



A LETTER FROM PARIS

I got the letter from Paris three days ago, sent by 24-hour guaranteed express delivery, my first correspondence since I moved to London last year.

I've been waiting for that letter. It told me what I had to do. I began writing the following notes once I'd absorbed its contents.

One piece was written on the blank pages at the back of a paperback book I was reading. The note titled **THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS** I wrote on the back of sheets of paper delivered through my letterbox over the last week. Tai chi classes, home delivery pizza, Socialist Worker Party meetings, detritus and drivel.

Great historic movements often attract fellow travellers who are more militant in the execution of their duties than the true believers. I am such a nomad. I have put my past through the shredder. Then I've taken the shreds and thrown them into the furnace.

PNEUMATIC PAST

In my dream last night I was in the wild hilly desert to the south of Plage Blanche. I lay on the hot ground spread-eagled naked facing the sun, burning like meat on the griddle. My heart was beating fast, loud, and painful. The human heartbeat the most erotic of rhythms.

When I first came to town I stayed in a Paddington hotel which claimed in Loot to be the cheapest in London. Full of junkies, lumpen, buskers, and Africans. My mattress was piss-filthy, the scene of endless fuck sessions between Paddington whores and Paddington commuters. It was the cheapest hotel in London; abject luxury compared with the squashed lives of the rotting poor of Asia or Africa.

I am in my bedroom on the ninth floor, a simple place, on a hot and complex summer evening. I'm looking down from my window onto the back of

a flashy architectural statement, the headquarters of ITN, a satellite news company. ITN — the digital future — commands one side of the square my apartment surveys. The opposite side is dominated by the old Mount Pleasant Sorting Office. A huge Orwellian information transferral factory from a bygone age — the pneumatic past.

I'm always impressed by the worker-like qualities of the men and women from the Sorting Office. I see them take their midnight cigarette breaks on the footpaths outside their building. Union members; unglamorous anonymous people.

Clerkenwell is still principally a post-industrial museum full of deserted warehousing, cobbled streets, factories in the process of being converted into apartment blocks. Mount Pleasant used to be London's printing district; the photographic and publishing interests still maintain a watchful foothold. The founder of Italian nationalism, Mazzini, lived right around the corner from me, says a plaque over the door of what was once his home. This is still an Italian district of sorts with a well attended Catholic church on Clerkenwell Road. Leather Lane, teeming with young Islamic life, spills out onto Clerkenwell Road, into this presumptuous Christian world of ours. I guess I've grown used to this scheme of things here in this part of London. I get it. I am living in the digital future where ITN works to convert the world to its views. The headquarters of the Fraud Squad is right next door.

I'm facing into a lonely nighttime. I've swallowed too many poisonous emotions so my throat is dry and hostile. I'm listening to old music, thinking back to an old girlfriend from long ago in Paris who grew up to be an architect woman living right now out there in another part of London called Richmond divorced and older. I listen to CDs of songs we used to listen to together (on things called LPs) like Leonard Cohen, Lou Reed, and John Cale.

I'm thinking about that long ago girl because I saw her photograph today. It was taken before we met, when she was girlfriend to a guy in a Paris punk band, and he used her on the cover of their last album. I saw the album today in a second hand shop near the Ritzy Cinema in Brixton. I didn't buy it because I had to go into the Ritzy later and couldn't afford to have luggage on me. Once she filled my life with warmth.

FILTHY MONEY

My father Guillaume grew rich, though he started life down in the murky depths of the lower middle classes. When I was a boy I had thousands of books on the teak shelves installed for my pleasure in my huge bedroom in our huge home at the end of a long avenue within a walled garden.

Guillaume was the sort of man who laughed second, after he'd worked out what the joke was and that it was OK for him to laugh. In all matters he was cautious, wanted to see what the consensus was. Then he went with that consensus. Guillaume was a typically agreeable Paris doctor whose typically agreeable manner made him a rich Paris doctor. He grew so accustomed to shaking samples of people's piss around in test tubes that he developed total contempt for mankind. My mother Simone was a beautiful thin educated woman with thick black hair from a rich Jewish merchant family. (They say it comes down through the female line but in my case I blocked off that

descent.) We were a pathetic bunch except for my father: my older sister Elsa, my little brother Léon, my unhappy poor mother with her taste for gossip and good clothes, little me.

Next door to our happy family lived a notorious art forger-cum-narcoterrorist. Next door to him, before he returned to Iran, lived the Ayatollah. I would catch glimpses of his young bearded disciples, coming from or going to the four quarters of the world. I saw him many times in his garden, not quite the stooped elderly man he'd become by the time the media caught on to him.

The only thing Guillaume gave us was his money and the only thing we took from him was that filthy money. Simone drank gin, travelled regularly to New York, a city where she would cheerlessly buy clothes and perfume. Elsa drank from an early age and so did I. When Elsa was a teenager she grew promiscuous, hated herself, got fat.

Little brother Léon bought LPs each week and, when he turned eighteen, moved to New York, presumably grew up, never returned. I remember him as a tall buck-toothed innocent. Simone died of cancer before her fiftieth birthday. Guillaume died young enough too, falling from a horse while out riding. He made no will, such was his indifference (or his doctor's fear of death), so his children inherited his wealth equally. We sold the family home, adding the proceeds to a cash pool we split three ways. We headed our separate ways out into life but we keep in touch. Guillaume's money set us up in this world, no small advantage. Léon bought a small house in Greenwich Village and rents out the upstairs as an apartment. We speak on the phone every few months. I cannot visit him just now, while he has abandoned Europe. Elsa quit France, got unhappily married in England to an English monster, got divorced, zigzagged her thirties away between Paris, London, and New York, settled down into a middle age of matronly Parisian middle class comfort. I stay with her when I'm in Paris. I have a permanent room of my own in her apartment; she lives alone.

My life is a series of new arrangements of new bedrooms for new lovers — only those new lovers never materialize. Or if they do, the situation is so dangerous or compromised or downright unpleasant that it only makes things worse.

THE MUJEHIDEEN GRAVEYARD

One day twelve months ago I was near Plage Blanche, standing on a North African pier which jutted out into the Atlantic. I was facing the ocean, the elaborate walls of the medina behind me, the sacred Mujehideen graveyard to my right.

There to get my next instructions, I was in the company of three men, two of them elderly Imams, the third — a young man — my leader. The taller of the two Imams chided me in his urbane cosmopolitan French, learned in Marrakesh during his childhood.

It was a wonderful thing, he smiled as he spoke, that I was reading the Koran in French and finding it strong — even if I could not take it into my heart. It was a fine thing that I was willing to help his people in their struggle

but I would never understand the Holy Koran unless I learned Arabic and took a good Islamic wife.

Soon we were joined on the pier by courting couples and surly adolescents in bootleg Nike.

The shorter Imam said that, Inshallah, one day I would be a believer.

I agreed. Inshallah.

Conversation frittered away to a parched halt.

RECYCLE REWEAR

All my young life I indulged myself; now that I am walking away from youth I lead a monk-like existence. Nobody knows my name, nobody knows my face. My room has a bookshelf, a ghetto blaster, a mattress on the floor, two shoeboxes full of CDs without their boxes. The books come from charity shops and I dump them in the trash when I've finished reading them. This is my system now, this is my methodology.

I go to a Jewish recycled clothes warehouse in Brixton — their motto is Recycle Rewear — to buy used clothes bulk imported by the bale from America. Trainers, T-shirts, windbreakers. When I buy my new old stuff I throw my old old stuff away.

I have a storage unit in a self-storage warehouse in Croydon. I pay the bill yearly and get a yellow swipe card which allows me 24-hour access to the facility. I like to go at night while the security cameras remorselessly whirr and purr, observing me. The tannoy system is tuned to Capital Gold radio twenty four seven.

In the warehouse I keep my library of books, my clothes, a few pieces of furniture from the old family home, my white life. I own almost a hundred paintings which I've collected since I was twenty.

YSL IN THE CASBAH

One day I met Yves St. Laurent in Tangier's Grand Socco. He was looking for directions and I was the only other European in a sea of brown faces. The moment I opened my mouth to talk with him he knew I came from Paris so his relief was total. He should have known better. I was with my leader who, afterwards, wanted to know who this YSL was. I explained that he was a famous rich pervert and a leader of the American world business community. 'Ah! Very interesting,' said my leader, smirking, 'and you say he live here? I think he make a very big mistake.'

I told him that YSL was born in Algeria.

I could have mentioned Camus or The Battle of Algiers but my leader would have been unfamiliar with either manifestation, having more important things on his fine dry mind.

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS

I leave the Ritzy cinema in Brixton at five, having seen The Battle of Algiers for the fifth time, this black and white pseudo-documentary on the struggle of the Algerians to win freedom from the French. The angelic revolutionary woman takes off her Arab clothes, puts on high heels, a mini skirted two piece suit, cuts her hair Paris-style. She paints her face like a European slut, she

prays in Arabic that her mission will be successful. She is beautifully righteous in her voluptuous tight-fitting rough silk suit. She looks like her enemy, her fatal advantage. Her leader gives her the handbag containing a bomb on which the clock is already ticking. Passing invisibly through French checkpoints she carries the vulgar churning bomb into the chic French coffee shop where adolescent kids of French origin — who look much like me and my siblings did in 1978 — are bopping to the latest jazz sounds.

The freedom fighter Arab woman in silk stockings sits on a jazz barstool in the coffee shop. She calmly accepts the glances of the harmless young French boy on the adjacent stool. She puts her handbag down on the ground and slides it in under the counter with her black patent leather high heels. She smiles pleasantly at her uncircumcised would-be suitor, makes her excuses in educated French, leaves. Minutes later the bomb explodes, ripping French flesh from bone, tearing apart the innocent with the guilty, ringing the chimes of freedom. I arranged my Ritzy assignation with deliberate irony.

I sat alone throughout the movie. When the credits rolled at the end Tony came to sit alongside me. He gave me a Tesco bag before the lights come up. I called him Tony while he called me Jules although I assume that Tony is not his real name. I'd never met him before and I'll probably never see him again. They just told me that the name was Tony, that he was a twenty four year old six-footer with short-cropped black hair who would be wearing an old black leather bike jacket. They told me he would have this Tesco bag for me. I told them to tell him I'd be wearing a black Nike shellsuit and a brown DKNY hoodie. I left the cinema first with the Tesco bag held in my right hand.

The streets around the Ritzy are full of black preachers, crack addicts, families out shopping, schoolgirls. Black men to my left and black men to my right, friends or enemies, giving off lots of this and that. Many hostile to me because I look like their white enemy; this is my fatal advantage. I cross Brixton Road and wait for a northbound 2 bus. At about six fifteen, traffic being heavy, it delivers me to the east side of Victoria Station. I get off the bus and head inside the station's arched entrance, making towards the toilets. I'm looking good. I have on Adidas trainers, my Nike shellsuit, and this DKNY hoodie with an especially big hood. Under that hood I sport Nike Classic Heavy Washed cap. I still have the Tesco bag in my hand. I am young, fit, and white. I look like Everyman. Or Nike Boy.

Police crisscross the train station platforms in a deliberate grid, under severe pressure to stop the bombs from going off. Everything and everyone is monitored and observed. Cameras catch me while cops inspect me but nothing about me arouses suspicion. They're looking for swarthy unshaven individuals in shabby suits going about the place bug-eyed. They're nervous because of the bomb that went off in Brussels yesterday. They're nervous because of the European football hooligans currently descending on London.

There are seventy or eighty police parading like pouting macho adolescents in front of me. I walk right through them and their patrols like the Invisible Man. A thousand citizens are getting on with their Saturday evening business of going home or heading away from home. Soon the underground toilets are in sight, just beyond a cluster of phone booths where young European backpackers are making calls. I walk down a long flight of stairs into a

bathroom, ignoring the young dreadlocked white beggar boy sitting cross-legged at my feet on the lower level.

Homosexuals are busy caressing their genitals at urinals. Dazed commuters wander around like zombies though some are preoccupied with pissing. A continental student boy, stripped to the waist, is washing himself in front of a sink. He has the hot tap flowing permanently, the water getting really hot, hammam-like quantities of steam rising from his sink, fogging up his mirror. He washes his hairy armpits while the homosexuals ogle.

Everybody ignores me — I'm just another Nike asshole. I walk towards the rear of the washroom and try three cubicles before I find one unoccupied. No toilet paper so that's no good. The next one has paper but no lock. Third time lucky there's a fresh roll of paper and a lock in perfect working order. I lock myself in, sit on the toilet seat.

I don't take a piss though I am nervous and feel the need to piss. The first thing I take out of Tony's Tesco bag is a sealed pair of surgical gloves which I unpack and put on. Then I nervously take the small bomb out of its bag, hold it briefly in my gloved hands, stare at it, think about it, flick a red switch which activates a digital timer. Thirty minutes to blast-off.

The bomb is about the size of an old camcorder, a handmade shiny metal machine put together by an expert in a laboratory workshop. I put it carefully back inside its bag, let the bag down gently, and gently push it in behind the toilet bowl. Then I take a second Tesco bag from my hoodie pocket, throw in the surgical gloves, fill it with enough toilet roll to roughly approximate the bulk of the bomb, flush the toilet, leave the cubicle, wash and dry my hands. The continental student boy has finished his washing and is fully dressed now, combing his brown hair. I head back up towards ground level

There are police everywhere, seemingly more than when I arrived but that might just be my paranoia. I note an English mother and father running around frantically looking for their lost child. The brunette mother is fine looking and thin. She is the boss woman whose husband, a passive balding idiot in expensive Gant casuals, trails along behind her like English husbands do. The police, there to protect society from the savagery of such as me, pay attention to them. This is good.

The mother frantically screams 'Simon! Simon!'

She approaches me and asks if I've seen a little boy — about five — with red hair. Tears begin to form in her eyes so I can see she wears contact lens.

I don't want to talk, don't want anybody to hear my slight French accent, hope the cops don't notice us talking. I point firmly in the first direction I think of, the toilets I've just left.

'Over there,' I brusquely say, never slowing down, walking away methodically.

'Thank you! Thank you!' says Mother gratefully as she heads towards the toilets while I disappear into the safer distance.

I don't believe I'll go to Heaven when I die.

I get the 73 bus in Victoria's forecourt and that takes me to King's Cross in half an hour. While we travel I take off my hoodie and my cap, ramming them into the Tesco bag. I don't alight at King's Cross because by the time we get there all hell is breaking loose.

A girl sitting in front of me is on her mobile phone hearing that there's been a bomb at Victoria, another at Heathrow. Somebody says there were five killed at Victoria, just one at Heathrow. News travels fast. All the mainline stations are shut so it's just total chaos out there. I get off at the Pentonville Road stop, across from King's Cross Snooker Hall.

The backstreets to the south of King's Cross, tough, silent, free of security cameras, take me home. I make it a slow walk.

As I pass the Duke of Wellington pub alongside my building, National Front types are gathering to drink, talking loudly of 'fucking Pakis' and revenge. Three ugly children belonging to the pub owner mess around on a miserable concrete play space. A chubby working class woman in her late twenties with a huge knife scar across her left cheek talks to one of the pub children, a fat unpleasant boy I know to see.

'Don't you remember me, Toby?' she asks him, smiling, 'You have a rottweiler. I used to baby-sit for you when you was little.'

I unlock the front door of my building, whose surveillance cameras have seen me coming and going, week in, week out. Now they see me arriving home in the early Saturday evening with my weekend Tesco groceries. I summon the lift and go to the ninth floor.

Indoors I am at peace. I strip off immediately, throw the Tesco bag and every stitch of clothes I have on me into a black polythene rubbish bag. I cut off all my hair, shave my skull, get most of that hair into the bag. The rest I brush up from the floor and flush down the toilet.

I shower for half an hour, play a new Patti Smith album at volume nine on the ghetto blaster. Then I make a pot of tea. Stassen Ceylon Tea, packed by Stassen International in Sri Lanka. The packet promises, and delivers, 'tasstea cups'.

VOLUBILIS

My leader — who had a point to make — arranged to meet me amid the pillared ruins of Volubilis, a 2nd Century AD Roman city near Fes. One of the most far flung outposts of the Roman Empire, it was inhabited by Berbers, Greeks, Jews and Syrians, all of whom spoke Latin and practiced Christianity up until the coming of Islam.

My leader is a younger man than me, twenty-seven years old according to gossip. I am ten years older.

'Last time I came here there were no storks,' he said, pointing energetically at several different storks' nests, which perch on the summits of the surviving Corinthian columns of the Roman forum.

He is a tall sparse man with an occasional sense of humour. I don't know where he lives but he comes originally from Plage Blanche and was, at the time of that meeting, sheltering in a religious house in Fes.

'You come from a quiet clean place. Things is steady there,' he said kindly, 'so your people is afraid we'll replace their nice old world with our young one.'

Three bearded youths bearing small arms, binoculars, and walkie talkies, stood guard from atop The Arch of Caracalla, a triumphal arch which has surveyed the treeless green valley below for two thousand years, celebrating the power and glory of an eternal civilization.

I could have mentioned Ozymandias or Planet of the Apes to my leader, but he had more important things on his fine dry mind.

BRIDGES TO BABYLON

In the morning I head for Brighton. Trains go there all the time from King's Cross Thameslink. Everything I own in this apartment will be packed in a large cheap shoulder bag; the ghetto blaster, my CDs, charity shop books, Recycle Rewear clothes, the rubbish bag with my hair, rubber gloves, Heavy Washed cap, shellsuit and hoodie. On my way to the station I'll dump the lot a skip outside this building. When I reach Brighton I'll take a taxi to my home in Hove.

It's a hot complex summer night. I'm still naked from my shower and my skull feels weird and raw so freshly shaved. Now I am a baldhead athlete listening to Bridges to Babylon by the Rolling Stones. The music of my tribe was probably the last frantic gasp of an eternal civilization.

I'm looking out my window. I see a ghostly movement over there on the roof of the ITN building. I think it must be fatigue affecting my vision but then I see that movement again, like a big black cat, caught in the floodlight which illuminates the roof area.

I stand there naked, defenceless, staring a few more minutes, and then I see the fucking movement for the third time.

Down below on the street two African drunks are shouting good-natured abuse at one another.

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