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JAMES KELMAN

YOU HAVE TO
BE CAREFUL
IN THE LAND
OF THE FREE

'Kelman is simply incomparable'

INDEPENDENT

*You Have to be Careful
in the Land of the Free*

JAMES KELMAN



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1

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and I appreciate that.

for my family in USA,
those I know and those I don't know,
and also for my friends there

blue eyes
she said, pretty blue eyes
she said I had pretty blue eyes . . .

*(from 'Oooh Love', a song by Blaze Foley,
from the album Live at the Austin Outhouse)*

I had been living abroad for twelve years and I was gaun hame, maybe forever, maybe a month. Once there it would sort itself out. In the meantime I fancied seeing my fairmy again; my mother was still alive, and I had a sister and brother. The plane out of here was scheduled for one o'clock tomorrow afternoon. I was in a room at an Away Inn, out in the middle of nowhere, miles from the airport and miles from downtown, but it was cheap as fuck so there we are and there I was. The woman on reception gied me a look when I asked if there was a bar within crawling distance. Then she thought a moment and told me if I walked a mile or so there was a place. She had a twinkle in her eye at the idea of the mile or so walk. Then she said she never used the place herself but reckoned they might do some food

I hadnay asked about food in the first place so how come she threw that in? I think I know why. I just cannay put it into words. But it turned my slow move to the door into a bolt for freedom. I had the anorak zipped right to the top, pulled the cap down low on my heid. Outside a freezing wind was blowing. Ye were expecting tumbleweed to appear but when it did it would be in the form of a gigantic snowball. While I walked I wondered why I was walking and why outside. Why the hell could I no just have stayed in the room, strolled up and down the motel corridor if I felt energetic. Better still, I could have read a book. Or even allowed myself to watch some television. Who could grumble about that; I was entitled to relax. Yet still I left the place and walked a mile in subArctic

conditions. Mine was a compulsive, obsessive, addictive personality, the usual – plus I felt like a beer and the company of human beings; human beings, not tubes in a box or words on a page, and masturbation enters into that. In other words I was sick of myself and scunnered with my company, physically and mentally. And why was I gaun hame! I didnay even want to go hame. Yes I did.

No I didnay.

Yes I did.

No I didnay. No I fucking didnay. It was an obligation. Bonné Skallin man it can only be an obligation. The fairmly were there and one had to say hullo now and again. Posterity demands it of us. Once I am deid the descendants will be discussing departed ancestors: Who was that auld shite that lived in the States? Which one? Him that didnay come hame to visit his poor auld maw! Aw that bastard!

This is the obligation I am talking about.

Jesus christ.

But the reality was that my mother wasnay keeping too well. Let us put an end to the frivolity: if I wantit to see her again this seemed the time. I spoke to my brother on the phone. What an arsehole. Never mind, the point was taken, I had bought le billet with return scheduled a month from now and here I was. Yeh, the wind, and polar bears on the street. I like polar bears. And I like this part of the world. The auld ears, nevertheless, were being nipped at by icy spears. I settled into a catatonic march. Blocks of low-level factories and warehouses were on baith sides of the road, disused, some derelict. Maybe a cab would pass. I should have phoned one from the motel, I know that. But I didnay. Okay?

The wind whistled between buildings, rattling the roofs. Can the wind rattle the roofs? It did sound like that. This land was good land. But these capitalist fuckers and their

money-grabbing politico sidekicks had turned it into a horror. I had an urge to write down my thoughts but where was my notebook? In my room at the Inn. And so what if it had been with me, in this gale it would have blown away or else my fingers would have froze and fell off. I bought the notebook yesterday in a decent wee bookshop no too far from the bus station. It was a real surprise. But that can happen, ye enter a town in the middle of nowhere and discover some enthusiast has opened a bookshop. In this case a middle-aged couple who had grabbed their dough and skipped out of Denver or somewhere. So they opened a pure nirvana of a place. These folks were good folks. Although no doubt they were millionaires and the shop was a hobby. If their bookshop was in the vicinity and open I would have gone. I am convinced of that. But now it was evening and it surely would have been closed and how far away was I from the bus station? I had seen the day where I might have thought fuck it and tried to hitch a ride but buddy, no just now.

The cheery neon sign blinking a welcome to weary travelers had nothing whatsoever to do with my decision. I saw it ahead, its fissures of light streaming upwards to the moon. Jeremiah Brown, grunted the sign – for such was my name – rest ye here oh weary one.

Sure, I replied. Show me yer fine food, yer fine beer, yer wine, yer spirits; and what about an Isla malt at an affordable price?

Walk straight ahead oh venerable one oh wise one, the gravelly voice intoned.

I was either hallucinating or a god had collared me for his ayn.

The place was huge and empty, built for stagecoachloads of customers who never arrived. There was something about it, like it had been abstracted from a 1940s movie, made for

hotdogs and hamburgers and all kinds of similar fastfood sustenance. It was like it wasnay a bar at all it was really something else, a fucking what do you call it, a restaurant.

A restaurant! It wasnay a bar at all, it was a goddam restaurant. There was a little bar right enough, set into a corner in the style of a rock and roll obsessed backwoodsman's den, Jim Bridger goes electric. You entered the den you entered the bar. There were ossified wee creatures and paintings of such; toads, squirrels, foxes and beavers, mink, a huge bear, game birds and big fucking brown trout and carp; fishing rods and single barrel shotguns. Some interesting auld signs; one read PIKE'S PEAK OR BUST and another CALAMITY JANE'S ROCK N ROLL. Stuck alongside on the wall were 78 rpm records with sleeves, and LP and EP covers showing Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Fats Domino, Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, Franco Corelli and Eddie Cochrane. The bar was done in the image of a redwood tree trunk and the barstools looked like sawn-off portions of thinner trunks. Naybody here. I was about to vamoose but a guy had spotted me, poked his head out from behind a door and was across immediately. Yes sir how are you sir?

I'm fine, how's yerself in this here jungle?

Okay okay. He attempted a smile, it became a question.

I didnay bother explaining. Just a lite beer, I said, I dont care which brand, nor its state, nor yet its country of origin.

The guy attempted another smile. I rubbed my hands together. It's damn cauld tonight.

Yeh, gonna be snow later, maybe sooner.

Aye, it's in the air. Time for Santa Claus eh!

Yes sir.

That bottle of beer later I skedaddled. To leave a bar on one such item isnay exactly typical. Maybe I had turned over a new leaf. If so naybody had telt me. Naybody never tells me

fucking nothing but so that is okay. If they did one might prepare.

I was gauny call a fare-thee-well to the bartender but he was out of sight, no doubt blethering to a lassie in the kitchen, if he was lucky enough to have a lassie in the kitchen. I worked in bars much of the time and I never had nay lassie in nay kitchen. It was just the usual sentimental fucking shite man it came pouring out my brains. The reality is the guy in this bar was living a boring nightmare. What chance did he have? What life lay ahead? What fuck.

Right, on we go. And so did I, out the door. In the lobby I phoned a cab which is what I should have considered back in the Away Inn. Never mind. Ten minutes later I was in the backseat of an elderly Lincoln, just about my favourite jalopy, that yin with the unEuropean lines, which is what I liked about it, it was just so fucking unEuropean. Times have changed for the better when the taxis are elderly Lincolns. Yes sir. There was a large sign pinned to the rear window.

'S YORE RIGHT TO SMOKE IN HERE,
'S MA RIGHT TO SHOOT YA.

I must not smoke I must not smoke I must not smoke. The guy himself wasnay smoking although his side window was a quarter way open. He had a woollen hat on his napper and a thick scarf wound round his neck. All the heaters were blowing warm and his music playing softly, a solo clarinet. Yeh, it was snug. Where was his flask of coffee and the nip of brandy? At certain periods ye could envy taxi drivers. I called to him, It's a miserable cauld night outside but warm in here!

Yes, very cold, the snow is coming.

What time do you finish?

I saw his eyes in the rearview mirror, studying me. There was a chance he was a writer. I finish at four, he said, maybe five.

He was from Africa but from what part. You from Ghana originally?

Ghana . . .

Yer accent is familiar.

He nodded, but noncommittally; was I right or wrong, who could say. His nod was to my idea about the accent and how I had arrived at the "Ghana" deduction, no about whether the guess was accurate which was irrelevant. He kept his eyes on the road. To hell with it, I leaned forwards and called: Nowadays we do not ask people personal questions. But once upon a time that was okay, that was civilized behaviour. I would have tried my guess out on ye without a moment's consideration but nowadays that is asking for trouble and the likelihood is you think I am some nefarious undercover Security agent from the anti unPatriotic Front, masquerading as whatever, a down-at-heel Skatchman. I'm no, I'm just an ordinary guy, I'm just an immigrant. I shrugged.

I didnay say "an immigrant like you" or "unlike you I am an immigrant" or "I am not an immigrant, like yourself, or unlike yourself". Nayn of that stuff. I didnay say fucking nothing. Ah but conversations are fraught, deadly dangerous. Then too the poor guy, the driver, just out for his 12- or 14-hour shift trying to earn a dollar and he gets hit by me.

The chat was now at an end.

The feller no longer watched me in his mirror, only drove to the appropriate area, one with a choice of bars. Okay. And the district we were in now, it had that familiarity about it, like I had been through this way in the past. It was funny how ye got these sensations. I was gaunny mention it to the driver but

naw, I had blown it, and when I got out the cab he avoided looking at me. I hoped he had grasped that I wasnay a right-wing racist bastard and I wasnay an undercover member of some counter-insurgency agency whose specialty lay in perceiving the alien threat. I tipped him a typical sum and said, Have a good night.

There was a sign for the local community college and I saw a little river, and there were some no bad-looking bars, and farther on there was a leisure place, 10 pin bowling. Neat. As burgs go it was a small yin but here it had its ayn wee downtown area and all kinds of people should have been out walking, all kinds of people. Nayn of them was so walking, no tonight. It was just too cauld.

But at least there was nay snaw. I checked the first bar; busy enough and a young crowd; and the music, though dull and boring, was very loud and rhythmic. Could I cope, that was the question. There were a couple of beautiful girls; the boys with them seemed too young to buy a drink never mind act as escorts. I was inside the lobby and about to push open the door and saunter in but my arm locked and I was unable to fulfill the operation. But my legs were fine and they did a march on the spot while my upper body conducted a reverse manoeuvre. Next thing I know I am out the door thank god. When in doubt trust yer physicality.

Next along was a joint called the Shooters and Horses Sports Bar. This was the last place I should have gone, should ever have gone.

Thank you for the warning fates, now it was up to me.

In the bright interior I could see baseball on a few large screens, yep, Corey Parker. He was everywhere ye went. It was reaching the end of the season and everything had stopped to see if the new boy wonder could set an all-time record. I didnay think he could and would have taken

bets all day. I reckoned it was down to his name. If the feller had been christened some less macho moniker – e.g. Herbert Summerbottom III – he would have remained in obscurity. Mind you the auld timers were saying the guy was special.

Never trust an auld timer but, no when ye want to lay down yer dough. Ever met a rich auld timer? There are a few rich ones but you will never meet them. The ones ye meet for daily communion are either skint or else do not gie a fuck about the dollar, almighty or no.

But I wasna gaun to no fucking bar to sit and stare at the tube. There were five of them thar screens in this here joint, probably they even had one in the pisshouse. What a dive. But my feet led the way, I pushed open the door. It got worse. In this bar a man could hit the Oregon Trail without leaving his stool. Not only was Corey Parker a feature so too were the ladies, and a large poster screamed to lascivious boozers that come midnite adult entertainment was scheduled, sit back and relax: here come the Wicked Women from the Wild West. Then I saw the poster was dated 1872.

One feller was seated on a stool at the bar, he was doing a crossword puzzle. Six others were sitting below the main screens, their occasional comments no doubt concerning the league of all-time bat-swinging immortals. Fine, what is wrang with that? Nothing at all except I had to leave, leave, right at that moment man I couldna fucking stand it. Stay!

Go!

Stay!

Go!

Fuck. How come I aye insisted on tempting the fates? It isna as if I had never been warned. Once upon a time I wound up with a knife in the gut. Of course that was in fucking Glasgow, coming out a chip shop.

The bartender frowned. Had I paused by the exit just to

annoy him? How come I had done that? Or was I wondering what to drink? What else could it be? Surely I couldn't have paused there just to annoy him? Really? Yeh. Fuck him. Needless to say I returned, stepped to the bar and ordered a beer in blasé fashion, tethering my anorak to a nearby stool. The bartender nodded like what else. He was an aulder guy and I sensed he was a frustrated intellectual. No matter the deviant politics here was a feller that enjoyed whatever mentally stimulating data life tossed at him. I caught him examining me, gauging what I was, who I was, why the hell I had come to his bar. I resisted winking when he knew I had caught him in the act. Make that a lite beer, I said.

A lite beer?

Yeh.

You bet, he said. His brow had furrowed then frowned; now relaxed, now frowned again and yeh, I knew he was placing bets with himself: 8 to 5 this guy with the funny voice is a conman, evens he is on the run, 4s an unfrocked priest. But I warnt no christian never mind no catholic christian. And if he read my mind I would get accused of blasphemy and he would fill me full of holes and be awarded the congressional medal for services to the almighty while I would be buried at the crossroads, a lonesome coyote growling.

Now he nodded to himself. It was okay, it was just I was an unintegratit furnir, a member of the alienigenae, all was explained.

Why the fuck had I left the goddam motel room? why could I not have been satisfied with a relaxing night in front of el tele, instead of the baseball I could have bought into the porn and chastised myself mightily.

I should have known the evening would go wrang from the first pub I entered. This was the kind of town where the barstaff are aye depressed out their skulls, where the customers are