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Opening Extract from...

Paris Trance

Written by Geoff Dyer

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When Luke came to Paris with the intention of writing a book based on his experiences of living – as he grandly and naïvely conceived it – 'in exile', he was twenty-six years old ('a fine age for a man,' according to Scott Fitzgerald). As far as I know, he made absolutely no progress with this book, abandoning it – except in moments of sudden, drunken enthusiasm – in the instant that he began leading the life intended to serve as its research, its first draft. By the time we met, at the Garnier Warehouse, this book had assumed the status of a passport or travel visa: something which, by enabling him to leave one country and pass into another, had served its purpose and could be, if not discarded, then stored away and ignored. So it's fallen to me to tell his story, or at least the part of it with which I am familiar. Our story, in fact, for by recounting this part of my friend's life I am trying to account for my own, for my need to believe that while something in Luke tugged him away from all that he most loved, from all that made him happiest, it is his life – and not mine – which is exemplary, admirable, even enviable.

The events recorded here concerned only a handful of people and, quite probably, are of interest only to those people.

Especially since 'story' is almost certainly the wrong word. Whatever makes events into a story is entirely missing from what follows. It may well be that what urges me to preserve these events in the way I have – the only way I could – is exactly what stops them becoming a story.

Luke arrived in Paris at one of the worst possible times, in mid-July, when the city was preparing to close down for August. Parisians claim this is the best part of the year – it's easy to park, they say (after a certain amount of time in a city the parking is all you care about) – but for someone who had just arrived it was the worst. The only people around were tourists and those forced to cater for them. Many shops and restaurants were shut and the few that *were* open closed far earlier than usual. Luke had rented a horrible apartment in the First arrondissement. On paper it had sounded perfect: right in the middle of the city, a few minutes' walk from the Louvre, the Arcades, and other famous tourist sights. Unfortunately that's all there was: museums and tourist sights. The temporal heart of the city, the part that makes it what it is today – as opposed to preserving what had been magnificent in the eighteenth century, or mythically bohemian in the 1920s – had moved east into the Eleventh, close to what had once been the edge of town.

The apartment itself was a stained place with a sad curtain separating the sleeping area from the living area and nothing to separate the living area from the smells of the cooking area (the cooker itself comprised two hot plates, electric, one of which warmed up only reluctantly). It was the kind of apartment where, if possible, you avoided touching anything. The surfaces of the cooking area – you couldn't call it a kitchenette,

let alone a kitchen – were all sticky. Even the worn linoleum floor was sticky. The fridge had never been defrosted and so the ice-box was just that: a box of furry ice in the depths of which, preserved like a thousand-year-old body in a glacier, could just be glimpsed the greenish packaging of a bag of frozen peas. Years of unventilated steam had made the paint in the bathroom bubble and peel. There was mould on the walls. Clothes hung up to dry on the cord above the bath never did. The shower curtain was grimy, the toilet seat warped, possibly dangerous. There were yellow-brown cigarette burns on the flush. To stop the taps dripping Luke had to twist them so hard he expected the pipes to snap. The window in the living area – the only window in the place – had not been washed for a long time. In a few years it would be indistinguishable from the wall. Already it was so grimed with pollution that it seemed to suck light out of the apartment like an extractor. An extent of patterned material had been stretched over the lumpy sofa but as soon as anyone sat down (Luke himself essentially), it became untucked so that the cigarette-scarred arms and blotched back were again revealed. The only stylish touch was provided by a black floor lamp with a halogen bulb and foot-adjustable dimmer switch. By keeping the light turned as low as possible Luke sought to keep at bay the simple truth that it was an ugly sofa in an ugly, sticky apartment in the middle of a neighbourhood that was really a mausoleum. At intervals he was filled with rage – immigrant's rage – that Madame Carachos had had the nerve to rent this dump to him. On arriving in the city he had turned up at her lavish apartment and handed over a wad of bills to cover the rent for the two months they had agreed

upon. They had taken a coffee together and then Madame Carachos, like everyone else, had left the city to the tourists, to those who could not afford to leave, to Luke.

He spent as little time as possible in the apartment. Mainly he walked, and everywhere he walked he glimpsed apartments where he wanted to live, restaurants where he wanted (one day) to eat, bars where he wanted to drink with friends he did not yet have. When he grew tired of walking he went to the cinema. (Ah, cinema, solace of the lonely young men and women of all great cities.) He saw a film a day, sometimes two. He became a connoisseur of the non-time that preceded the films themselves, especially in small cinemas where there were no advertisements or previews, where the audience was made up of four or five people, all of them alone. It was easy to see why, in films, fugitives and wanted men went to the cinema: not just to hide in the dark but because these intervals between performances were out of time. To all intents and purposes you might as well not have existed – and yet, simultaneously, you were acutely conscious of your existence. When the lights faded – always that same sequence of perception: the lights are fading, no they're not, yes they are, yes – and the curtains cranked back slightly to extend the tiny screen, there was always a moment, after the studio logos had been displayed, when the blaze of projected colour lit up the screen like Eden on the first day of creation. Disappointment and boredom often set in very soon afterwards but, for a few minutes at least, Luke's head filled with verdant images of city and sky, landscape and trees, and he believed utterly in the cinema's loneliness-obliterating promise of brightness and colour. If this faded he tried to stay there anyway, tried to

become absorbed in the simple clarity, the to-no-avail lucidity of the projected image. As he began to lose interest in the film so the idea of the city began to lure him out of the darkness of the cinema. The sun hovering over buildings, light striking walls and shutters, people moving, cars massing at bridges, the river winding through the centre of the city: all the things he had hoped for from the film he had come to see were actually to be found outside. The cinema was a dungeon from which he could escape into a world of colour and light. He sat for a while longer and then got up and pushed open the exit bar, stunned when the brightness of the street crashed into him again.

On one occasion he went to the cinema and found that he was the only person there. He was the audience. It was a Kieslowski movie, *A Short Film About Love*; to Luke it seemed An Interminable Film About Fuck-All and after forty minutes he left. Out in the street he wondered if the screening had been abandoned after his departure; or had the film continued even though no one was there to see it? He walked home, stopping, as he often did, in the Tuileries, which was only a few minutes from his faucet-dripping apartment. In his first month in the city he passed through there almost every afternoon. It was filled with sculptures from a time when, relatively speaking, it was easy to manufacture statues of exceptional power. One was of a naked man, walking, one hand clutching his face in despair. Another was of a man staring at the sun, his hands chained behind his back. Luke's favourite, though, was of a centaur bearing off a woman. He did not know which biblical or mythical characters were depicted but the statues' power was scarcely diminished by his ignorance. The theme

in these sculptures was always the same: rapture, punishment, suffering. Passion.

He walked by the centaur, looked at the veins pulsing in his belly. The fingers of one hand dug into the woman's waist, the other tugged her stone hair. His front hoofs had been broken off and she had lost a hand; her other hand grasped his arm but it was impossible to tell if this was a gesture of resistance or abandonment, if he was rescuing or abducting her, if what was being demonstrated was violation or rapture. If it was a violation then it was a rapturous one. Her missing hand – the way her fingers grasped the sky – would have provided a clue but, as things stood, only a pun remained: she was being carried away. Luke stared at the statue, the centaur rearing up on legs that bore the entire weight of stone, head tilted up to the sun, framed by blue.

Most of the other statues were also damaged in some way. Many lacked arms or legs, an unfortunate few were headless, all were being rotted by pollution. Rain soaked their naked skin, the sun scorched their backs. Pigeon shit fell on them. In the extremes of passion depicted, however, such indignities barely registered – so there was an implicit consolation in their fate. Essentially, they endured. The figure clutching his head in despair – had he been blinded? – was walking, putting one foot in front of the other. In spite of the immensity of his affliction, he kept going. Mere survival turned punishment into triumph. Condemned by the gods the statues became gods themselves. They protested their sentence even while accepting it. Always, in some way they were resisting or trying to rise above the fate to which they were condemned. The character in chains struggled against gravity, towards the

tormenting sky. And yet, at the same time, the fact that they were made of stone, would never free themselves, meant that at some level they were resigned. Yearning and endurance were indistinguishable. They accepted their sentence even while protesting it. They accepted the sun that dazzled them, accepted the darkness to which blindness had condemned them.

'*O light! This is the cry of all the characters who, in classical tragedy, come face to face with their fate*.'

After a week of rain the sky became solid blue. The heat was tremendous and though Luke was consoled by the statues the park itself was a source of torment. Arranged at discreet intervals, young men and women sunbathed, read, dozed. Many of the women wore swimming costumes. The park was like a beach and, as on a beach, Luke was aghast at how beautiful they were, these women. Several came for their lunch hour, stripped down to their swimming costumes, ate their sandwiches, dressed and left. Back at their desks they may have been plain, ordinary, but for that interlude of near-nakedness they were beautiful. Luke walked around the park and then, like a respectful pervert, chose a spot where he could watch a particular woman, could watch her arms, her legs, her breasts, her hair, hoping that she would catch his eye, return his gaze. The park seethed with a potent mix of sex and celibacy. No one could read for more than two pages without looking round at the other readers. Everyone was reading as displacement activity or disguise but this disguise was so effective that to violate it was inconceivable.

What hell it was, this park! It was so different from the parts of the Seine frequented by cruising gays. Walking along

the river on his way to the park Luke always felt uncomfortable, obscurely offended by their stares, by the flagrant desire conveyed by their looks. They made him feel prudish, affronted. Then, when he reached the park and began looking at women with exactly the attention that, a few minutes earlier, had been focused on him, that gay world seemed nothing short of idyllic. He envied the men their common currency of glances and desire. How perfect it would have been to have caught the eye of a woman who was hoping to catch his eye, to have exchanged a few words, to have walked back to his dismal room and ripped each other's clothes off. His thoughts were as crude as a prisoner's but as strong as these desires – far stronger in fact – was his acceptance of the idea that it was not on to disturb a woman when she was pretending to read, that she had a perfect right to sit on her own in a park reading a sexually explicit book and not be pestered by men. A couple of times he had seen men make approaches but the women on whom they had imposed themselves had never seemed flattered or pleased by these attentions. Or almost never. On one occasion he had watched a tanned American sit next to a woman with short blonde hair and a lovely shy laugh. Luke heard that laugh a lot in the next half hour and then he saw them gather up their things and leave together.

It never happened like that for Luke. Even on days when the park was ablaze with women he left as he'd arrived, on his own. On the way out of the gates he always passed an old woman who sat patiently in a chair, holding a card on which was written 'DITES MOI' in thick black ink. She seemed happy enough, sitting there, announcing her wish to talk without any hint of pleading or supplication. So matter-of-

fact was the announcement that it seemed as if she were not requesting conversation but providing a service: 'If you need to speak to someone, here I am.' Perhaps that was why no one ever took her up on her offer. Luke had never seen anyone speak to her: people were embarrassed by her loneliness because it so frankly mirrored their own. And the sign itself was strangely off-putting. Having externalised her desire for speech in this way she was left in the most complete silence imaginable. The card rendered her mute, dumb; all the language of which she was capable had been set down, framed and preserved in those two words: dites moi. Luke was fascinated by her, by the way that she had decided what she wanted, did what she could to obtain it, and then sat and waited, apparently without desire or hope. He wanted to know her story but, oddly, he never considered asking her, speaking to her. Instead he walked back to his stained apartment, lay down on the unerotic bed and masturbated – an act that left him feeling sadder than ever. If an orgasm was a petite mort then this was petite suicide.

Instead of spending his afternoons prowling the parks and jerking off like this he should have been working on his French which was so poor that even the simplest tasks – deciphering menus, buying bleach to clean out the toilet, ordering sandwiches – became major exercises in pantomime diplomacy. Rarely understanding how much shopkeepers and waiters were charging him, he paid for everything with fifty- or hundred-franc notes and came home with sagging pockets of change. The most efficient way to have used this money would have been to enrol in one of the many courses in French conversation and grammar but Luke persuaded himself he could absorb

the language passively, by osmosis, without effort, by reading the French subtitles of American films.

Even more than learning French he should have been making progress with the book he had come to write but what in London had seemed a romantic, attractive option immediately took on the character of an arduous, pointless task that he had no idea how to go about. Which made it all the more important that he found a job – but during the summer there was no work to be had and since he was unable to find a job, incapable of learning French or getting on with his book and was, in addition, lonely, bored and consumed by sexual frustration, he seemed better off going back to England.

England: as featured from the ferry on the day he left. A rare bright day in the Channel. Breezy (to put it mildly). He had stood at the stern and looked back at the Dover cliffs, yellow in the sunlight. Then he had turned to the man next to him – a stranger – and said,

'There you are: the teeth of England.'

'Excuse me?'

'I said "The Bowmen of Agincourt",' said Luke, and headed back inside the chip-smelling lounge . . .

Yes, he could go back to England – and it was that phrase that made him stay. Going back to England: it was difficult to think of four words more redolent of defeat because what they actually meant was going back to living so deeply within his limitations he would not even be aware that they *were* limitations: they would pass themselves off as contentment. Not that he had ever felt content in England, more like a perpetual rumbling of discontent . . . And yet, at the same time, he thought constantly about going back to England.

Returning was a tormenting possibility, simultaneously to be resisted and to draw strength from. How comforting to have been forced into total exile, forbidden to return on pain of death. To know that there was no choice but to begin a new life, to learn a new language, to start over definitively and construct a mythic, idealised vision of the homeland that could never be challenged or undermined by experience.

The weeks passed and Luke stayed in Paris. More exactly, for the experience expressed itself negatively, he kept not going back to England. He stayed by increments, in exactly the same way that, until a few months previously, he had kept up a programme of boring weight training. He'd hated it, hated turning up at the gym and going through the funless routine of warming up, reps, and warming down. He'd known that at some time in the future he would give up but had forced himself to keep going in order to postpone the day when he *would* give up. He remained in Paris – where he made no attempt to join a gym – in the same way: putting off his return on a weekly, sometimes daily basis. In this way, although he was not happy, he was able to hold out for happiness, for the happiness promised by the city.

His knowledge of which expanded daily. Crucially, he discovered the 29 bus which ran from the Gare Saint Lazare to Montempoivre. Though impressive, the route itself – past the Opéra and the Pompidou Centre, through the Marais and round the Bastille – was less important than the design of the bus: a small balcony meant that a handful of passengers could stand at the back and watch the life of the city unfurl like a film. Luke often rode the 29 from terminus to terminus, glimpsing hundreds of little incidents whose origins (he could

only see what lay behind) or consequences (the bus, in this traffic-free month, moved swiftly on) were revealed only rarely. Under the influence of Alain Tanner's *In the White City* (which he had seen a few weeks earlier) Luke formed the idea of making a film comprising super-8 footage shot from the back of the 29. He would call it *Route 29*. All he needed was a camera and a Carte Orange.

In the meantime he received an unexpected, very welcome phone call. Andrew, the one person he (vaguely) knew who was in the city for the summer, invited him to a party. A party! This, he was sure, would prove a turning-point.

He spent a long time in the shower, shaved carefully, chose his clothes carefully, checked to see that he had a pen and paper – for phone numbers – and set off early to catch the Métro and arrive at the party in good time. He had walked down the stairs from his apartment and was out in the street when he realized he had forgotten the condoms that he had bought weeks earlier, in London. He walked back up, unlocked the door, put the packet in his pocket and set off again.

The party was in the courtyard of a house in the south of the city. Andrew welcomed him and was immediately called away to the phone. Luke scanned the women and felt immediately deflated: no one caught his eye. Nothing about his life was more depressing than the way variants of that phrase – catching his eye, catching her eye – had come to occupy a position of such prominence in it. He stood drinking. After half an hour he spotted a woman he had not seen before. She looked Brazilian, was wearing a brightly patterned dress, orange mainly. He looked for Andrew, hoping he could introduce them, but the host was nowhere to be seen. Luke manoeuvred

so that he was close to her but she was cordoned off by the two men she was talking with. He was unsure what to do next: talk to someone in the vicinity and have his freedom of movement restricted, or stand on his own, feeling conspicuous, awkward and alone, but ready to move when the chance arose to introduce himself to her. He compromised in the worst possible way, by talking to another English guy who was also standing on his own: a young banker who was just beginning a six-month stint in the city. Together they gave off a double helping of solitude. One of the men talking to the Brazilian woman went to get a drink. The other was briefly distracted by an Italian in an improbable cravat. Luke abandoned his new friend and stepped in front of the Brazilian without having any idea of what he was going to say. Opting for boldness he offered her his hand and introduced himself. Somewhat startled she shook his hand and said her name, which Luke did not catch.

'Are you Brazilian?' he said in English.

'I'm Italian.'

'Ah, Italian.'

'What about you? Are you Brazilian?'

'Me, no . . . Though I am a great fan of that Brazilian drink: caipirinha.'

'Excuse me?' she said, exactly like the man on the ferry. On this occasion Luke prolonged their non-exchange for a couple more minutes until, the instant a pause afforded her the opportunity, she excused herself and moved away.

After that encounter he felt that he was treated suspiciously by the other guests, as if they regarded him as the most pitiful of individuals: a loser on the make. Already slightly drunk he

made his way to the kitchen to get another beer. Going to a party to pick up women demanded a single-mindedness of purpose that he didn't have. He relaxed, drank, talked to anyone who came his way, indiscriminately. It was easier like that, and far more enjoyable. On his way to the toilet he saw the Italian-Brazilian woman again, chatting in Spanish or Portuguese to a man with chubby fair hair and a baggy suit.

In the toilet Luke reminded himself that this party was his one chance of the summer, there would not be another like it, and admonished himself to pursue his original intention. Within minutes of coming out of the toilet his resolve had collapsed. It was futile, this self-inflicted ruthlessness. He thought about leaving and then forced himself to stay, hoping crazily that he would be able to get the phone number of the woman he had talked to earlier. One look at her told him it was impossible: she was laughing with the man in the baggy suit, liking him, and he was leaning against the wall in a way that suggested they were already on the outskirts of a kiss.

Luke left the party and walked to the Métro. The station was closing, the last train had left moments before. He began walking home. It had been his chance, the party, and he had blown it. In spite of this he felt happy to be walking, relieved to be free of the tension generated by impotent prowling. He knew that in the morning he would wake up feeling abject but now, as he walked past benches and parked cars, as he saw the yellow lights of traffic coming towards him, as he passed couples walking home and old men walking their dogs, he did not feel unhappy. There were lighted bars and late open shops on each side of the street. He would stop and have a beer before he went to bed but he wanted to get near home first.

He headed north, feeling neither tired nor depressed. His fingers touched the packet of condoms in his pocket. They reminded him of an evening when he had bought tickets for a concert and then, due to a catalogue of mishaps, had failed to get there. He was still miles away when the concert was due to begin. When he realized he would not make it he had thought, calmly, that it didn't really matter because in two hours the concert would be over and everything would be the same anyway, whether he had been there or not. Ultimately, it was futile, self-defeating, this logic of negative consolation, but it was difficult to be depressed while walking. He passed another Métro station and found, to his surprise, that this line was still running. Within seconds the last train arrived. As soon as it left the station the train pulled above ground. Suddenly the train was passing over the Seine and there was a perfect view of the Eiffel Tower, its reflection lying on the water like a pier. Everyone in the train was looking across at the Tower and Luke felt his relief turning to elation.

It had been years since he had felt as wretched as he had at the party, as he had on afternoons in the Tuileries. He could not remember a time when he had felt so lonely, lost, but that isolation had now been redeemed by a simple Métro journey. The two sensations, the two states, were linked, dependent. You could not experience one without the other. He looked at the lighted windows, hoping to see a woman undressing or combing her hair in front of a dresser. He saw nothing like this but he was happy. No day was uniformly terrible. Even the worst days had moments of relative happiness. And if there were not these moments of happiness then there was always something to look forward to in the coming day. There may

not be anything to get up for but there was always this urge to wake up. Like this, life went on, tolerable and intolerable, bearable and unbearable, slipping between these extremes. It was not a question of hope, it was part of the rhythm of the day, of the body. And it was part of this rhythm that tomorrow he would wake up with desolation lying over him like a thin blanket, would try to remain asleep a little longer, wanting to put off the claims of the day, to prolong the comforting sense of not yet being quite alive. But there might be a letter in the mail box and that would be enough to get him out of bed . . .

As he got off the train and stepped up into the street he was already looking forward to checking his mail, to buying a paper and ordering coffee, to sitting in the same chair he always sat in, the chair he was heading for now, where he would have one drink before going back to the sad apartment, where he would undress, splash water on his face, and climb in his bed to sleep.

The body has its own economy. Faced with extreme sexual recession Luke's lust gradually diminished until, by the time of his birthday on 20 August, it had all but vanished. By then he had become sufficiently accustomed to loneliness that an absolute lack of birthday cards did not seem particularly demoralising. He spent the morning checking his mail box; in the afternoon he walked over to Invalides where football matches – kick-arounds, really – allegedly took place on Saturdays. The Esplanade was occupied by the usual assortment of sitters, readers and sleepers and it seemed unlikely that any kind of game ever took place on these traffic-surrounded squares of grass. He returned home, checked his mail and took a nap.