

SATIN ISLAND



TOM McCARTHY





Also by Tom McCarthy

MEN IN SPACE

C

REMAINDER

TINTIN AND THE SECRET OF LITERATURE

SATIN ISLAND

A N O V E L

Tom McCarthy



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THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK

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v3.1

Outside, like the cry of space, the traveller perceives the whistle's distress. "Probably," he persuades himself, "we are going through a tunnel—*the epoch*—the last long one, snaking under the city to the all-powerful train station of the virginal central palace, like a crown."

—*Mallarmé*

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Note About the Author

1.1 Turin is where the famous shroud is from, the one showing Christ's body supine after crucifixion: hands folded over genitals, eyes closed, head crowned with thorns. The image isn't really visible on the bare linen. It only emerged in the late nineteenth century, when some amateur photographer looked at the negative of a shot he'd taken of the thing, and saw the figure—pale and faded, but there nonetheless. Only in the negative: the negative became a positive, which means that the shroud itself was, in effect, a negative already. A few decades later, when the shroud was radiocarbon dated, it turned out to come from no later than the mid-thirteenth century; but this didn't trouble the believers. Things like that never do. People need foundation myths, some imprint of year zero, a bolt that secures the scaffolding that in turn holds fast the entire architecture of reality, of time: memory chambers and oblivion-cellars, walls between eras, hallways that sweep us on towards the end-days and the coming whatever-it-is. We see things shroudedly, as through a veil, an over-pixelated screen. When the shapeless plasma takes on form and resolution, like a figure approaching us through murky waters or an image looming into view from noxious liquid in a darkroom, when it begins to coalesce into a figure that's discernible, if ciphered, we can say *This is it, stirring, looming*, even if it isn't really, if it's all just ink-blots.

1.2 One evening, a few years ago, I found myself stuck in Turin. Not in the city, but at the airport: Torino-Caselle. Lots of other people did too: nothing was taking off. The phrase *Awful Announcements* multiplied, stacked up in columns on the information screens, alternately in English and Italian. What was causing the delay was a rogue aeroplane, some kind of private jet, which, ignoring all instructions, was flying in idiosyncratic patterns over Southern England and the Channel; which meant that no other planes could penetrate that swath of airspace; which in turn, via the series of switches and transfers and reroutings that had been put in place to deal with the whole situation, had spread a huge delay-cloud over Europe. So I sat, like everyone else, sifting through airline- and airport-pages on my laptop for enlightenment about our quandary—then, when I'd exhausted these, clicking through news sites and social pages, meandering along corridors of trivia, generally killing time.

1.3 That's when I read about the shroud. When I'd done reading about that I started reading about hubs. Torino-Caselle is a hub-airport. There was a page on their website explaining what this is. Hub-airports are predominantly transfer points, rather than destinations in and of themselves. The webpage showed a diagram of a rimless wheel, with spokes of different lengths all leading to the centre, such that communion between any two spots on the wheel's surface area was possible despite no direct line connecting these. It looked like Jesus' crown with all its jutting prongs. A link took me to an external page that explained how the hub model was used in fields ranging from freight to distributed computing. Soon I was reading about flanges, track sprockets and bearings in bicycle construction. Then I clicked on *freehu*

These incorporate splines—mating features for rotating elements—and a ratchet mechanism built into the hub itself (rather than adjacent to or above it, as in previous, non-freehub models), whose temporary disengagement permits coasting.

1.4 To a soundtrack, incongruous, of looped, recorded messages and chimes, a fruit-machine idle-tune, snatches of other people's conversations and the staggered, intermittent hiss quieter or louder, of steam-arms at espresso bars dotted about the terminal, a memory came to me: of freewheeling down a hill as a child, riding my second bike. It wasn't a specific memory of riding down the hill on such-and-such a day: more a generic one in which hundreds of hill-descents, accumulated over two or three years, had all merged together. Where my first bike had had a footbrake, activated by the pedal, this one, fitted with a handbrake instead, allowed backpedalling. This struck me, I remembered, as nothing short of miraculous. That you could move one way while rotating the crank in the opposite direction contravened my fledgling understanding not only of motion but also of time—as though time, too, could be laced with a contraflow lodged right inside its core. Whenever I hurtled backpedalling, down the hill, I'd feel exhilaration, but also vertigo—vertigo tinged with slight nausea. It wasn't an entirely pleasant feeling. Recalling the manoeuvre now reproduced—in the crowded terminal, in my head and stomach—the same awkward sense of things being out of sync, out of whack.

1.5 Around me and my screen, more screens: of other laptops, mobiles, televisions. These latter screens had tickers scrolling across them, text whose subjects included the air delay in which I was caught up. Behind the tickers, news footage was running. One screen showed highlights of a football game. Another showed the aftermath of a marketplace truck bombing somewhere in the Middle East, the type of scene you always see in this kind of report: hysterical, blood-spattered people running about screaming. One of these people, a man who looked straight at the camera as he ran towards it, wore a T-shirt that showed Snoopy lounging on his kennel's roof, the word *Perfection* hovering in the air above him. Then the scene gave over to an oil spill that had happened somewhere in the world that morning, or the night before: aerial shots of a stricken offshore platform around which a large, dark water-flower was blooming; white-feathered sea birds, filmed from both air and ground, milling around on pristine, snowy shorelines, unaware of the black tide inching its way towards them; and, villain of the piece, shot by an underwater robot, a broken pipe gushing its endless load into the ocean.

1.6 My phone beeped and vibrated in my jacket. I took it out and read the message I received. It came from Peyman. Peyman was my boss. It said: We won. That was it. Two boys ran past me; one fell down; his brother jolted to a halt, backtracked a few paces and roughly pulled him to his feet; they ran on. I looked up again at the television monitor on which the football game was showing. The goal I'd seen a moment earlier was replaying in slow motion. The ball's trajectory, the arc it followed as it cleared defenders' heads and the keeper's hands, the backspin of its hexagons and stars, the sudden buckle and eruption of the

net's neat grid as the ball hit it—this sequence now aligned itself with these words sent to me by Peyman: We won. I looked at the screen's upper corner, where the scoreline was displayed, to see which teams were playing. Barcelona and Bayern Munich. I texted him back. Who won what? Company won Project contract, he responded half a minute later. This I understood. The Company was our company, Peyman's company, the company I worked for. The Project was the Koob-Sassen Project; we'd been going after the contract for some time. Good, I texted. The answer came more quickly this time: Good? That's it? I deliberated for a few seconds, then sent back a new message: Very good. His next text crossed with mine: You still stuck in transit? I confirmed this. Me too, Peyman eventually informed me; in Vienna. Come see me tomorrow a.m. Then a message came from Tapio. Tapio was Peyman's right hand man. Company won KSP contract, it said. Two more, from other colleagues, followed in quick succession, both conveying the same news. The effects of my chance exposure to the football game lingered after I'd read these; so it seemed to me that Bayern Munich's striker, roaring with delight towards the stands, was rejoicing not for his own team and fans but rather for us; and it even seemed that the victim with the Snoopy shirt on, as he ran screaming towards the camera, was celebrating the news too: from his ruined market with its standard twisted metal and its blood, for us.

1.7 Now my laptop started ringing: someone was Skyping me. *JoanofArc*, the caller-ident box read. I recognized the handle: it belonged to a woman named Madison, whom I'd met two months previously in Budapest. I clicked to accept. Can you hear me? Madison's voice asked. I said that I could. Activate your camera, the voice instructed me. I did this. Madison appeared to me at the same time. She asked me where I was. I told her. She told me that she'd been in Torino-Caselle Airport too, in 2001. What brought you here? I asked her, but my question seemed to get lost in the relay; she didn't answer it, at any rate. Instead, she asked when I'd be back in London. Her face, on my screen, jumped in small cascades of motion from one pool of stillness to another. I don't know, I said. I popped the news page open as I talked to her. The airspace lock-up was announced halfway down, adjacent to another in the same font-size as the marketplace truck bombing. Above it, slightly larger, the oil spill with a sequence of photos showing tugs, oil-covered men wrestling with grips and winches on those black-ringed outlying islands, the giant oil-flower and so forth. The editor had chosen a "fade" effect to link the shots together, rather than the more abrupt type of succession that recalls old slideshow carousels. It struck me as the right effect to use, aesthetically speaking.

1.8 The same two boys ran past me. Once more the small one's feet slipped out from under him: it must have been the angle as the floor rounded the row of seats—that, and the fact that the floor was polished. Once more his brother (if it was his brother) picked him up and they ran on. Madison asked once more when I'd be back. She said she needed ethnographic attention. How so? I asked, sliding her screen back above the news page. I'm lacking, she began to tell me—but just then the audio dropped. Her face froze in mid-sentence too. Her mouth was open in an asymmetric, drooley kind of way, as though she'd lost control of its muscles following a stroke; her eyes had rolled upwards, so the pupils were half-hidden behind the lids. A little circle span in front of her, to denote buffering. My screen stayed that way for

a long, long time, while I gazed at it, waiting for the buffering to pass. It didn't: instead, *Call Ended* message eventually replaced both face and circle.

1.9 I looked up, around the terminal. People who weren't clicking and scrolling their way like me, through phones and laptops were grazing on the luxury items stacked up all about us. The more valuable of these were kept behind polished glass sheets whose surfaces reflected the lounge's other surfaces, so that the marketplace bomb-aftermath replayed across the pattern of a shawl, oil flowed and reflowed on a watch's face. The overlap between these various elements, and the collage effect it created, was constant—but, as the hours wore on, the balance of the mixture changed. The luxury objects and their cases stayed the same, of course—but little by little, football highlights and truck bombing faded, clips of them growing shorter and less frequent; while, conversely, the oil spill garnered more and more screen time. It was obviously a big one. By midnight, those oil-drenched men I'd seen in the newspaper photos were on the airport's TV screens as well—but moving now, laying floating booms, trying, without any apparent success, to herd and corral the flow of water-borne oil as it forked and turned and spread out. They looked like demoralized, tug-mounted cowboys whose black cattle, through sheer mass and volume, had mutinied, stampeded and grown uncontrollable. Other sequences simply showed oil-saturated water, dark and ponderous. It seemed to move, to swell and crest, at once more slowly and faster than water usually does—as though, just like the goal that by now had retreated to a single sport-bar TV set at the television's edge, it had been filmed with high-end motion-capture cameras, the type that sharpen and amplify each frame, each moment, lifting it out of the general flow and releasing it back into this at the same time. I found this movement fascinating. I watched the images for hour after hour, my head rotating with them as they moved from screen to screen.

1.10 The man sitting beside me, noticing the rapt attention I was paying these pictures, tried at one point to spark up a conversation. Tutting disapprovingly in their direction, he opined that it was a tragedy. That was the word he used, of course: *tragedy*—like a TV pundit. He looked him up and down, scanning his get-up. He was wearing a suit but had removed his tie and laid it, folded, on a wheel-mounted carry-on bag that stood beside him. He addressed me in English, but his accent was Eurozone: neither French nor Dutch nor German but a mishmash of all these and more, overlaid with ersatz, business-school American. I didn't answer at first. When I did, I told him that the word *tragedy* derived from the ancient Greek custom of driving out a sheep, or *tragos*—usually a black one—in a bid to expiate a city's crimes. He turned back to the screen and watched it with me for a while as though the shared activity now formed part of our dialogue, of our new friendship. But I could feel he was upset not to have got the response that he'd expected. After a few minutes, he stood up, grasped the handle of the bag on which his tie was resting and walked off.

1.11 I, for my part, stayed put, watching the crippled platform listing, the broken pipe gushing, the birds milling around, the oil-flower unfurling its petals, the dark water swelling and cresting, over and over again. I watched, as I said, for hour after hour; when no public

screen was showing these scenes, I watched them on first one and then another of my private ones. They kept me utterly engrossed until, much later, in the small hours of the morning, the airspace unlocked and my flight was called. Nor did I leave them behind me then. When I had finally got airborne, and found my head slumped flat against the window as I slipped into flecked and grainy sleep, oil seemed to lie around the very cloud-patches the wing-lights were illuminating: to lurk within and boost their volume, as though absorbed by them, and to seep out from them as well, in blobs and globules that hovered on their ledges, sat about the folds and crevasses, like so many blackened cherubs.

2.1 Me? Call me U. It's not my intention, here, to write about the Koob-Sassen Project—give an exegesis, overview, whatever, of it. There are legal reasons for this: sub-clauses of contracts sitting in the drawers of cabinets that I always picture (and this, perhaps, is not unconnected to my sense of the Project itself, which I came to envision this way too) as made out of some smooth, post-metallic compound—epoxy, say, or Kevlar—although in reality they could just as well be aluminium, wooden, MDF or so on; stipulations protecting commercial, governmental and the level that comes one above that confidentiality interdictions on virtually all types of disclosure. And anyhow, even if there weren't, would you actually want to hear about it? It is, it strikes me, in the general scale of things, a pretty boring subject. Don't get me wrong: the Project was important. It will have had direct effect on you; in fact, there's probably not a single area of your daily life that it hasn't, in some way or other, touched on, penetrated, changed; although you probably don't know this. Not that it was secret. Things like that don't need to be. They creep under the radar by being boring. And complex. Koob-Sassen involved many hook-ups, interfaces, transpositions—corporate and civic, supra-national to local, analogue to digital and open to restricted and hard to soft and who knows what else. It was a project formed of many other projects, linked to many other projects—which renders it well-nigh impossible to say where it began and ended, to discern its “content,” bulk or outline. Perhaps all projects nowadays are like that—equally boring and equally inscrutable. So even if I could, and if you wanted me to, shine a (no more than anecdotal) spotlight on specific moments of Koob-Sassen's early phases, letting the beam linger on those passages and segments where the Company's operations, or my own small and insignificant activities, intersected them, would this, in any way, illuminate the Whole? I doubt it.

2.2 What do I do? I am an anthropologist. Structures of kinship; systems of exchange, barter and gift; symbolic operations lurking on the flipside of the habitual and the banal: identifying these, prising them out and holding them up, kicking and wriggling, to the light—that's my racket. When these events (*events!* If you want those, you'd best stop reading now) took place, I found myself deployed not to some remote jungle, steppe or tundra, there to study hunter-gatherers and shamans, but to a business. Deployed there, what's more, not by the austere dictates of a Royal Anthropological Society or National University, but by the very business to which I'd been dispatched: I was the in-house ethnographer for a consultancy. The Company (let's continue to call it that) advised other companies how to contextualize and nuance their services and products. It advised cities how to brand and re-brand themselves; regions how to elaborate and frame regenerative strategies; governments how to narrate their policy agendas—to the press, the public and, not least, themselves. We dealt, as Peyman liked to say, in narratives.

2.3 When, in those days, you entered the Company's Central London premises, passing the frequently changing but perennially attractive staff who manned the reception desk, a lift would bear you up to several floors of conferencing rooms and viewing suites and studios. Separated from each other by floor-to-ceiling glass partitions on which lower-case letters in the Company's own, distinctive font were stenciled, these compartments ran on one into the next, creating an expansive vista in which sketches, diagrams and other such configurations of precious data, lying face-up on curved tabletops, pinned to walls or drawn on whiteboards or occasionally (and this made the data seem all the more valuable, *fragile* even), on the glass itself, seemed to dialogue with one another in a rich and esoteric language, the scene conveying (deliberately, of course) the impression that this was not only a place of business but, beyond that, a hermetic zone, a zone of alchemy, a crucible in which whole worlds were in the mix. The same lift that bore you up here, though, bore me down to a glassless, brick-and-plaster basement, where my own office was situated.

2.4 The ventilation system. This deserves a book all of its own. It was cavernous and booming. The air-handling unit was housed in the basement with me—a series of grey boxes joined to one another like parts of a mechanical elephant, a sheet-metal supply-duct curling upwards from the front box forming its raised trunk. The coils, blowers, dampers, filters and so on that made up the boxes' entrails transmitted a constant hum and rattle that permeated the whole floor, mutating in pitch and frequency as the sound negotiated corners, bounced off walls, was sponged up and squeezed out again by carpets. Before it left the basement, the duct forked, then branched out further, the new branch-ducts leading to diffusers, grilles and registers that, in turn, fed air onwards to other floors, before return-ducts carried it back down again, along a central plenum, to the rectum of the elephant, to be re-filtered, re-damped, re-coiled, then trumpeted back out into the building once again. Sometimes, when someone on a higher floor spoke loudly while they happened to be standing next to a return-vent, their words carried to the space in which I found myself, like the voice of a ship's captain sending orders through a speaking tube down to the engine rooms—orders, though whose content became scrambled, lost in the delivery. Other, vaguer voices hovered in the general noise—or if not voices, at least patterns, with their ridges and their troughs, their repetition frequencies, their cadences and codas. Sometimes these patterns took on visual forms, like those that so enchanted eighteenth-century scientists when they scattered salt on Chladni plates and, exposing these to various acoustic stimuli, observed the intricate designs that ensued—geometric and symmetrical and so generally perfect that they seemed to betray a universal structure lurking beneath nature's surface, only now beginning to seep through. And I, too, in my basement, sometimes thought I saw, moving in ripples on the surface of a long-cold coffee cup or in the close-up choreography of dust-flecks jumping on an unwiped tabletop, or even on the fleshy insides of my own drooped eyelids, the plan, formula, solution—not only to the problem with which I was currently grappling, but to it *all*, the whole caboodle—before, waking with a jolt, I watched it all evaporate, like salt in a quick breeze.

2.5 When I returned from Turin, I slept for a couple of hours, then showered, then made m

way into the office. It was a clear day, one of those crisp ones in winter when the sunlight seems to penetrate the thin, cold air more sharply; the glass and metal carapace of the Company building was flashing blue and silver, as though laced with an electric charge. Inside, too, the place seemed all charged up: people were moving briskly, with a bounce and purpose to their gait. It was the Project contract, of course, the Company's landing of it, that was generating this excitement. The name Koob-Sassen was being spoken in the lobby, in the lift, along the corridors; even when nobody was speaking it, it seemed to hang about the air and speak itself. Arriving in my room, I called up to Peyman's office on the fifth floor, and was put through to Tapio. U., Tapio said; you're back. He spoke in a robotic Finnish monotone, but still he seemed surprised. Yes, I said. Peyman's not, he told me; he's still stuck in Vienna. (The airspace there, it turned out, was backed up much worse than it had been in Italy.) He'll be back tomorrow though, Tapio continued; come and see him then. He hung up, leaving me alone in my basement, disconnected and deflated.

2.6 On that day, of all days, I left the office early. Rather than go back to my flat, I went to Madison's. She lived in Westbourne Grove. On the tube on the way there, I picked up one of the free newspapers that lay about the seats. The front page carried an update on the oil spill. The containment booms hadn't worked; oil was, slowly but ineluctably, encroaching on those shorelines. The paper had reproduced a chart that showed the way the currents circulated in that particular spot: they moved in a large circle, or, to be precise, ellipse, one of whose elongated edges intersected the coast and at whose antipodal point the broken pipeline sank. The uptake and delivery of its effluvia thereby rendered all the more intense and concentrated between its and the coast's perfectly corresponding positions on the circumference. (There were, ironically, stretches of blank ocean lying much closer to the pipeline that were unaffected.) Looking at the chart, its directional arrows, I thought of those two boys, those brothers or not-brothers: I pictured them still running, sliding, plying their oval loop—not in the airport anymore, but on some other floor, a kitchen's or a school refectory's or playground's. Flipping onwards through the paper, I found my attention caught by a small item halfway through. A parachutist had died jumping from a plane. His parachute had detached from him and he'd plummeted to earth. Although just twenty-five, he'd been a seasoned parachutist, a core member of the club under whose auspices this fatal jump had taken place. Police were treating the death as suspicious.

2.7 I'd met Madison, as I've already mentioned, two months earlier, in Budapest. I'd been at a conference. She'd been there with some girlfriends. We'd got talking in the hotel bar. An anthropologist, she'd said; that's ... exotic. Not at all, I'd replied; I work for an incorporated business, in a basement. Yes, she said, but ... But what? I asked. Dances, and masks, and feathers, she eventually responded: that's the *essence* of your work, isn't it? I mean, even when you're writing a report on workplace etiquette, or how to motivate employees or whatever, you're seeing it all through a lens of rituals, and rites, and stuff. It must make the everyday all primitive and strange—no? I saw what she was getting at; but she was wrong. For anthropologists, even the exotic's not exotic, let alone the everyday. In his key volume *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss, the twentieth century's most brilliant ethnographer, described

...pacing the streets, all draped with new electric cable, of Lahore's Old Town sometime in the nineteen-fifties, trying to piece together, long after the event, a vanished purity—of local colour, texture, custom, life in general—from nothing but leftovers and debris. He goes on to describe being struck by the same impression when he lived among the Amazonian Nambikwara tribe: the sense of having come “too late”—although he knows, from having read a previous account of life among the Nambikwara, that the anthropologist (the account's author) who came here fifty years earlier, before the rubber-traders and the telegraph, was struck by that impression also; and knows as well that the anthropologist who inspired by the account that Lévi-Strauss will himself write of this trip, shall come back fifty more will be struck by it too, and wish—*if only!*—that he could have been here fifty years ago (that is, now, or, rather, then) to see what *he*, Lévi-Strauss, saw, or failed to see. This leads him to identify a “double-bind” to which all anthropologists, and anthropologists themselves, are, by their very nature, prey: the “purity” they crave is no more than a state in which all frames of comprehension, of interpretation and analysis, are lacking; once these are brought to bear, the mystery that drew the anthropologist towards his subject in the first place vanishes. I explained this to her; and she seemed, despite the fact that she was drunk, to understand what I was saying. Wow, she murmured; that's kind of fucked.

2.8 When I arrived at Madison's, we had sex. Afterwards, lying in bed, I asked her what she had been doing in Turin. I wasn't in Turin, she answered; *you* were. But you were too, I said. No, I wasn't, she replied. You told me that you had been once, I said—when we Skyped, just last night. I never said I'd been in Turin, she mumbled into her pillow; she was half asleep. She was silent for a few moments, and I thought she'd drifted off. After a while, though, she continued mumbling. I said, she told me, that I'd been in Torino-Caselle. Okay, I said, Torino-Caselle: what were you doing there? Waiting, she said, just like you were. What for? I asked. A plane, she said. What else do people wait for in an airport?

3.1 My meeting with Peyman didn't take place all that week. He'd been delayed in Vienna for so long that by the time a flight became available his schedule had him in Seattle, so he'd flown straight there. This was annoying—beyond annoying: frustrating. In fact, his absence filled me with what I can only describe as anxiety. Not that his presence made you feel uncomfortable, anxious, calm; far from it. The whole place ran on anxiety: it was Peyman's motor-oil, his generative fuel. But there's anxiety and anxiety. With the Project contract won, knowing the weight he attached to it, I, like everyone else in the Company, was now anxious to see Peyman and, through Peyman, to connect: either to some rich and stellar network that was pictured lying behind this name, Koob-Sassen; or, if not that, then at least to ... something. Being near Peyman made you feel connected. In his absence, I spent the week wrapping up other briefs that I'd been working on: transcribing audio files, drawing up charts, tweaking documents, drifting around websites. Mostly drifting around websites.

3.2 What does an anthropologist working for a business actually *do*? We purvey cultural insight. What does that mean? It means that we unpick the fibre of a culture (ours), its weave and warp—the situations it throws up, the beliefs that underpin and nourish it—and let our client in on how they can best get traction on this fibre so that they can introduce into the world and weave their own fine, silken thread, strategically embroider or detail it with a mini-narrative (a convoluted way of saying: sell their product). Ethnographers do field research, creating photomontages out of single moments captured in a street or café; or they get sample citizens—teenagers, office workers, mums—to produce video-diaries for them, outlining their daily routines in intimate detail, confiding to the camera the desires, emotions, aspirations and so forth that visit them as they unload a dishwasher, lace up trainers, or sip foam through the little slit you get in plastic coffee-cup lids. It's about identifying and probing granular, mechanical behaviours, extrapolating from a sample batch of these a set of blueprints tailored according to each brief—blueprints which, taken as a whole and cross-mapped onto the findings of more “objective” or empirical studies (quantitative analysis, econometric modeling and the like), lay bare some kind of inner social logic, which can be harnessed, put to use. In essence it's not that much different from what soothsayers, ichthyomancers, did in ancient times: those wolfskin-clad men who moved from stone-age settlement to stone-age settlement, cutting fish open to tease wisdom from their entrails. The difference being, of course, that soothsayers were frauds.

3.3 Once, for a brief time, I was famous. My renown came in the wake of my first—and only—major academic study. The study's subject was club culture. For three years, in the nineties—my mid-to-late twenties—I spent a large portion of my waking (and sleeping) hours among clubbers. I took a barman job in Bagleys; spent off-nights at the Fridge, the Ministry of Sound, the Velvet Rooms and Turnmills; took poppers, speed, MDMA; the lot. By the end

was helping procure venues for illicit raves, helping direct crowds to these through code messages put out on pirate radio stations, cellular networks and the array of whisper-line that spring up around this type of dubious activity. I then spent two more years writing it up. On my study's publication (first as a doctoral thesis, then, two years later, with me in my mid-thirties, as an actual book that real people could buy), what was generally found to be most notable about it wasn't the insight it afforded into the *demimonde* or "mindset" of whatever you want to call it of clubbers, but rather the book's frequent and expansive "asides" in which I meditated on contemporary ethnographic method and its various quandaries.

3.4 For example: I considered at great length the question of field. In classical anthropology there's a rigid distinction between "field" and "home." Field's where you go to do your research, immersing yourself, sometimes at great personal risk, in a maelstrom of raw, unsorted happening. Home's where you go to sort and tame it: catalogue it, analyze it, transform it into something meaningful. But when the object of your study is completely interwoven with your own life and its rhythms, this distinction vanishes: Where (I asked repeatedly) does home end and field begin? Or—and this problem follows from the last—reflected on the anthropologist's relation to the figures known as his "informants." If these people's background and culture are at base no different from your own, and if these people are your friends—albeit ones who might (or then again, might not) know of your side-by-side ethnographic carryings-on—then how should you interrogate them? What constitutes "interrogation" in the first place? In what way should it be staged? Does sex with a Lycra-miniskirted informant on your writing table at five a.m. when you're both tripping count? Does passing out with someone in a toilet? Then, in the train of that one—and I'm not skipping the solutions to these predicaments, these pickles, since I didn't provide any—comes the question of the anthropologist's *persona*. Since the necessary act of approaching the familiar as a stranger, of behaving—even to yourself—as if you didn't understand the situations that in fact you do, is an obvious contrivance; and since, conversely, *pretending* to understand them, at a profound, unmediated level, to think and believe and desire certain premises, propositions, objects and outcomes, for the purpose of attaining better access to the subculture you're infiltrating, is equally contrived; or, to flip it back the other way again, to *actually* think and believe and desire these, but to be forced nonetheless, in your role as anthropologist, to *pretend* you're being and doing what you really *are* being and doing—brief, since all this shit entails a constant shifting of identities, a blurring of positions and perspectives, you end up lost in a kaleidoscope of masquerades, roles, general make-believe.

3.5 I wrote about all this. It made me famous—relatively speaking. Let's not get carried away. A famous anthropologist, even one with a real book out, is about as well-known as a third-division footballer. No, less: let's say an Olympic badminton player, or a reality-TV contestant from an unpopular show five years ago. And come to think of it, I'm even exaggerating the degree of fame my study brought me in my own field, let alone the world of letters. Rather than "made me famous," it would be more accurate to say that the book "garnered me some attention"—the odd public reading, the odd newspaper review; and, a

they say, tomorrow's fish (unlike ichthyomancers) can't read. It was enough attention, though, to bring me onto Peyman's radar, there to beep, or throb, or do whatever things of radars do; which, in turn, prompted him to pluck me from the dying branches of academia and re-graft me inside the febrile hothouse of his company.

3.6 My colleague Daniel had his office next to mine down in the basement. From time to time, I'd poke my head in there to see what he was up to. He was a visual-culture guy. He trained as a film-maker, and turned out a couple of avant-garde shorts before Peyman had hired him. When I looked into his office on the Tuesday of that week, I found him sitting watching a film, projected onto his white wall. It showed, shot from above, a section of a city crammed with traffic. What city's that? I asked him. It didn't look like a British or European one, or North American either: the colours were different, and the vehicles seemed more wild and battered. It's Lagos, he said. I shot it with Peyman a few months back. President Goodluck Jonathan lent us his own personal helicopter to go up in. Lagos, said Daniel, has the most amazing traffic jams in the world. You mean the worst? I asked him. Not necessarily, he said; I mean the most amazing. Almost everything in Lagos is public transport: yellow buses, huge blue and red and brown trucks. The streets, he went on, aren't wide enough for them, so they wedge and squish together. Look, he said: this portion coming up is great. I watched the wall, the footage. He was right: it was pretty awesome. Chains of buses maybe seven or eight long, these rivers of bright yellow, were trying to push their way down arteries that were too narrow for them, while isolated blocks of other colours tried to break in from the sides, insert themselves into the chains. When they succeeded, sequences of alternation and progression started typing themselves out: it looked like those helix-maps of DNA. The wildest thing about it all, said Daniel, is that, in between all these trucks and buses there are people. You can't see them from this high up, but they're there. Won't they get crushed? I asked (there wasn't any space between the vehicles). You'd think so, Daniel said—but they slink in and out between and underneath them, like silverfish. Legend has it they're dismantling them, these people—dismantling the vehicles and reassembling them too: the jam turns into an unending car market or pit stop. These bits you see curling above the road, he told me, pointing at some fern leaf-shaped outgrowths, are highway exits that lead nowhere—the thoroughfare was actually designed for a city where they drive on the left, not the right. The city to whom the designers originally submitted the plan rejected it, then the Nigerian Transport Ministry bought it on the cheap and didn't bother to flip it around; and so there are these dead-end exit-ramps that all the vehicle parts are laid out in, organized by colour. I followed his finger: above the main road, in the dead-end curls, lay expanded pools in which red turned into yellow, yellow into brown, brown into black. It's like a palette menu, isn't it? he said. The whole city's like a painting, painting itself as you watch. I nodded; he was right. We sat in silence for a long time, watching.

3.7 I didn't meet with Peyman that week, but I met with my friend Petr. Petr worked for a big IT outfit, as a systems analyst. I'd never really understood what that entailed, although he'd told me several times. We met in a pub. He had a thyroid goiter. You could see it on his neck: it moved about beneath the skin while he was talking, like a second Adam's apple. He

doctor, Petr told me, had decided that the goiter should be surgically removed. The removal was to be carried out in a couple of days. It was a small, routine procedure: he'd be in and out of hospital on the same day. But Petr didn't want to talk about his goiter: he wanted to discuss the Project. His firm was working on it too, like hundreds of others. He congratulated me on the Company's recent "sign-up to the Grand Metamorphosis." What will you actually be doing? he asked. I couldn't really answer him. I told him that Peyman was out of town and that things would become much clearer once he came back—although, as I spoke these words, I doubted if they were in fact correct. Hey, Petr asked me: how's the Great Report coming along? Oh, you know, I said: it's finding its form. This seemed to satisfy him; he went back to talking about Koob-Sassen. It was a huge, ambitious scheme, he said, on the same scale as poldering and draining landmasses of thousands of square miles, or cabling and connecting an entire empire—and yet, he continued, the most remarkable thing about it was that, despite its massive scale, it would remain, in an everyday sense, to members of the general populace, invisible: there'd be no monuments, no edifices towering above cities, spanning countrysides, dotting coastlines and so on. It was a feat, rather, of what he called *network architecture*. He went on for a long time about networks, convergence, nodes and relays, interstices—it was very abstract. I found myself zoning out; by the third drink, I stopped listening to his words completely and was paying all my attention to the goiter just above his voice-box, to the way that, like Lagos's traffic, it squished and slid.

3.8 On the way home from meeting Petr, I picked up one of those free newspapers again. The fifth or sixth page brought more news about the parachutist whose death I'd read about two days earlier. It turned out that the police had been quite right to be suspicious: an examination of the dead man's gear had unearthed evidence of tampering. The rig, harness, he'd had strapped onto his back contained two parachutes—three if you counted the small, handkerchief-sized "drogue" that, once deployed, is meant to suck the main chute from the rig—and it had transpired that the cords attaching each of these to one another, to the rig, and, ultimately, to him had been deliberately severed. The severing had been carried out with expertise and cunning; all the chutes had been repacked correctly afterwards, so that no outward sign of any interference would be visible. The deed could only have been done by an insider: someone connected to the airfield and the club, who knew the rigmarole of parachute-assembly, the protocol of jumping and jump-preparation—packing, storage, safety checking and so forth; in short, by another parachutist. It was now a murder story. Arriving home, I drunk-phoned Madison, who didn't answer; then I passed out on my sofa.

4.1 On Lévi-Strauss. He was my hero. He would roam around the world—twice: first slowly, physically, by boat and train and donkey; then all over again on fast-track as, writing his findings up, he zapped from continent to continent, culture to culture, travelling through worm-holes of association till he'd remade the entire globe into a collage of recurring colours, smells and patterns. Patterns especially: the painted patterning on tribesmen's bodies; the layout, concentric or congruent or concyclic, of village huts; the symmetry or asymmetry of caste systems, their transgenerational rhythms of exogamy and endogamy—he saw all these as co-related, parts of larger systems lying behind not just a single tribe but also the larger one of all humanity. If we had some kind of grid that we could lay across it all, he reasoned, we could establish a grand pattern of equivalences. Describing sunsets, he saw spun webs of lit-up vapour, a whole architecture of reflective strands that both revealed and hid the sources that lay behind them; even landscape seemed to him to withhold, in its layers and strata, some kind of infrastructural master-meaning of which any one layer was a partial, distorted transposition. This stuff bewitched me. Master-meaning! Concealed revelation! I spent my twenties wanting to be Lévi-Strauss—which is ironic, since he spent most of his life wanting to be somebody or something else: a philosopher, say, or novelist, or poet.

4.2 Also ironic: the very first brief I was given when I started working at the Company. I was, Tapio informed me, to compile a dossier on jeans. The client was Levi's—or, to give the company its full name, Levi Strauss. A little research unearthed more than just coincidence behind the nomenclatural overlap: the jean-maker, like the anthropologist, had been an Ashkenazi Jew; both, leaving Europe under vague or not-so-vague threat, had turned to the Americas, and built their fame on what they did there. Levi-no-hyphen-Strauss was German but the fabric he sold came, like Lévi-Strauss, from France—from Nîmes, down in the South. *Serge de Nîmes*: denim. Nîmes serge has unique fading and dyeing properties. I spent my first three weeks of gainful employment interviewing teenagers, mid-life-crisis-riven men and garment workers; assessing the subtle code-spectrum of turn-ups, buttons, zippers, creases, generally breaking down how jeans, and Levi Strauss ones in particular, connoted. I got real into creases. Jeans crease in all kinds of interesting ways: honeycomb, whisker, train-track, stack ... I catalogued no fewer than seventeen different crease-types, each of which had slightly different innuendos. To frame these—that is, to provide a framework for explaining to the client what these crease-types truly and profoundly *meant*—I stole a concept from the French philosopher Deleuze: for him *le pli*, or fold, describes the way we swallow the exterior world, invert it and then flip it back outwards again, and, in so doing, form our own identity. I took out all the revolutionary shit (Deleuze was a leftie); and I didn't credit Deleuze, either. Big retail companies don't want to hear about such characters. I did the same thing with another French philosopher, Badiou: I recycled his notion of a *rip*, a sudden temporal rupture, and applied it, naturally, to tears worn in jeans, which I presented as the birth-scars of the wearer's singularity, testaments to the individual's break with general history, to the

successful institution of a personal time. I dropped the radical baggage from that, too (Badio is virtually Maoist). This pretty much set up the protocol or MO I'd deploy in my work for the Company from then on in: feeding vanguard theory, almost always from the left side of the spectrum, back into the corporate machine. The machine could swallow everything and incorporate it seamlessly, like a giant loom that reweaves all fabric, no matter how recalcitrant and jarring its raw form, into what my hero would have called a master-pattern—or, if not that, then maybe just the pattern of the master.

4.3 *Le pli*. While my supposed business, my “official” function, as a corporate ethnographer was to garner meaning from all types of situation—to extract it, like a physicist distilling some pure, unadulterated essence out of common-mongrel compounds, or a miner drawing gold ore from deep within the earth’s bowels—I sometimes allowed myself to think that, in fact, things were precisely the other way round: that my job was to put meaning *in* the world, not take it from it. Divining, for the benefit of a breakfast-cereal manufacturer, the social and symbolic role of breakfast (what fasting represents, the significance of breaking it), and establishing for them some of the primary axes shaping the way in which the practice of living is, or might be, carried out; and watching the manufacturer then feed that information back into their product and its packaging as they upgraded and refined these, I understood the end-result to be not simply better-tasting cereal or bigger profits for the manufacturer but rather *meaning*, amplified and sharpened, for the millions of risers lifting cereal boxes over breakfast tables, tipping out and ingesting their contents. Helping a city council who were thinking of creating parks and plazas but had yet to understand the ethnographic logic driving such an act; laying out for them the history of public (as opposed to private) space, making them grasp what these zones fundamentally embody, what’s at play in them from a political and structural and sacred point of view; and doing this in such a way that this who history is then injected back into the squares, sports-fields and playgrounds millions of citizens will then inhabit—same thing. Down in my office, stirred and lulled by ventilation, I would picture myself as some kind of nocturnal worker, like those men who go out at night to repair the roads, or check the points and switches on the railway tracks, or carry out a range of covert tasks that go unnoticed by the populace-at-large, but on which the latter’s well-being, even survival, is dependent. While the city sleeps, bakers are baking bread in night kitchens, milkmen are loading crates onto their floats; and river-men are dredging riverbeds or checking water-levels, while other men in buildings with nondescript exteriors track storm surges and spring- and neap-tides on their screens, and activate the flood defences when that becomes necessary. When the populace-at-large wakes up, they just see the milk there on their doorstep, and the fresh bread in the shop down the street, and the street itself still there, unflooded, un-tsunamied from existence; and they take it all for granted, where in fact these men have *put* the milk and bread there, and have even, in deploying the flood defences, *put* the city there as well, put it *back* there every time they deploy them. That’s what I was doing, too, I told myself. The world functioned, each day, because I’d put meaning back in it the day before. You didn’t notice that I put it there *because* it was there; but if I’d stopped, you’d soon have known it.

4.4 I compiled a lot of dossiers. They weren't always for clients. The Company gave me *carte blanche* to follow my own nose when not working on a specific brief. I went to conferences, read (and, occasionally, wrote) articles, kept my finger on the soft pulse of the media—and compiled dossiers. I had a dossier on Japanese game-avatars, and another one on newspaper obituaries; a dossier on post-match interviews with sportsmen and their managers; a dossier on alleged alien sightings and one on shark attacks; dossiers on tattoos, “personalization” trends for hand-held gadgets, the rhetoric and diction of scam emails. These dossiers sprang up spontaneously, serendipitously, whimsically. A situation, a recurring meme would catch my eye, pique my fancy, and I'd start investigating it: following its spore, seeing where it led, collecting instances of its occurrence, assembling an inventory of all its guises and mutations like a detective keeping a file on a quarry that's both colourful and slippery, elusive—a cat burglar, say, or quick-change-artist con-man.

4.5 When I write “dossier,” this might imply some kind of tidy, reasoned set of entries, each held in its own box-file. But the process was much less orderly: my dossiers largely consisted of scraps of paper stuck around my walls, with lines connecting them and annotations, legible only to me, scrawled at their margins. Each one would stay up for a while, then be replaced by the next one. As the scraps of paper came down, I would stuff them, usually unsorted, into large portfolios. Only the ones for clients ended up as neat, legible documents—although whether the personal whimsy-dossiers were actually so separate from the client-ones was another question. Who's to say what is, or might turn out to be, related to what else? Occasionally, a whimsy-dossier would suddenly and without warning overlap with a client one, or with a previous whimsy- or client-one, or several of both, in quite unexpected and surprising ways, parities and conjunctions appearing between contexts that, on the surface of things, seemed to have nothing in common. When this happened, I'd feel a sudden pang, bristling in the back of my neck: the stirring, the re-animation, of a fantasy that, like in hard-boiled novels and *noir* movies, *all* the various files would one day turn out to have been related all along, their sudden merging leading me to crack the case. What was “the case”? I didn't know—but that was the whole point: the answer to that would become clear once all the dossiers hove into alignment.

4.6 In my office, waiting for Peyman to come back to London, I began a dossier on oil spills. The oil spill that had started while I'd been in Turin was still making the news headlines, but I didn't confine myself to that one: I read about all kinds of oil spill, going right back to before the First World War. An anthropologist's not interested in singularities, but in generics. Oil spills are perfectly generic: there's always one happening, or one that's recently transpired, or, it can be said with confidence, one that's on the verge of happening. I printed off tables of data, statistics about frequencies of oil spills, their clustering by region, year and company; images of tankers trailing long, black tails; of birds coated in oil; of people in white suits pushing brooms over vinyl-coated beaches. I looped on a spare laptop a video-clip that Daniel found me: it showed a close-up sequence of a few feet of sea-bed across which oil was creeping, carpeting the floor as it coagulated. The film had been captured by a hand-held underwater camera. You could see the diver's other hand, his free one, reaching down in

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