

Synopsis:

# DAMIEN'S PARADISE

Photographic essay by  
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between March 14 and December 2014  
In the area of the Park de La Villette - Paris 19<sup>ème</sup>

I met Damien altogether by chance while exploring Paris, a city I didn't know. I was still a student at the SPEOS photojournalism school.

Damien, a smile, a few words, an exchange, and the door of his paradise was opened to me. He has been living there for the past fifteen years.

This place and its residents are known to the police, the municipality and the social services; the authorities just check from time to time that Damien is not lodging anyone he shouldn't be. They are tolerated by all, and especially by the management of the Park who has no use for this plot of land, which belongs to the Ministry of Culture.

Damien does social work! He lodges three other people, who he took in off the streets....Two of them feature in this essay, the third declined.

This tiny community has no social resources; "I ask nothing of anyone", says Damien, "and I owe nothing to anyone". Indeed, he had nothing at all, but he always manages to share.

Alcohol and violence are not strange to them, but happiness and solidarity aren't either. In front of them, I ask myself "where does their life force come from?"

They speak little of their past and even less of their future; they hold out no hope. All that remains is the present, which they are happy to share whenever they have the chance. Their existence seems to sum up to that moment, from day to day. Denial? Without a doubt. But their slow metamorphosis was imposed by loneliness. Resignation? No! They still manage to find the strength to go on and they fight for their dignity.

Their aspirations and their needs are no different from those of the majority of people: enough to eat, a decent dwelling and a little human kindness.

Damien, Jacqueline and Christian are tired now; worn out by this life, which, while not quite being paradise, is agreeable enough when the weather is good, but becomes very difficult in winter. A well-meaning neighbour persuaded Damien to fill out an application for help from the social services. While the idea appeals to him, he is nonetheless afraid of losing what is dear to him: his freedom and his pets.

I go to see them often and hope one day to photograph their move to a decent home.