

To Paris from Cambridge Town

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Chapter 5 of "Rescue of a Rock and Roll Child"



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From Paris to Golders Green

In the autumn of 1983 I took residence in a room on the grounds of the Lycée Jean-Paul Timbaud in Brétigny-sur-Orge, a commune in the southern suburbs of Paris some sixteen miles south of the city centre. It was during those early days in Paris that I became infected for what I believe to be the first time in my life by a serious sense of self-disillusion, as a new darkness spread over my mind.

This sea-change marked the onset of a real drink problem that went way beyond the usual student booze-ups into the murky realm of drinking alone by day, and there seems little doubt to me today that at its heart lay a conscience that was starting to become calloused through repeated defilement. My well-being, however, remained relatively unaffected, in fact, for those first few months, I was happy, blissfully happy to be a *flâneur* in the city which had inspired so many great poets to write classics of the art of urban idling. I wrote of my own experiences, usually late at night, in my room with the help of wine and cigarettes, and while few of these notes have survived, some incidents that may have once been committed to paper are still fresh in my mind.

There was the time I sat opposite a same-sex couple on the Métro when I was still innocent of its labyrinthine complexities. â Sheâ was a slim white girl, dressed from head to toe in denim, who gazed blissfully, with lips coyly pursed, into some wistful middle distance, while her muscular black boyfriend stared straight through me with eyes in which desire and menace seemed to be mixed, until one of them spoke, almost in a whisper, â *Qu'est-ce-que t'en pense?*â

I recall the night I took the Métro to Montparnasse-Bienvenue, where I slowly sipped a demi-blonde in a brasserie, perhaps of the type immortalised by Brassai in his photographs of the secret life of '30s Paris. At the same time, a bewhiskered old alcoholic in a naval officer's cap, his table strewn with empty wine bottles and cigarette butts, repeatedly screeched the name, "Phillippe!" until a pallid impassive bartender with patent leather hair filled the old man's glass to the brim with a mock-obsequious â *Voilà, mon Capitaine!!*â

I can also remember the afternoon when, enacting the role of the social discontent, I joined an anti CND march through Paris which ended with a bizarre street cabaret performed by a troupe of neo-hippies whose sheer demented defiance may have filled me with longing for a time when I treated my well-thumbed copy of the Fontana Modern Masters bio of Che Guevara by Andrew Sinclair as some kind of sacred text...

A day spent as a *flâneur* would often end with a few hours spent in a movie theatre, perhaps in the vast

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soulless Forum des Halles shopping precinct, and there was a point I started to hate the movies I chose, as I struggled more and more with fits of deep and uncontrollable depression. For the first time in my life, I was starting to feel worse after having seen a film than before, the result perhaps of creeping anhedonia, which is a reduced ability to take pleasure in the everyday activities. I grew bored of watching others perform. What joy I reasoned was there in watching some dismal movie when there was so much to do in the greatest city in the civilised world?

I'd never really been any kind melancholic up until this point but this situation may have started to change in my first few months in Paris. If my travels failed to produce the desired uplifting effect, I'd fall prey to a despair that was wholly out of proportion to the cause.

As a means of protecting myself, I started squandering my hard-earned cash on endless baubles and fripperies. These wholly pointless trinkets included a gaudy short-sleeved shirt by Yves St Laurent, a retro-style alarm clock with the loudest tick in Christendom, a gold-plated toothbrush with I never actually used, a black and gold cigarette holder and matching slim fit lighter, a portrait drawn of me at the Place de Tertre which made me look like a cherubic 12 year old and a black vinyl box jacket procured from the Porte de Clignancourt flea market.

Mention must also be made of the many books I bought, such as the three Folio works by Symbolist pioneers, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Villiers de L'Isle Adam and Joséphin Péladan; as well as the second-hand books of poetry by such obscure figures as Trakl and Deleuë part of Seguerâ's Contemporary Poets collection.

Could the kids who loved to wave and coo at me from all corners of the Lycée have guessed that their precious Carl, the smiling blond Londoner who looked like a lost member of Duran Duran was a secret dark depressive...and a collector of the literary works of late 19th Century decadents...and a social discontent given to recording snarling rants against the callousness of Western society on a cheap cassette tape recorder?

The simple answer is never in a thousand years; for I was leading a double life, perhaps even a multiple one. Little wonder, therefore, that I was starting to drink to try and make sense of what was happening to me, which was something akin to the fracturing of the personality.

It wasn't long before I tired of the solitary existence of the *flâneur*, but then becoming more sociable may have simply been the result of being in one place for a significant length of time and nothing more meaningful than that. In fact, I'd befriended twenty year old Theresa, English assistant in the neighbouring town of St Genevieve des Bois, while we were both attending classes at the Sorbonne intended to prepare us for the year ahead; and we went on to see more and more of each other as our Parisian sojourn proceeded apace.

She'd been a close girlhood chum at convent school of my own great Westfield friend, Astrid. In fact, one of the first times we met up was with Astrid, when we saw "Gimme Shelter" at some dinky little art house theatre; this being, of course, the documentary of the Rolling Stones 1969 American tour which, culminating in the Free Concert at the Altamont Speedway in northern California, infamously marked the end of the Hippie dream of peace and love.

Another close friend was Jules, a maths teacher at the LEP who was the rebellious son of an army officer, and a furious hedonist who worshipped the Rock and Roll lifestyle of Keith Richards and other British bad boy musicians. I still see him now, tall, thin, dark, charismatic, with his head of wiry black hair, dressed in drainpipes and Cuban heeled boots, playing the bass guitar - but brilliantly- at some unearthly hour with friends following a night's heavy partying before rushing to be with a girl friend as the dawn broke.

My best male friend was Milan, another teacher at the LEP. He was the son of Yugoslavian parents from the suburb of Bagneux whose impassive manner belied the exorbitantly loving and unstable soul of a true poet. He fell in love with Theresa at first sight, and spent the whole night on a train bound for the south of France in a romantic delirium singing the songs of Jacques Brel. He loved us both in fact, and referred to our slender swan necks as being typical of what he called "le charme anglais".

So many of the people of Bretigny went out of their way to make me feel welcome and content from the headmaster all the way down to the kids some of whom staged near-riots in the classroom whenever I

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appeared. I felt so unworthy of their kindness, of the incredible hospitality that is characteristic of ordinary French people.

However, if I was much loved in the warm-hearted *faubourgs*, in Paris itself I was at times as much a magnet for menace and hostility as approval. In fact, I was hysterically threatened in Pigalle only days after arriving in the city. I was verbally assaulted again later in the year on a RER train by some kind of madman or derelict who told me to go to the Bois de Boulogne to meet with what he saw as my inevitable violent destiny.

I spent an entire train journey from Paris-Austerlitz to Bretigny with a self-professed *voyouâ* with chilling shark-like eyes, who nonetheless seemed quite fond of me, as he made no attempt to harm me. He even gave me his number, telling me that unless I phoned him as promised I was merely what he termed un *anglais c**â*. Mention must also be made of the sinister skinhead who called me *une tapette anglaiseâ* for trying on Marie's wide-brimmed hat while travelling home by train after a night out with her and Ariana. After they'd gotten off at St Genevieve, I was left at his mercy as I made my way alone to my room in the insanely driving rain, but thankfully he'd vanished by then. Do I hate them now? No, I wish them all wellâ they kept me on my toes and made me the man I am today, someone who can get on with anyone.

I left Bretigny without saying goodbye to so many people that it's painful for me to think about it, but frenetic last hour socialising had left me exhausted and demoralised. However, there was one final get-together, organised by Theresa and a few other friends. Milan was there of course, as well as another close friend from the LEP, Jean-Paul, and several mutual friends of myself and Theresa. Sadly though, Jules wasn't. I bumped into one of his girl friends in the course of the evening, and she was incredulous I hadn't invited him. Seized by guilt, I phoned him at his home to ask him to make a last minute appearance, but in a muted voice, he told me it was too late for that. It was the last I ever heard of him. I never saw Milan again either, although he did phone me once from Paris. On the other hand, Theresa and I stayed friends until the early *â* 90s, by which time she'd got married to a fellow church-goer and former Cambridge University alumnus, whom I liked enormously.

My parents stopped by that night to pick me up on their way to La Ribera where we were due to stay for a few weeks before returning to the UK, and after a day or so spent sightseeing we set off. Soon after arriving it became clear to me that my beloved pueblo had changed beyond all recognition. Eight years after Franco's death and Spain's innocence was long gone and Western urban decadence and violence had penetrated even into the deepest provinces.

In Murcia, while quietly drinking in a night club with Marc, a very dear friend of mine from La Ribera's golden age, his future wife Maria, and other friends, I found myself in the surreal position of being visually threatened by a local Punk who clearly objected to the bootlace tie I was wearing which immediately identified me as a hated *Rockabilly*. This would never have happened ten years before, or perhaps even five.

As for the youth of La Ribera itself, where once they'd been so endearingly naive, now they seemed so worldly and cool, in fact far more so than me, dancing like chickens with their elbows thrust out to the latest New Pop hits from the UK such as King's "Won't You Hold My Hand Now (These Are Heavy Times)", which I endlessly translated for them. They even put the club kids of *La Piscine* to shame.

I returned to Westfield in the autumn of 1984, and I can't help thinking it was soon afterwards that my recent past started haunting me for the first time, but I may be wrong. Perhaps it never occurred to me that only a few years previously I'd known legends of sport and the cinema, mythical figures of the theatre, blue bloods and patricians, and they'd been kind, generous of spirit to this nonentity from the outer suburbs. Now I was nearly 30, with a raft of opportunities behind me, and a future which looked less likely than ever to provide me with the fame I still ached for with all my soul.

At first I lived off-campus, thinking it might be fun to coast during my final year as some kind of enigma freshly returned from Paris; but before long I desperately missed being part of the social hub of the college, even though this was a virtual impossibility for a forgotten student in his fourth year. However, I *did* eventually move back onto campus to occupy a tiny little room in the Berridge hall of residence in nearby

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West Hampstead NW9.

Thinking that being in a play might help raise my faded profile, I accepted a small role in Cole Porter's "Kiss me Kate", which was being directed by a close friend of mine, but it was all too little too late. My time as one of Westfield's leading *prodigies* had long passed, and other, younger golden children had come to the fore since my departure for Paris, such as the kid named Bill whom my long-time friend and champion Ariana described as being some kind of new edition of me, due perhaps to his versatility as musician, actor, comedian and so on. The first I saw of him, he was playing Gorgibus in the original French in a production, directed by Ariana, of Moliere's "Les Precieuses Ridicules", a part she'd originally earmarked for me, but I turned it down. To say he went on to greater things would be an understatement.

I read incessantly throughout the year for the sheer pleasure of doing so. For example, while Eugene O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh" was a compulsory part of the drama course, there was no need for me to wade through "O'Neill", the massive two-part biography of the playwright - published in 1962 and 1972 - by Arthur and Barbara Gelb, but that didn't stop me. In fact it was a joy to do so.

I made this descent into the depths of O'Neill's tortured psyche at a time when I was starting to drink during the day at Westfield, often getting hammered around lunchtime in the bar in the company of various friends, such as Paul, my friend from "Playing with Fire", or even earlier thanks to a can or two of extra strong lager. Paul was still trying to persuade me to join forces with him against an indifferent world, he with his writing and me with my acting, but for reasons best known to myself I wasn't playing ball. He'd always sensed something really special in me, which was variously described as energy, intensity, charisma, but for all the praise I received from Paul and others, I didn't seem to have a very high opinion of myself. I'm not quite sure why.

I recently watched the testimony of a former violent offender through a website called Transformed Lives, and he described himself as having a big ego and low self esteem before he became a Christian, and this may have been my problem. It's possible that while I had the vast ego of a narcissist that requires constant attention and approval, I somehow also suffered from low self-esteem...which would indicate actual Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Whatever the truth, I was going through one of my perverse phases, affecting a world weariness which I simply didn't have at 30, but which upset and alienated a really good friend, something for which I feel utterly ashamed.

It wasn't long before Paul had left college, and for good this time - he'd already somehow spun out his allotted three years to four - and without taking his degree...leaving me to stew in my stupid pseudo-cynicism. My principal final year tutor was my beloved Elizabeth, and subject of study, the works of literary genius Andre Gide. I thrilled to the perverseness of Gidian characters such as the urbane Menalque from "The Immoralist" (1902), who awakens the Nietzschean superman in Michel, the novella's protagonist, the feral Lafcadio from "The Vatican Cellars" (1914), who commits a crime of terrible cruelty simply for the sake of doing so, and the demonic Passavent, from "The Counterfeiters" (1926), his only novel according to his own definition of the term. While figures of such unmitigated depravity are commonplace today, in countless novels, plays, films, videos etc., when Gide created *his* monsters, they still had the power to shock. I view them with a different pair of eyes today.

On a lighter note, a special favourite of mine by Gide, who was always a magnificent storyteller, was the novella "Isabelle", which appealed to my softer, more romantic side. Written in 1911, it's the tale of a young student Gérard Lacase who stays for a time at a Manor house in Normandy inhabited by two ancient aristocratic families in order to look over their library for research purposes, and while there becomes bewitched by the portrait of the mysterious "Isabelle" only to become disillusioned upon finally meeting her.

By the same token my favourite ever play by O'Neill was another story of hopeless love, "A Moon for the Misbegotten" (1947), although "A Long Day's Journey into Night" (1956) came a very close second. Both feature Eugene's tragic yet infinitely romantic elder brother Jamie. I became fascinated by him; and read all about him in the massive O'Neill biography by the Gelbs. Poor Jamie. How richly blessed he'd been at birth with beauty, charm, and intellect. While part of the Minim Department of Notre Dame University, Indiana, he was one of founder Father Edward Sorin's most favoured *princes*, destined for a glittering future as a Catholic gentleman of exquisite breeding and learning; and then a prize-winning scholar at Fordham, the exclusive

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Jesuit university from which he was ultimately expelled for a foolish indiscretion.

He was also potentially a very fine writer, although he only left a handful of poems and essays behind, and the owner of a beautiful speaking voice which ensured him work as an actor for a time alongside his father James. His one true legacy, however, is Jamie Tyrone, the brilliant yet tortured charmer who haunts two of his brother's masterpieces with the infinite sorrow of promise unfulfilled.

"The Wanderer of Golders Green" was formed from notes made while I was taking my finals in the summer of '85. It reflects what was a long-standing obsession on my part with romantic *weltschmerz* - literally world pain - and should not be taken too seriously as such. That said, mention must be made of the intense saturnine melancholy that was making more and more inroads into my naturally sanguine temperament, and at nearly 30 I still wasn't famous, and may have been drinking as heavily as I was partly as a means of coping with this painful fact. What is certain is that from the age of 27, alcohol became more indispensable to me than ever before.

The Wanderer of Golders Green

I decided on a *Special B*
Before the eve.
I bought a lager
At the Bar
And chatted to Gaye.
Then Ray
Bought me another.
I appreciated the fact
That he remembered
The time he,
His gal Chris,
And Rory Downed
An entire Bottle
Of Jack Daniels
In a Paris-bound train.
A tanned cat
Bought me a (large) half,
Then another half.
My fatal eyes
Are my downfall.
I drank yet another half...

My head was spinning
When it hit the pillow
I awoke
With a terrible headache
Around one o'clock.
I prayed it would depart.

I slowly got dressed.
I was as chatty as ever
Before the exam...
French/English translation.
Periodically I put my face
In my hands or groaned

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Or sighed -
My stomach
was burning me inside.

I finished my paper
In 1 hour and a half.
As I walked out
I caught various eyes
Amanda's, Trudy's (quizzical) etc. ;
I went to bed ;
Slept till five ;
Read O'Neill until 7ish...
Got dressed
And strolled down
To Golders Green,
In order to relive
A few memories.
I sang to myself -
A few memories
Flashed into my mind,
But not as many
as I'd have liked -
It wasn't the same.
It wasn't the same.

Singing songs brought
Voluptuous tears.
I snuck into McDonalds
Where I felt At home,
Anonymous, alone.
I bought a few things,
Toothpaste and pick,
Chocolate, yoghurts,
Sweets, cigarettes
And fruit juice.
Took a sentimental journey
Back to Powis Gardens,
Richness
And intensity,
Romantic
And attractive ;
Sad, suspicious and strange.
I sat up until 3am,
Reading O'Neill
Or writing (inept) poetry.
Awoke at 10,
But didn't leave
My room till 12,
Lost my way
To Swiss Cottage,
Lost my happiness.

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Oh so conscious
Of my failure
And after a fashion,
Enjoying this knowledge.

Of All Sad Words of Tongue or Pen

My first employment after leaving Westfield in the summer of 1985 was as a deliverer of novelty telegrams. This often brought me into potentially hazardous situations, but for me the risk was worth it, because I was getting well paid to show off and party, two of my favourite occupations at the time...but it was an unusual way of life for a man of thirty.

What I really wanted was the immortality provided by fame, and I didn't care whether this came through acting, music or literature, or any other means for that matter, but until my big break came, I was content to feed my addiction to attention through the novelty telegrams industry. I evidently had no deep desire to leave anything behind by way of children, nor for any career other than one liable to project me to international renown. How then did I end up as a PGCE student at Homerton College, Cambridge in the autumn?

The truth is that once again I'd yielded to family pressure to provide myself with the safety net that's been dear to the hearts of parents of would-be *wunderkinds* since time immemorial, and despised by the artists themselves: the great English singer-songwriter Nick Drake once told his father it was the one thing he didn't want. For my part, I was so unhappy about having to go to Cambridge that just days before I was due to start there, I arranged to audition for a Jazz Funk band. I was all set to sing "The Chinese Way" by Level 42 and another song of its kind, but I never made it. Late, and desperately drunk on the afternoon of my audition, I simply threw in the towel and resigned myself to Cambridge. For all I know they may still be waiting for me to this day, relics from an age of tasselled loafers and white socks.

From the time I arrived in the beautiful medieval university city of Cambridge, I was made to feel most welcome and wanted by everyone, and I made some wonderful friends at Homerton itself. They included Jake, a poet and actor from the little town of Downham Market in Norfolk, Dale, a singer-songwriter of dark genius from Yeovil in Somerset who eventually went on to become part of London's psychedelic underground, and Clarisse, a stunning red-head whose beauty and charm belied the fact that she hailed from Slough, a vast sprawling suburb to the west of London most famous for having inspired an infamous poem by John Betjeman.

When I made my first appearance at the Manor Community College in the tough London overspill area of Arbury where I was due to begin my period of Teaching Practice the following January, the pupils reacted to me as if I was some kind of visiting movie or Rock star. My TP would've been a breeze. Everything was falling into place for me at Cambridge, and I was offered several golden chances to succeed as an actor within its hallowed confines.

Towards the end of the first term, Tim Scott, the then president of the Cambridge University Footlights Dramatic Club had gone out of his way to ask myself and Jonathan to appear in the sole production he was preparing to mark his year-long tenure.

He was a Homerton man, and so clearly wanted to give a couple of his fellow students a break after having seen us perform a couple of Jonathan's satirical songs for the club. This was a privilege almost without measure, given that since its inception Footlights has nurtured the talents of Cecil Beaton, Jonathan Miller, Germaine Greer, David Frost, John Cleese, Peter Cook, Graham Chapman, Eric Idle, Stephen Fry, Emma Thompson, Hugh Lawrie and Sasha Baron Cohen among many others. I could have been added to that list.

As if this opportunity weren't enough to persuade me to stay put, a young undergraduate, renowned for the high quality of the plays he produced personally asked me to feature in one of his productions during the Lent Term after seeing me interpret the part of Tom in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* some time before Christmas. Someone told me that if he took an interest in you, you were pretty well made as an actor at

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Cambridge. What more did I want? For Spielberg himself to be in the audience and discover me? I can actually remember being quite disappointed that he wasn't a talent scout from outside of the university. That's how self-deluded I was. I was so obsessed by fame that I could barely wait to get my clammy hands on it, and yet it seems that whenever I was offered a serious chance at achieving it, I bungled it.

In my defence though, I did feel trapped by the course, and was finding it heavy going. In order to pass, you had to spend a full year as a teacher after completion of the basic PGCE. That meant it would be two years before I was free again to call myself an actor and work as such. It just seemed an awfully long time, when in fact it wasn't at all, and two years after quitting Cambridge I was even further away from my dream than when I'd started off. The truth is I left Homerton for no good reason, and my decision still pains me to this day, although my faith helps me to cope with the anguish the idiocies of my youth have left me with. Without it these words from Whittier's *Maud Muller* might tear me to shreds of utter nothingness:

"For of all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these: it might have been".

Within a matter of hours of the start of the Lent Term of 1987, I was gone, vanished into the night in the company of a close friend I'd wheedled into helping me out. It wasn't her fault; she'd originally told me to go to Cambridge, and just get stuck in, but I hadn't listened.

Once I was free I started to furiously audition, commuting to London from a little village in rural Hampshire just a stone's throw the coast near Portsmouth, where I was resident at the time.

It was music rather than acting I was interested in at the time, not that it ever really mattered to me how I became famous, just so long as I did. I auditioned for a series of desperately unsuitable bands, including the Jazz-Funk outfit from Croydon, whose Soul Boy musicians didn't seem to believe me when I told them I knew one of the guys from Level 42 and the Rock 'n' Roll revival band from Pompey itself...but none of them took to me, and I can't say I blame them. I was usually tanked up to start with, and then there was the question of my image. I think it's fair to say that highlighted hair, dinky gold ear studs and skin tight jeans didn't go down all that well in the places I chose to audition.

I returned to London in the summer of 1987 to a minor flurry of creative activity.

First, I took part in a rehearsed reading at Notting Hill's justly reputable Gate Theatre of a play whose name eludes me, but it was directed by Astrid. Then, at her behest, I served as MC for a week-long benefit for the Gate called "Captain Kirk's Midsummer Log". I did so in the persona of one *Mr Denmark 1979*, a comic monstrosity created for me by Ariana. Among those appearing on the bill were comedienne, Jo Brand, in her then incarnation of The Sea Monster, comedy satirist, Rory Bremner, whom I'd known in both Edinburgh and Paris, and Renaissance Man, Patrick Marber, initially a stand-up comic, but best known today as an award-winning playwright and Oscar-nominated screenwriter.

The Denmark character went down so well at the benefit that I wrote an entire show around him on the premiss that winning a Scandinavian male beauty contest in 1979 had so altered the balance of his mind that he'd since convinced himself he'd been at the forefront of pretty well every major cultural development since the dawn of Pop, only to be cravenly ripped off by Sinatra, Elvis, the Beatles, the Stones, Punks, Rappers and so on. It premiered a few months after the benefit at a new variety venue called Club Shout, again to great success.

1987 was also the year I got seriously involved in walk-on work for television and the cinema, although I wasn't entirely new to the game. For example, I briefly feature as a side drummer in a Salvation Army band in "A Mirror Crack'd" (1981), based on the Agatha Christie novel. This was at a typical English village fete set in the 1950s, and the scene is graced first by Geraldine Chaplin, and then Elisabeth Taylor. Also, in Charles Jarrott's "Poor Little Rich Girl" (1987), I can be seen gesticulating in a white suit as twenties crooner Rudy Vallee in a party scene featuring Farrah Fawcett as Betty Hutton and Burl Ives as FW Woolworth. But these were just isolated episodes. From around 1987, I took the work more seriously, first in the sitcom "Life Without George", and then in long-running police series "The Bill" in which I played a scene of crime photographer for about five years.

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Soon after I'd finished my work for "Life Without George" I started rehearsals for Astrid for a play called "The Audition" written by the Catalonian dramatist Rudolf Sirera. with English translation by John London. It was due to have its world premiere at the Gate early in the winter of '88.

Apparently set by Sirera in pre-revolutionary France, Astrid updated it to the late 19th Century, with a setting reminiscent of Wilde's "Dorian Gray" or a Parisian equivalent, perhaps by Lorrain. It involves the kidnapping of an actor Gabriel De Beaumont by an unnamed Marquis, who goes on to sadistically toy with his victim before finally murdering him. It received some good reviews, and I was singled out for some praise by The London Times.

I should have capitalised on this modest success, but Rob, a close friend from the Guildhall now working as a teacher at the Callan School of English in Oxford Street, had earlier urged me to join him there. As I'd already trained with them and been offered a job by the time "The Audition" had got under way, I started work as a teacher soon after it had wrapped. Thus, I entered into one of the most purely blissful period of my entire life, even while my theatrical career suffered.

I could write a whole book on my time at Callan's alone, indeed on pretty much any of the major episodes of my life, this being merely one version of it, to which multiple layers like so many onion skins could be added to create something approaching an accurate self- portrait guaranteed to make a even the most hard-hearted reader weep.

This is the alternative roman à clef version, so some names have been changed

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