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Written by Paul Murray

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The Mark and the Void

PAUL MURRAY



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For my mother and father

Idea for a novel: we have a banker rob his own bank. He's working alone; at first, it'll look like a classic inside job. This man, however, is not what you'd call an insider. He's French, not Irish, and although initially he might look like a typical Parisian – black suit, expensive shoes, hair neat but worn slightly long – as the story unfolds and his past comes to light, we find out he never quite fitted in over there either. He didn't grow up in a leafy suburb, didn't attend a fancy *grande école* of the kind that bankers tend to come from; instead he spent his childhood in a run-down corner that the city prefers to disown, and his father's something blue-collar – a welder maybe, a veteran of 1968, a tough nut.

The family doesn't have much: the father's job is precarious, they're constantly resorting to moneylenders, bailiffs come to take the car away, all that. But the father's ambitious for the boy; the father's determined that he'll have a better life. So the son beavers away in his third-rate school and makes it into a second-rate university, and after graduating at the top of his class, he's offered a position in a prestigious French bank. It's dull work, mostly filing and admin, but he's diligent and quick and after a few months his manager takes note of him and recommends him for a start in the Research Department.

As a junior analyst, his official role is to dig up information on companies for the bank and its clients. In practice, he spends his time fixing paper jams, fetching coffees and listening politely while his boss describes his recent sexual adventures. When he gets to do his job, though, he finds that he likes it. More importantly, he's *good* at it. He watches money flow through the market, learns the secret influences at work on it, begins to understand

how a speech made by an obscure politician in, say, Guangzhou can send stock prices soaring, while a rumour about a change in the interest rate can spark a worldwide panic. He works early mornings, late nights, hour after hour in the cold glow of the screen, developing models, monitoring trades, figuring out the best way to persuade a client that he and all of his competitors have got the value of a stock completely wrong. One morning, he checks his bank balance and sees he's got his first bonus: three times what his father would make in a year. That's when he knows he's made it.

But his father's not happy. Instead, he looks at the trophies of his son's success – the car, the suit, the unblemished hands – and despises them. It makes no sense – this is what he wanted for him! – yet the higher the boy climbs, the angrier the old man becomes. Everything the banker does to impress him has the opposite effect. He brings little gifts to the house, the father won't accept them. He takes them for dinner, the old man won't eat. They argue incessantly, the father berating the son for things he has nothing to do with – the neighbourhood changing, the rents going up, the President being elected. He calls him a deserter, a traitor. He looks at his son and sees the emissary of a world that no longer needs him.

What can the banker do? Does the old man genuinely want him to give up his job? That would be crazy, right? Besides, he likes it. He likes being wealthy and respected. He likes having a nice apartment in Auteuil and a nice new Mercedes to take him there; he likes nice meals in Le Grand Véfour and nice clothes from the Rue de Sèvres; he likes the beautiful girls who all of a sudden like him, and the micro-romances they squeeze in between the market's close on Friday evening and the Monday meeting at 7 a.m. And he's his father's son: he thrives on opposition. But it gets so bad that they can't even be in the same room together, and after his mother dies, he decides he's had enough. A headhunter calls him about a position at Bank of Torabundo, a

rising investment bank with a European HQ in Dublin. They want an analyst to advise clients on financial institutions, domestic and Continental. His language skills make him perfect for the job; they're offering a significant increase on what he's making in Paris.

He doesn't think of it as flight, nor, exactly, as punishment. Yes, the old man is on his own now. But if they're ever to have a functional relationship, he needs to learn something about compromise. So the son takes the job, cutting off all contact with home, beyond monthly payments for the live-in nurse. He plans to return to Paris at Christmas and review the situation, only with the global crash he finds he's too busy to get away. Next Christmas, he thinks, without fail. But in April the nurse calls to tell him the old man has died in his sleep.

That's how we find him as our story begins. It's a couple of months later; he's back in Dublin, passing his days in the service of money; passing most of his nights that way too. He has no friends, no pastimes, no life outside of the bank. He works so hard he doesn't have a moment to himself, or, indeed, a self to have a moment. Someone observing might say he is depressed. He would say he wants only to be left alone. Certainly at this point he has no intention of committing a crime.

Here's the thing, though: someone *is* observing him. For a number of weeks, someone's been watching from a distance – a man, dressed all in black. He makes no effort to conceal himself, nor does he make any effort to communicate; he's simply *there*, a supernumerary presence imprinted on the scene. He never comes closer, just watches, eyes trained on the banker as if through a gunsight; but any day now, the banker knows he'll step out of the crowd and call him by his name; and at that moment everything will change.

That's the set-up. What do you think? Would people buy it?

I

A Boat Ride

As a remedy to life in society I would suggest the big city.
Nowadays, it is the only desert within our means.

Albert Camus

'Claude?'

'Yes?'

'What are you doing under your desk?'

'Me?'

'You're not hiding, are you?'

'Why would I be hiding?' I say. I wait a moment, hoping that this will satisfy her, but her feet remain where they are. 'I am looking for my stapler,' I add.

'Oh,' Ish says. On one ankle, between her patent-leather pumps and the hem of her skirt, I glimpse a slender chain from which several small animal charms dangle. Now a pair of brown brogues approaches over the fuzzy blue carpet tiles and comes to a halt beside Ish's pumps.

'What's happening?' I hear Jurgen say.

'Claude's looking for his stapler,' Ish says.

'Oh,' says Jurgen, and then, 'But here is his stapler, directly on the desk.'

'So it is,' Ish says. 'Claude, your stapler's right here on your desk!'

I clamber to my feet, and look down to where she is pointing. 'Ah!' I say, attempting to appear pleased and surprised.

'Are you coming for lunch?' Jurgen says. 'We are going to the hippie place.'

'I'm rather busy,' I say.

'It's Casual Day!' Ish exhorts me. 'You can't eat at your desk on Casual Day!'

'I have a meeting with Walter this afternoon.'

'Come on, Claude, you can't live on Carambars.' She grabs my arm and starts tugging me.

'All right, all right,' I say, reaching for my suit jacket, pretending not to notice the disapproving eye she casts over me as I put it on.

Ish studied anthropology back in Australia; Casual Day, one of the few rituals we have at Bank of Torabundo, is something she takes very seriously. For most of the staff a pair of well-pressed chinos and perhaps an undone top shirt-button will suffice, but Ish is wearing a low-cut top fringed with tassels, and a long, multicoloured skirt, also with tassels. She has even topped up her tan for the occasion, a deep greasy brown that makes it look like she has smeared her body with pâté. This image, when it occurs to me, immediately makes me nauseous, and as we descend in the lift my stomach dips and soars like a fairground ride. I dislike Casual Day at the best of times; today it spurs my paranoia to new and queasy heights.

'Is Kevin coming?' I say to distract myself.

'He went on ahead to try and get a table,' Ish says.

'This whole place goes mental on Casual Day,' Jurgen says.

At every floor the lift stops and we are joined by more people in pressed chinos with their top shirt-button undone, squeezing in beside us, sucking up the air. The crush makes my heart race: it's a relief to step through the double doors of Transaction House and into the fresh air – but only for a moment.

Pastel waves of identically clad bodies are converging on the plaza from every direction. I scan the approaching faces, the bland gazes that beat against mine. Amid all the smart-casualwear a figure in black should be easy to spot – but that means I too am an obvious target, and in a freezing flash I can picture him making his way through the sea of bodies, a cancerous cell swimming in the innocent blood.

'Thinking of getting a bidet,' Ish says.

'For the new apartment?' Jurgen says.

'Wasn't something I'd thought of initially, but the bloke from the showroom called up and said because I'm going for the full suite they can throw in a bidet for half price. The question is, do I *want* a bidet? You know, at this stage I've got my toilet routine pretty much worked out.'

'You do not want to feel like an alien in your own bathroom,' Jurgen agrees. 'I suppose Claude would be the expert. Claude, how much of a benefit do you think the addition of a bidet would be?'

'Do you think French people do nothing else but eat baguettes and sit on their bidets?' I snap. Out here I am finding it hard to hide my nerves.

Jurgen starts telling Ish about a special toilet he has had imported from Germany. I tune him out, return to my search. Above my head, monochrome birds wheel and swoop, like scraps torn from the overcast sky. How long has it been now? A week? Two? That's since I first became conscious of him, though when I think to before that, I seem to find him there too, posed unobtrusively at the back of my memories.

There's no discernible pattern to his appearances: he'll be here one day, somewhere else the next. In the gloom of morning, I might see him by the tram tracks as I make the brief, synaptic journey from my apartment building to the bank; later, bent over a pitchbook with Jurgen, I'll glance out the window and spot him seated on a bench, eating sunflower seeds from a packet. In the deli, in the bar – even at night, when I stand on my balcony and look out over the depopulated concourse – I will seem to glimpse him for an instant, his blank gaze the mirror image of my own.

The Ark is in sight now; inside, I can see the waitresses gliding back and forth, the customers eating, talking, toying with their phones. Of my pursuer there is no sign, yet with every step the dreadful certainty grows *that he is in there.* I stall, with a clammy mouth begin to mumble excuses, but too late, the door is opening and a figure coming straight for us –

'Full,' Kevin says.

'Balls,' Ish says.

'They're saying fifteen minutes,' Kevin says.

Jurgen looks at his watch. 'That would give us only twelve and a half minutes to eat.'

'Oh well,' I say, with a false sigh. 'I suppose we must go back to –'

'What about that new place?' Ish says, snapping her fingers. 'Over on the other side of the square? You'll like it, Claude, it's French.'

I shrug. So long as we are moving in the opposite direction to the Ark, I am happy.

The 'French place' is called Chomps Elysées. An image of the Eiffel Tower adorns the laminated sign, and on the walls inside are photographs of the Sacré-Cœur and the Moulin Rouge. Nothing about the menu seems especially Gallic; I order a moccachino and something called a 'panini fromage', and while Kevin the trainee offers his thoughts on Ish's lavatorial options, I sit back in my seat and try to relax. Be reasonable, I tell myself: who would be interested in following you? Nobody, is the answer. Nobody outside my department even knows I exist.

This thought doesn't cheer me quite as I intend it to; and the panini fromage, when it comes, only makes matters worse. It is not that the cheese tastes bad exactly; rather, that it tastes of *nothing*. I don't think I have ever tasted *nothing* quite so strongly before. It's like eating a tiny black hole wrapped in an Italian sandwich. There is no way food this bad would ever be served in Paris, I think to myself, and experience a sudden stab of homesickness. How far I have come! How much I have left behind! And for what? Now with every chew I feel the emptiness rising inside, as if, like a kind of anti-madeleine, the panini were erasing my past before my very eyes – severing every tie, leaving me only this grey moment, tasting of nothing . . .

I approach the counter. The waitress's scowl appears authentically Parisian, but her accent, when she speaks, denotes the more proactive hostility of the Slav.

'Yes?' she says, not pretending that my appearance has made her any less bored.

'I think there has been a mistake,' I say.

'Panini fromage,' she says. 'Is French cheese.'

'But it is not cheese,' I say. 'It's artificial.'

'Artificial?'

'Not real.' Prising apart the bread for her inspection, I point at the off-white slab sitting atop the melancholy lettuce. It resembles nothing so much as a blank piece of matter, featureless and opaque, before God's brush has painted it with the colour and shape of specificity. 'I am from France,' I tell her, as if this might clarify matters. 'And this is not French cheese.'

The girl looks at me with unconcealed contempt. You are not supposed to complain in restaurants like this one; you are not supposed to notice the food in restaurants like this one, any more than you notice the streets you hurry through, latte in hand, back to your computer. The screen, the phone, that disembodied world is the one we truly inhabit; the International Financial Services Centre is merely a frame for it, an outline, the equivalent of the chalk marks of a child's game on the pavement.

'You vant chench?' the girl taunts me. I raise my hands in surrender and, cheeks burning, turn away.

Only then do I realize the man in black is standing right behind me.

Around us, the café has returned to normal life; the sullen girl rings up another panini, the office workers drink their uniquely tailored coffees. I goggle at Ish at the nearby table, but she doesn't seem to notice – nor does anyone else, as if the stranger has cast some cloak of invisibility over us. Blinding white light pours through the open door; he gazes at me, his eyes a terrifying ice-blue.

‘Claude,’ he says. He knows my name, of course he does.

‘What do you want from me?’ I try to sound defiant, but my voice will not come in more than a whisper.

‘Just to talk,’ he says.

‘You have the wrong man,’ I say. ‘I have not done anything.’

‘That makes you the right man,’ he says. A smile spreads slowly across his chops. ‘That makes you exactly the right man.’