second his fingers touch the weal, the itch disappears. A few moments later, he goes to sleep. He sleeps badly, his dreams are filled with images he can't quite place, images that have to do with work. He wakes up two or three times and lies still, waiting for sleep to come back to him, and realises that what he has seen are colour plates of tumours, brown and grey, like rain clouds waiting to break.

He remembers the itch the following morning. He is standing at the basin, about to shake the can of shaving foam, when the odd feel of the raised skin under his fingers worms into his head. Curious, he turns and sees in the mirror a fine red line, maybe three inches, running along the white skin between his shoulder blades. The upper part of the line is bent sharply down to the left, like a fish hook or the number one. He twists his arm up his back to touch the line, which is flat; the weal has disappeared. If he hadn't looked, he wouldn't have known it was here.

In the bedroom he smooths the sheet and shakes the pillow, not quite prepared to admit to himself that he's looking for bed bugs, though he has no idea what bed bugs are like. He imagines a small round creature, the size of a grain of rice, with pincers and teeth. By the time he's dressed and making coffee, his mind is on other things; Miranda's arrival, work. The proofs are due in that morning for the April number of *The British Oncology Journal*, already four days late despite his regular fretful calls to the printers, who treat him with a mixture of pity and contempt. This is the third month running, he thinks, there'll be hell to pay when Gough finds out. *Cutting edge research can't hang around while you do crosswords, Dougal*. But Gough's in Norway for three more days, which should give him time to turn the proofs round and back. And this time he'll be careful. There won't be any slip-ups.

He's upstairs on the bus when something starts to crawl across his left thigh, tiny and resolute as an ant, moving beneath the thin cloth of his suit trousers. He lets

go of his newspaper and brings his hand down sharply on the spot, startling the woman beside him. The crawling stops. He must have killed it, he thinks, and wonders what *it* was. The notion that *it* might exist occupies him for the rest of the journey. His vision of the bed bug returns and drives away all desire to read his paper.

Inside the building, he darts down the corridor to the bathroom, locks himself into a cubicle and drops his trousers. He's shocked, though not surprised, to find the same kind of weal he had felt the night before, in bed. He realises that the colour must come later, because now it is as pale as the rest of his skin. He strokes it and feels the ridge through the thin hairs on his leg. This time it's not a turned-down line, but a pair of linked semicircles, like a smiley cut in half and flipped open. Like the number three, it occurs to him. He squats on the toilet with his trousers round his ankles and waits to see how long it takes the weal to go and the red line to appear. Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes pass as the line flattens out and turns livid, as though what has happened is no longer a source of irritation but the start of a design. There is no sensation at all. He sits and watches, fascinated, slightly hypnotised. It's like watching paint dry, he thinks. A line of bright red paint.

Dougal is almost asleep when someone rattles the door.

'Hello? Are you all right?'

It's Boyd from reception. Dougal sits up and glances at his watch. He's been here over half an hour. Boyd's feet are just visible beneath the door.

'I'm fine,' he says. Boyd doesn't move. 'I've got a bit of a stomach problem.'

'Is that you in there, Mr Davis? Only your phone's been ringing.'

'Yes,' Dougal says. He gets to his feet and pulls up his trousers, remembering to flush the toilet before he leaves. Boyd is hovering outside, his jacket unbuttoned while Gough's away. 'If there's anything I can get you?' he says. 'For your stomach?'

Dougal brushes past, more rudely than he intends. 'I'm fine now.'

The proofs arrive just after ten, but Dougal can't concentrate. He feels as if his body has been invaded by tiny hair-like creatures. Every few minutes, his hand darts inside his shirt or up his trouser leg or down the back of his collar. There's nothing to find, of course, he's aware of that; he knows that he's imagining it. This makes it worse, as though whatever is plaguing him is both on his body and inside his head. He picks up the sheets of paper, the folder of photographic plates that need to be inserted, and puts them down, then spreads them around the desk to create the appearance of activity. Debbie, one of the temps from the next room, pokes her head into the office and asks him if he'd like a decent coffee from the sandwich bar and he's about to give her the money when a pin-stab of pain in his lower back makes him cry out loud.

'Are you all right?' she says. She doesn't seem surprised. Boyd's been talking, that's obvious. He pushes some loose change into her hand as the pin drags over the

flesh. This is what it must be like to be tattooed, it occurs to him.

'I'm fine,' he says.

Alone, he takes off his jacket, pulls the back of his shirt out from the waistband of his trousers and finds what he expects to find, a lengthening ridge of skin that stops the minute he gets his hand to it. He gouges at the end of the ridge with his nail, then grits his teeth at the pain. Too late. Whatever it is has moved on. He glances to the floor, as if he expects to see it scuttle off. His fingers trace the shape of this latest weal. A swirl, a curve. A nine. It must be a sort of worm, he thinks, it must be burrowing under the skin. He's about to look in the medical dictionary, under worm, when the phone rings. He jumps and stares at it. Debbie comes in with his coffee and looks first at Dougal and then at the phone. Dougal hurriedly tucks his shirt into his trousers. 'Get that for me, will you?' he says.

It's Miranda, from Heathrow. They arrange to meet for a drink before going home.

He thought he'd be let into secrets when he started work at the journal. No one he knew had died of cancer, which meant that he could still regard it as a sort of metaphor for more immediate concerns. He saw research as esoteric and himself as an acolyte. He was taken on as editorial assistant, a position for which he is not obviously qualified, because he claimed to have an eye for detail, to love precision. This isn't true. What Dougal loves is looking for sense in things that appear to possess no sense at all. He counts the steps between his front door and the bus stop,

the number of letters in headlines and names. He dreams of codes. Each month he counts the number of nude mice to be slaughtered in the course of experiments he barely understands. In April, it's two thousand three hundred and eighty-seven. This must mean something, he thinks, but what? And 139?

'It started last night. I was in bed.'

'It's probably just a reaction,' Miranda consoles him. 'You must have eaten badly while I've been away.'

'I don't get reactions,' he says.

'That doesn't mean you can't start to get them.' She picks up his free hand and plays with it, stroking the fingers out, trying to make him relax. 'Show me one of them.'

Dougal withdraws his hand, glances round, then pulls up his trouser leg to show her the most recent addition, just above his left knee.

'It could be a two,' she says. 'It's hard to tell.'

'I'll show you the others. It can't be a coincidence. OK, the first one could just be a line, I suppose. But a three? A nine?'

'One three nine two.' She smiles. 'It could be a pin code. Somebody's bank account? It could be a date.'

'You needn't take me seriously,' he says. It occurs to him now that he had hoped she would laugh it off.

'What happened in 1392 anyway? The Crusades? Weren't the Crusades about then? Perhaps you've been possessed by the spirit of some Moorish infidel.' She starts to look bored.

‘The Crusades were earlier,’ he says, though he isn’t certain of this. He feels like arguing, Miranda consistently fails to understand him, he thinks, watching her as she fiddles in her bag for something. Her purse? Her cigarettes? She pulls out her plane ticket, puts it into her coat pocket. Constantly, she goes away and comes back, and when she isn’t here he misses her, and when she is there’s a nagging resentment he can’t quite place, as though she owes him something. He closes his eyes for a moment and sees the worm, because by now he’s decided it must be a worm, burrowing and almost but not quite surfacing, pushing the skin into meaningful weals and diving back down, within, sightless but determined. He imagines it easing its way through his body, weaving from vein to vein, at home among his cells, perhaps more at home than he is.

Miranda picks up his empty glass. ‘I’ll get you another,’ she says.

Back home, he types 1392 into a search engine. The first few items are laws, decrees, but halfway down the page is *The Goodman of Paris, 1392*. Skimming the text, he finds: *Wherefore I beseech you thus to bewitch and bewitch again your husband. And in summer take heed that there be no fleas in your chamber, nor in your bed. I have seen blankets of white wool set on the straw and on the bed, and when the black fleas hopped thereon, they were the sooner found upon the white, and killed. But the best way is to guard against those that be within the coverlets and the furs, and the stuff of the dresses wherewith one is covered. For when the coverlets, furs or dresses, wherein there be fleas, be*

folded and shut tightly up, or otherwise put and pressed so that the aforesaid fleas be without light and air and kept imprisoned, they will perish forthwith and die.

Miranda bewitching him? For the first time that day, he's amused. Other than that the passage isn't clear, all this business about fleas seems to be telling him something, but what? Is it their presence that bewitches, or their absence? And what if the fleas are not inside the clothes but inside the body already, itching, focused, working out? What if the fleas are eggs or seed, unwilling to exit, secure yet insistent? *They will perish forthwith and die.* Then he thinks it might not be nine at all, but six. It might be 1362. He is on the point of calling Miranda from her unpacking when the back of his hand begins to itch. He looks down and sees it happen for the first time. A bump appearing, the size of a pin head. Appalled, he watches as the bump seems to pause, *to think*, before moving up towards the wrist. He doesn't even try to interrupt its progress. The bump becomes a line that becomes a four. He doesn't call Miranda. He thinks about what he has found. 13924. Five digits, so no longer a date. He types it in. The catalogue number of a painting of three tulips in a vase. The number of a bug. A bug? Yes! He punches the air, a gesture so uncharacteristic he freezes halfway. He clicks on the site but it makes no sense at all. Why me? he wonders. What makes me special? It's odd, but he feels privileged.

They get no sleep. Dougal lies on his back, wide awake, waiting. Miranda's jetlagged beside him, reading a novel.

Each time the worm rises, he throws the duvet back and they watch its work appear. Dougal writes what he finds in a notebook beside the bed and records the time, convinced now that not only the numbers but also the rhythm of their arrival makes some kind of sense. What this might be is not yet apparent, and he is furious that he didn't begin to record the times with the first one, with 1; he feels that he has lost significant data. When he says this to Miranda, she takes off her glasses and squints at him.

'I think you should speak to a doctor,' she says.

'What sort of doctor?' He sounds suspicious.

She puts her glasses back on and picks up her book.

'A dermatologist.'

He calls into work the next morning and leaves a message with Boyd to say that his stomach is worse. Miranda finally falls asleep after breakfast and he sits alone in front of his computer, his dressing gown hanging open so that the slightest movement of the worm can be tracked. He stares down at his thin white legs, his convex belly, watching the worm work and the numbers come. He keys the growing sequence in, each time with diminishing results. After the eleventh digit, nothing more can be found. What does it want? he wonders. By lunchtime, he has begun to sense a pattern in the timing, which seems to be producing clusters separated by pauses, an algorithm his school-boy maths can intuit but not read. There are thirty-six numbers scattered about his limbs and torso. With the exception of the four on the back of his hand, they would

all be concealed by clothes; no one would need to know that they were there. It's as though the worm were talking only to him. Idly, he taps in the word *worm* and finds, among the etymologies, *vermilion*. Of course, he thinks, as if something fundamental has been revealed; that's what the colour is, this red that's closer to ketchup than blood. When Miranda walks into his study and sees him, she stands beside his chair and stares at the screen. He glances up, sees her face, dispassionate, a hint of distaste perhaps. He can't tell with Miranda. One plus one equals two, he thinks.

'Look at me,' he says, standing up and pulling the dressing gown away from his body to display the numbers. She looks but doesn't seem to see him. She pulls a face.

'I think you should go and talk to your doctor,' she says.

'He didn't believe me,' Dougal says when he gets back.

'What did he say?'

'He thinks I'm doing it myself. With a felt tip pen.'

'He said that?'

'He didn't need to. It was obvious.' Dougal laughs briefly. 'He tried to rub one off with alcohol. He thought I wouldn't realise what he was doing.'

'But nothing happened while you were there?'

'Happened?'

'You know. Nothing came up?'

'No,' says Dougal, and smirks. 'The worm's no fool.' He takes off his jacket and pulls the shirt collar away from

his neck. 'But the minute I was outside the surgery, this one came. Look.' Miranda sees what might be a seven, crossed. 'Seven. Your worm's continental,' she says. 'Unless it's a four on its side?'

'There's no need to humour me.' Dougal goes into his study, hangs up his jacket and takes out a book from the pocket. He puts it on the desk, strips off, throwing his clothes to the floor, and walks past Miranda, who stares at him open-mouthed, until he is standing in front of the full-length mirror in their bedroom. As close to the mirror as he can get, Dougal slowly pirouettes, inspecting his pale skinny body, round-shouldered, pot-bellied, almost hairless, the body of a man who spends all day at a desk, who deals with words and numbers and images of death, but also life; of multiplication as the cells proliferate. He examines his chest and back and buttocks with a satisfaction he has never before experienced, as though what he is seeing now is what he has always wanted to see. As though his existence is finally making sense.

Miranda stands behind him, one hand over her mouth, and sees the surface of her husband's body disfigured by tracks the worm has left behind, tracks which might be numbers and might be something else; which might mean nothing at all. She no longer knows. Perhaps the doctor is right, she thinks, it is all in his head; although surely she too has seen the worm do its work? Hasn't she? Last night seems so long ago. Had she really been there beside him watching these things appear? Perhaps she'd been dreaming. Now, as she watches Dougal pass his fingers in awe across the latest track, feeling the weal