Geoff Dyer: My Secret Life of Crime
There are three episodes in his life that Geoff Dyer prefers not to remember. He could have ended up in jail - but thankfully didn't. So did he just get lucky?

In my first year as an undergraduate at Oxford - this was 1977-78 - I lived on the ground floor of the Corpus Christi New Building, just across the road from the venerable old college itself. During Michaelmas term, at about two in the morning, I was woken up by a gang of people singing Bob Dylan's Rainy Day Women outside my window. They kept going up and down the narrow lane, singing "Everybody must get stoned." It went on for ages and eventually I got dressed and went out to confront them. As I did so I met my friend Paul, an American who lived along the corridor. We were both furious. Seeing each other like this meant our fury turned into bravado and made us more furiously brave. "Let's get those guys," he said.

On the way out of the new building we armed ourselves with empty milk bottles from the crate inside the gate. By the time we got outside into the lane the stoners were gone but we could still hear them, more faintly now. We followed the sound, crossed over to the college. From a first floor window we could hear them singing the same chorus, the same song. If we had been back in our rooms we would not have heard them and could have slept soundly but we were outside on the street, wide awake, furious and excited. Paul looked at me and said, "Shall we?"

Without another word we threw our four milk bottles through the window. The crash of glass was unbelievable. We tore back into the new building. As we separated, Paul shouted, "Night, Geoff!", as though we had just done something exciting and mischievous.

As soon as I got back to my room the awful gravity of what we had done came crashing in on me. Four bottles exploding through a window: what physical harm would this have done to a room full of people?

In the morning, after an almost entirely sleepless night, I went out to look at the scene of the crime. The glass had all been cleared up. The windows were unbroken. Miraculously all four bottles had shattered either against the walls or the metal diamonds framing the small windows. Not a single bottle had made it through. It was like a nightmare where you dream that you have done something terrible and then wake up, bathed in sweat, relieved to find that you have not done it in real life.

In the autumn of 1997 I went to Durham, North Carolina, to write about the photographer William Gedney, whose archive had ended up at Duke University. Durham itself is tiny, part of the Triangle Area that also comprises Raleigh and Chapel
Hill. In the course of my two-month stay I regularly drove 15 or 20 miles to go to a cinema in the suburbs of one of these affiliated towns. I say suburbs but, at night, it felt like driving in the open country, along deserted roads in complete darkness. I rarely drive in England so the problem of driving on the "wrong" side of the road never came up. Then, on my way back from seeing The Ice Storm, I did exactly that: drove up a totally dark lane on the wrong side of the road. I had no idea I was doing this until a car screamed towards me and, at the last moment, swerved past. There wasn't even time for the driver to sound the horn. The car swerved around me and was gone and I was unscathed.

Two years later I travelled to the Bahamas with my then girlfriend to write a piece for an American magazine. We had to change in Miami, entering the US before boarding the connecting flight to Nassau and taking a boat to Harbour Island.

After a few days on Harbour Island we started sniffing around, trying to buy grass. The Bahamas is not like Jamaica, where every few minutes someone is asking - to put it mildly - if you would like to buy sensei. There were quite a few dreadlocked young guys with whom we exchanged glances but we never quite approached anyone. Bahamians are big drinkers but Harbour Island didn't seem like a stoner scene and my policy in these matters is to be cautious to the point of paranoia.

We had been on the island three days. As I was putting on a pair of trousers - cargo pants, to use the correct sartorial term - I had not worn since the flight, I felt something bulky in my pocket: a large bag of skunk complete with pipe. Accidentally I had taken this through what is probably the most drug-alert airport in the world - Miami. There were sniffer dogs everywhere. I had walked though emigration in UK, sauntered through immigration in the US, strolled through US emigration, boarded a plane to Nassau, and entered the Bahamas. And nothing had happened.

This occurred during a phase when I was smoking a lot of the skunk that was in the process of gaining complete market domination in the UK. The immediate cause for my unwitting bit of smuggling was that on the Saturday night before flying out I had worn these trousers to a Return to the Source party.

My girlfriend was understandably furious. How could I have been so stupid, forgetful? Because I was smoking lots of skunk. It was doing to me what it is apparently doing to teenagers up and down the country: rotting the brain. Her anger was understandable and not entirely convincing. My forgetfulness meant that we now had exactly what we wanted: grass. We could get stoned. In fact we had to get stoned because I did not want to repeat, in reverse order, the process of smuggling, especially now that I would be doing so consciously (ie, conspicuously).
What would have been the consequences of each of these episodes turning out not as they did but as, in all probability, they should have done?

In the case of the Oxford incident, apart from the injuries I might have caused, I would almost certainly have been caught due to Paul's calling out my name. (In the morning the woman who cleaned my room said that whoever had thrown the bottles had run back in to New Building.) I would have been sent down, expelled. If there had been injuries, presumably some kind of criminal prosecution would have followed. So I would have been sent down and I would have been in more trouble with the police (I had actually gone up to Oxford on bail, for criminal damage, but that is another story). Now, students get sent down from Oxford all the time and go on to lead interesting lives. But if I had been sent down I would not have travelled abroad or done anything adventurous; I would have gone back to my home town and reapplied for the boring job in the Mercantile & General Reinsurance Company that I was doing during the nine months between school and university.

In North Carolina the consequences would have been straightforward. I would have been killed, paralysed, brain-damaged or injured. I might have killed, paralysed, brain damaged or injured the other driver. I would have wrecked two cars. If I had survived I would, presumably, have faced some kind of massive lawsuit.

If I had been caught with that big bag of grass in Miami then, most immediately, we would not have had our trip in the Bahamas. I would not have been able to complete my assignment for a prestigious American magazine and so would have forsaken my fee. All small beer compared with what would, surely, have been the eventual outcome: being jailed in the US.

None of these things happened. I didn't get sent down from Oxford, I didn't die in North Carolina, and I didn't go to jail in Florida. I completed my degree, as a result of which my life options expanded to the extent that I ended up becoming a writer who was invited to Durham and sent for a luxurious, all-expenses-paid trip with my girlfriend to the Bahamas. Life turned out extremely nicely, thank you.

When he was considering promoting one of his soldiers, Napoleon famously asked, "And does he have luck?" I have got into the habit of thinking of myself as an extremely unlucky person. I could compile a huge list of all the ways in which my luck has been bad. I mean, how many times has it started raining within minutes of my beginning a tennis match? But these three incidents are examples, obviously, of good luck. They are incidents that you would expect to have quite terrible, life-shattering or life-ending consequences. It's not just that I was given a second chance, I was given a
third and a fourth as well. If I were a cat, each of these incidents would have used up a life: three down, six to go.

As far as I can remember, these are the three luckiest things that have ever happened to me - more exactly, the three luckiest things that have not happened to me. Thinking of any of them now fills me retrospective dread. I have never done anything where the immediate and expected consequences could have been anything like as bad. I had a certain amount of random, unprotected heterosexual sex in the 1980s and 90s, but the chances of getting Aids was minimal compared with the chances of facing the consequences of these actions. Put it this way: given the limited extent of my sexual adventures I would have been extremely unlucky to have contracted HIV. These three incidents, on the other hand, would be the equivalent of having unprotected sex with a promiscuous homosexual IV drug-user - the kind of thing, I guess, that might well befall someone who ends up in prison in Miami.

I would estimate that it was about 99% certain that I would pay the price for my actions. But I didn't. I got away with all three of them, scot-free, without a scratch. Did I learn anything from them? I don't think I did. Or at least I didn't learn anything that I didn't already know: not to throw bottles through people's windows, not to drive on the wrong side of the road, not to carry smelly, illegal drugs into the US; in sum, not to be stupid.

So I ask myself the Dirty Harry question: do I feel lucky? "Well do ya, punk?" Not particularly, no.

And what about fate? Or destiny? Can one draw a larger conclusion? Only that most people reading this could put together their own list of three similar episodes. There are a few others who, even by cat standards, have been super-lucky, have not used up even one of their nine lives. And there are some who are not reading this precisely because they could not put a similar list together, because they did not have my kind of luck. Irrespective of whether these things had anything to do with my volition they have turned out to be my three enduring achievements.