





REMAINDER

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REMAINDER

TOM MCCARTHY



ALMA BOOKS



FOR MY PARENTS



REMAINDER



1

About the accident itself I can say very little. Almost nothing. It involved something falling from the sky. Technology. Parts, bits. That's it, really: all I can divulge. Not much, I know.

It's not that I'm being shy. It's just that – well, for one, I don't even remember the event. It's a blank: a white slate, a black hole. I have vague images, half-impressions: of being, or having been – or, more precisely, being *about* to be – hit; blue light; railings; lights of other colours; being held above some kind of tray or bed. But who's to say that these are genuine memories? Who's to say my traumatized mind didn't just make them up, or pull them out from somewhere else, some other slot, and stick them there to plug the gap – the crater – that the accident had blown? Minds are versatile and wily things. Real chancers.

And then there's the Requirement. The Clause. The terms of the Settlement drawn up between my lawyer and the parties, institutions, organizations – let's call them the *bodies* – responsible for what happened to me prohibit me from discussing, in any public or recordable format (I know this bit by heart), the nature and/or details of the incident, on pain of forfeiting all financial reparations made to me, plus any surplus these might have accrued (a good word that, “accrued”) while in my custody – and forfeiting quite possibly, my lawyer told

me in a solemn voice, a whole lot more besides. Closing the loop, so to speak.

The Settlement. That word: *Settlement*. *Set-l-ment*. As I lay abject, supine, tractioned and trussed up, all sorts of tubes and wires pumping one thing into my body and sucking another out, electronic metronomes and bellows making this speed up and that slow down, their beeping and rasping playing me, running through my useless flesh and organs like sea water through a sponge – during the months I spent in hospital, this word planted itself in me and grew. *Settlement*. It wormed its way into my coma: Greg must have talked about it to me when he came round to gawk at what the accident had left. As the no-space of complete oblivion stretched and contracted itself into gritty shapes and scenes in my unconscious head – sports stadiums mainly, running tracks and cricket pitches – over which a commentator’s voice was playing, inviting me to commentate along with him, the word entered the commentary: we’d discuss the Settlement, though neither of us knew what it entailed. Weeks later, after I’d emerged from coma, come off the drip-feed and been put onto mushy solids, I’d think of the word’s middle bit, the *-l-*, each time I tried to swallow. The Settlement made me gag before it gagged me: that’s for sure.

Later still, during the weeks I sat in bed able to think and talk but not yet to remember anything about myself, the Settlement was held up to me as a future strong enough to counterbalance my no-past, a moment that would make me better, whole, complete. When most of my past had eventually returned, in instalments, like back episodes of some mundane soap opera, but I still couldn’t walk, the nurses said the Settlement would put me back on my feet. Marc Daubenay would visit and brief me about our progress towards Settlement while I sat in plaster waiting for my bones to set. After he’d

left I'd sit and think of sets – six games in tennis or however many matching cups and plates, the scenery in theatres, patterns. I'd think of remote settlements in ancient times, village outposts crouching beneath hostile skies. I'd think of people – dancers, maybe, or soldiers – crouching, set, waiting for some event to start.

Later, much later, the Settlement came through. I'd been out of hospital for four months, out of physiotherapy for one. I was living on my own on the edge of Brixton, in a one-bedroom flat. I wasn't working. The company I'd been with up until the accident, a market-research outfit, had said they'd give me paid sick leave until May. It was April. I didn't feel like going back to work. I didn't feel like doing anything. I wasn't doing anything. I passed my days in the most routine of activities: getting up and washing, walking to the shops and back again, reading the papers, sitting in my flat. Sometimes I watched TV, but not much; even that seemed too proactive. Occasionally I'd take the tube up to Angel, to Marc Daubenay's office. Mostly I just sat in my flat, doing nothing. I was thirty years old.

On the day the Settlement came through, I did have something to do: I had to go and meet a friend at Heathrow Airport. An old friend. She was flying in from Africa. I was just about to leave my flat when the phone rang. It was Daubenay's secretary. I picked the phone up and her voice said:

“Olander and Daubenay. Marc Daubenay's office. Putting you through.”

“Sorry?” I said.

“Putting you through,” she said again.

I remember feeling dizzy. Things I don't understand make me feel dizzy. I've learnt to do things slowly since the accident, understanding every move, each part of what I'm doing. I didn't choose to do things like this: it's the only way I can do them. If I don't understand

words, I have one of my staff look them up. That day back in April when Daubenay's secretary phoned, I didn't have staff, and anyway they wouldn't have helped in that instance. I didn't know who the *you* was she was putting through – Daubenay or me. A trivial distinction, you might say, but the uncertainty still made me dizzy. I placed my hand against my living-room wall.

Daubenay's voice came on the line after a few seconds:

"Hello?" it said.

"Hello," I said back.

"It's come through," said Daubenay.

"Yes, it's me," I answered. "That was just your secretary putting us through. Now it's me."

"Listen," said Daubenay. His voice was excited; he hadn't taken in what I'd just said. "Listen: they've capitulated."

"Who?" I asked.

"Who? Them! The other side. They've caved in."

"Oh," I said. I stood there with my hand against the wall. The wall was yellow, I remember.

"They've approached us," Daubenay continued, "with a deal whose terms are very strong each way."

"What are the terms?" I asked.

"For your part," he told me, "you can't discuss the accident in any public arena or in any recordable format. To all intents and purposes, you must forget it ever happened."

"I've already forgotten," I said. "I never had any memory of it in the first place."

This was true, as I mentioned earlier. The last clear memory I have is of being buffeted by wind twenty or so minutes before I was hit.

"They don't care about that," Daubenay said. "That's not what they mean. What they mean is that you must accept that, in law, it ceases to be actionable."

I thought about that for a while until I understood it. Then I asked him:

“How much are they paying me?”

“Eight and a half million,” Daubenay said.

“Pounds?” I asked.

“Pounds,” Daubenay repeated. “Eight and a half million pounds.”

It took another second or so for me to take in just how much money that was. When I had, I took my hand off the wall and turned suddenly around, towards the window. The movement was so forceful that it pulled the phone wire with it, yanked it right out of the wall. The whole connection came out: the wire, the flat-headed bit that you plug in and the casing of the hole that that plugs into too. It even brought some of the internal wiring that runs through the wall out with it, all dotted and flecked with crumbly, fleshy bits of plaster.

“Hello?” I said.

It was no good: the connection had been cut. I stood there for some time, I don’t know how long, holding the dead receiver in my hand and looking down at what the wall had spilt. It looked kind of disgusting, like something that’s come out of something.

The horn of a passing car made me snap to. I left my flat and hurried down to a phone box to call Marc Daubenay back. The nearest one was just round the corner, on Coldharbour Lane. As I crossed my road and walked down the one lying perpendicular to it, I thought about the sum: eight and a half million. I pictured it in my mind, its shape. The eight was perfect, neat: a curved figure infinitely turning back into itself. But then the half. Why had they added the half? It seemed to me so messy, this half: a leftover fragment, a shard of detritus. When my knee-cap had set after being shattered in the accident, one tiny splinter had stayed loose. The doctors hadn’t managed to fish it out, so it just floated around

beside the ball, redundant, surplus to requirements; sometimes it got jammed between the ball and its socket and messed up the whole joint, locking it, inflaming nerves and muscles. I remember picturing the sum's leftover fraction, the half, as I walked down the street that day, picturing it as the splinter in my knee, and frowning, thinking: *Eight alone would have been better.*

Other than that, I felt neutral. I'd been told the Settlement would put me back together, kick-start my new life, but I didn't feel any different, fundamentally, from when before Marc Daubenay's secretary had phoned. I looked around me at the sky: it was neutral too – a neutral spring day, sunny but not bright, neither cold nor warm. I passed my Fiesta, which was parked half-way down the street, and looked at its dented left rear side. Someone had crashed into me in Peckham and then driven off, a month or so before the accident. I'd meant to get it fixed, but since coming out of hospital it had seemed irrelevant, like most other things, so the bodywork behind its left rear wheel had stayed dented and crinkled.

At the end of the road perpendicular to mine I turned right, crossing the street. Beside me was a house that, ten or so months previously, two months before the accident, the police had swooped on with a firearms team. They'd been looking for someone and had got a tip-off, I suppose. They'd laid siege to this house, cordoning off the road on either side while marksmen stood in bullet-proof vests behind vans and lampposts, pointing rifles at the windows. It was as I passed across the stretch of road they'd made into a no man's land for that short while that I realized that I didn't have Marc Daubenay's number on me.

I stopped right in the middle of the road. There was no traffic. Before heading back towards my flat to get the number I paused for a while, I don't know how long,

and stood in what had been the marksmen's sightlines. I turned the palms of my hands outwards, closed my eyes and thought about that memory of just before the accident, being buffeted by wind. Remembering it sent a tingling from the top of my legs to my shoulders and right up into my neck. It lasted for just a moment – but while it did I felt not-neutral. I felt different, intense: both intense and serene at the same time. I remember feeling this way very well: standing there, passive, with my palms turned outwards, feeling intense and serene.

I walked back to my flat, not down the road I'd come up but down one that ran parallel to it. I found the number, then set out again down the first road, the one perpendicular to mine. I passed my car again, its dent. The man who'd crashed into me had gone over Give Way markings, then driven off. Just like the accident itself: the other party's fault each time. I passed through the siege zone again. The man who the police had been looking for hadn't been in the house. When they'd realized this, the marksmen had wandered out from behind their cover and the regular officers had untied and gathered up the yellow-and-black tape they'd tied across the road to demarcate the restricted area. If you'd arrived there minutes later you wouldn't have known anything had happened. But it had. There must have been some kind of record – even if just in the memories of the forty, fifty, sixty passers-by who'd stopped to watch. Everything must leave some kind of mark.

Daubenay and I had been cut off in mid-conversation. When I stuck my fifty pence in the phone in the box and called back, the receptionist answered. I'd met her before, several times. She was smart and formal, in her early thirties, slightly horsey.

"Olander and Daubenay," she said. "Good afternoon."

I could see in my mind the desk she sat behind, the leather seats that faced it, the glass coffee table. The

reception area looked out over a cobbled courtyard, through a low window to her right.

“Could I have Marc Daubenay’s office please?” I said.

“Putting you through.”

A silence followed, not the quietness of the office but the type of silence you get when no input’s coming down the line. My picture of Olander and Daubenay faded, ousted by the caged façade of a cab office just beside the phone box. *Movement Cars*, it said; *Airports, Stations, Light, Removals, Any Distance*. A man was wheeling a large Coke vending machine into the doorway, tilting it slowly, taking its weight on his shoulders. I wondered what *Light* meant in this context, and felt a slight wave of that dizziness again. *Airports*, read the writing on the window. My friend Catherine would be arriving at Heathrow in just over an hour. There was a click on the line, then Marc Daubenay’s secretary picked up.

“Marc Daubenay’s office,” she said.

This woman was older, forty-plus. I’d come across her too, each time I’d visited Marc Daubenay. It was she who’d called me minutes ago. She always looked stern, austere, slightly chastising even. She never smiled. I gave her my name and asked to speak to Daubenay.

“Trying his line now,” she said. “No, I’m afraid it’s busy. He’s talking to someone.”

“Yes, he’s talking to me,” I said. “We were talking, and we got cut off. I think he’s trying to phone me back.”

“If you hang up I’ll tell him to try again.”

“No,” I said, “that’s no good. My phone’s come out of the wall. It’s broken. We were talking and it broke. I’m sure he’s trying to phone me now. Perhaps you could break in and tell him.”

“I’ll have to go through,” she said.

I heard her setting the receiver on its side, then footsteps, voices, hers and Daubenay’s, in the next room. *He’s on your line?* Daubenay was saying. *But his phone’s*

gone dead. I've been trying it for the last ten minutes. She said something to him that I couldn't make out, then I heard his footsteps coming to the phone in her room, then a rustle as he picked it off the desk.

"You there again?" he said.

"We got cut off," I told him.

The phone's display window was counting my money down and had already got to thirty-two. Peak rates. I dug into my pockets for more coins but only pulled out two-pence pieces.

"How much did you hear?" Daubenay asked.

"The figure. Could you say it again?"

"Eight and a half million pounds," Daubenay repeated.

"You understand the terms governing your acceptance of this sum?"

"I can't tell anyone?"

"You can't discuss, in any public or recordable format, the nature and/or details of the incident."

"I remember you telling me that," I said.

"You'll lose the whole lot if you do, plus any surplus this might have accrued while in your custody."

"Accrued, yes," I said. "I remember that bit too. And is it legally enforceable?"

"It most certainly is," he answered. "Given the status of these parties, these, uh, institutions, these, uh..."

"Bodies," I said.

"...bodies," he continued, "almost anything's enforceable. I strongly suggest we accept. We'd be crazy not to."

"What do I have to do?" I asked him.

"Come in tomorrow. They're biking over documents for you to sign. Come at around eleven: they should be here by then."

The Coke-machine man was wheeling his empty trolley back out of Movement Cars. It was *Light Removals*, not *Light* then *Removals*. It just looked like that, the way

they'd laid the words out. The phone's display window was in the teens now. Daubenay was congratulating me.

"What for?" I asked him.

"It's an unprecedented sum," he said. "Well done."

"I didn't earn it," I said.

"You've suffered," he replied.

"That's not really the right..." I said. "I mean, I didn't choose to – and in any..."

And the phone cut right there, in mid-conversation again.

I walked back to my flat to get more coins. I walked back down the same street parallel to the one perpendicular to mine, then out again along the perpendicular one, as before: past the Fiesta, the ex-siege zone. I put two pound coins in this time. Daubenay seemed surprised to hear me.

"I think we've just about got it wrapped up," he said. "Go and have a glass of champagne. See you at eleven tomorrow."

He hung up. I felt foolish. It hadn't been necessary to call him again. Besides, I needed to get to the airport fast now, eight and a half million or not. As I left the phone box I pictured Catherine's plane somewhere over Europe, bearing down towards the Channel, towards England. I walked back for a third time to my flat, still using the same route, picked up my coat and wallet, and had made it to beside a tyre shop halfway between the siege zone and the phone box when I realized I'd left the piece of paper with the flight number on it in my kitchen.

I turned back again, but stopped immediately as it occurred to me that perhaps I didn't need the information: I could just look at the arrivals board and see which flight was coming from Harare. There wouldn't be more than one at any given time. I turned back out and was about to start walking onwards when it struck me that I didn't know which terminal to go to. I would have to go and

get the details after all. But then before I'd taken a single step towards my flat I remembered that they have lists posted up in tube compartments on the Piccadilly Line, telling you which terminal to go to for each airline. I turned round yet again. Two men who'd walked out of a café next to the tyre shop were looking at me. I realized that I was jerking back and forth like paused video images do on low-quality machines. It must have looked strange. I felt self-conscious, embarrassed. I made a decision to go and pick the flight details up after all, but remained standing on the pavement for a few more seconds while I pretended to weigh up several options and then come to an informed decision. I even brought my finger into it, the index finger of my right hand. It was a performance for the two men watching me, to make my movements come across as more authentic.

When I finally broke out of the circuit I'd now covered four or five times, following the same route each time, perpendicular road out and parallel road back, even crossing each road at the same spot, beside the same skip or just after the same manhole cover – when I finally turned left down Coldharbour Lane towards Brixton Tube, it occurred to me that from now on I didn't need to move along the ground at all. I was so rich that I could have ordered up a helicopter, told it to come and land in Ruskin Park, or if it couldn't land then hover just above the rooftops, lower a rope and winch me up into its stomach, like they do when rescuing people from the sea. And yet I kept to the ground, ran my eyes along it like a blind man's fingers reading Braille, concentrating on my passage over it: each footstep, how the knees bend, how to swing my arms. That's the way I've had to do things since the accident: understand them first, then do them.

Later, as I sat inside the tube, I felt the need, like I'd done every time I'd taken the tube up to Angel, to picture the terrain the hurtling car was covering. Not the tunnels

and the platforms, but the space, the overground space, London. I remembered being transferred from the first hospital to the second one two months or so after the accident, how awful it had been. I'd been laid flat, and all I'd been able to see was the ambulance's interior, its bars and tubes, a glimpse of sky. I'd felt that I was missing the entire experience: the sight of the ambulance weaving through traffic, cutting onto the wrong side of the road, shooting past lights and islands, that kind of thing. More than that: my failure to get a grip on the space we were traversing had made me nauseous. I'd even thrown up in the ambulance. Riding to Heathrow on the tube, I experienced echoes of the same uneasiness, the same nausea. I kept them at bay by thinking that the rails were linked to wires that linked to boxes and to other wires above the ground that ran along the streets, connecting us to them and my flat to the airport and the phone box to Daubenay's office. I concentrated on these thoughts all the way to Heathrow.

Almost all the way. One strange thing happened. It might seem trivial to you, but not to me. I remember it very clearly. At Green Park I had to change lines. To do this at Green Park you have to ride the escalator almost to street level and then take another escalator down again. Up in the lobby area, beyond the automatic gates, there were some payphones and a large street map. I was so drawn to these – their overview, their promise of connection – that I'd put my ticket into the gates and walked through towards them before I'd realized that I should have gone back down again instead. To make things worse, my ticket didn't come back out. I called a guard over and told him what had happened, and that I needed my ticket back.

"It'll be inside the gate," he said. "I'll open it for you."

He took a key out of his pocket, opened the gate's ticket-collecting flap and picked up the top ticket. He inspected it.

"This ticket's only for as far as this station," he said.

"That's not mine, then," I said. "I bought one for Heathrow."

"If you were the last person to pass through, your ticket should be the top one."

"I was the last one through," I told him. "No one came past after me. But that's not my ticket."

"If you were the last one through, then this must be your ticket," he repeated.

It wasn't my ticket. I started to feel dizzy again.

"Hold on," the guard said. He reached up into the feeding system on the flap's top half and pulled another ticket out from where it was wedged between two cogs. "This yours?" he asked.

It was. He gave it back to me, but it had picked up black grease from the cogs when he'd opened the flap, and the grease got on my fingers.

I walked back towards the down escalator, but before I got there I noticed all these escalator steps that were being overhauled. You think of an escalator as one object, a looped, moving bracelet, but in fact it's made of loads of individual, separate steps woven together into one smooth system. Articulated. These ones had been dis-articulated, and were lying messily around a closed-off area of the upper concourse. They looked helpless, like beached fish. I stared at them as I passed them. I was staring at them so intently that I stepped onto the wrong escalator, the up one, and was jolted onto the concourse again. As my hand slipped over the handrail the black grease got onto my sleeve and stained it.

I have, right to this day, a photographically clear memory of standing on the concourse looking at my stained sleeve, at the grease – this messy, irksome matter that had no respect for millions, didn't know its place. My undoing: matter.