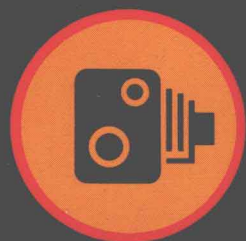




**JAMES**

**KELMAN**

How late it was, how late



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How Late it Was, How Late

Ye wake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear, the thoughts smothering ye; these thoughts; but ye want to remember and face up to things, just something keeps ye from doing it, why can ye no do it; the words filling yer head: then the other words; there's something wrong; there's something far far wrong; ye're no a good man, ye're just no a good man. Edging back into awareness, of where ye are: here, slumped in this corner, with these thoughts filling ye. And oh christ his back was sore; stiff, and the head pounding. He shivered and hunched up his shoulders, shut his eyes, rubbed into the corners with his fingertips; seeing all kinds of spots and lights. Where in the name of fuck...

He was here, he was leaning against auld rusty palings, with pointed spikes, some missing or broke off. And he looked again and saw it was a wee bed of grassy weeds, that was what he was sitting on. His feet were back in view. He studied them; he was wearing an auld pair of trainer shoes for fuck sake where had they come from he had never seen them afore man auld fucking trainer shoes. The laces were-nay even tied! Where was his leathers? A new pair of leathers man he got them a fortnight ago and now here they were fucking missing man know what I'm saying, somebody must have blagged them, miserable bastards, what chance ye got. And then left him with these. Some fucking deal.



Unless they thought he was dead; fair enough, ye could see that, some poor cunt scratching himself and thinking, Naybody's there, naybody's there; so why no just take them, the guy's dead, take them, better that than them just sitting there going to waste, disintegrating christ sake why no just take them. Fucking bastard he should have checked properly. Maybe he did; and saw he was nay dead after all so he just exchanged them, stuck on the trainer shoes.

Fuck it. He shook his head and glanced up the way: people – there was people there; eyes looking. These eyes looking. Terrible brightness and he had to shield his own cause of it, like they were godly figures and the light coming from them was godly or something but it must just have been the sun high behind them shining down over their shoulders. Maybe they were tourists, they might have been tourists; strangers to the city for some big fucking business event. And here they were courtesy of the town council promotions office, being guided round by some beautiful female publicity officer with the smart tailored suit and scarlet lips with this wee quiet smile, seeing him here, but obliged no to hide things; to take them everywhere in the line of duty, these gentlemen foreigners, so they could see it all, the lot, it was probably part of the deal otherwise they werenay gony invest their hardwon fortunes, that bottom line man sometimes it's necessary, if ye're a businessman, know what I'm talking about. So fair enough, ye play yer part and give them a smile, so they can tell ye know a life different to this yin where what ye are is all

where what ye are, that it's part of another type of whole, that they know well cause they've been telt about it by the promotional events' organisers. So municipal solidarity man know what I'm saying, the bold Sammy gets to his feet. Then he knelt to knot the laces on the trainers, kidding on he was nay shaking for fuck sake he was wearing his good trousers! There was stains down them. How come he was

wearing the good trousers man fucking bastard where the hell was his jeans! Ah fuck come on, get a grip. Up and walking, up and walking; showing here he wouldnay be stumbling, he wouldnay be toppling, he was fine, he was okay, he was doing it, the bold Sammy, he was doing it, he was on his way, he was fucking going places; and he moved on and around down the lane; and a guy here looking at him too! How come they were all fucking looking at him? This yin with his big beery face and these cunning wee eyes, then his auld belted raincoat, shabby as fuck; he was watching; no watching but fucking staring, staring right into Sammy christ maybe it was him stole the leathers. Fuck ye! Sammy gave him a look back then checked his pockets; he needed dough, a smoke, anything, anything at all man he needed some fucking thing instead of this, this staggering about, like some fucking down-and-out winey bastard. He caught sight of the tourists again. Only they werenay tourists, no this time anyway they were sodgers, fucking bastards, ye could smell it; even without the uniforms. A mile away. Sammy knew them, ye can aye tell, their eyes; if ye know these eyes then ye aye see them, these kind of eyes, they stay with ye. And he even fuck he thought he knew them personally from somewhere, who knows.

But he had decided. Right there and then. It was here he made the decision.

And he was smiling; the first time in days. Know what I'm saying, the first time in days, he was able to smile. Fuck them. Fuck them all. He settled the jacket back on his shoulders, tugging it down at the front, checked to see if he was wearing a tie – course he wasnay wearing a tie. He gave his elbows and the arse of his trousers a smack to get rid of any dirt, and felt a big damp patch where he had been sitting. Who cares. He was smiling again, then he wiped it off, and he followed behind them, hands in his trouser pockets, until they stopped for a wee reccy; and he got into them immedi-

ately; and ye could see they didnay like it; them in their civvy clobber man they didnay like it:

Heh mate I need a pound. I dont like asking. Sammy shrugged. Being honest, it's cause I was on the bevy last night; fuck knows what happened except I've done the dough. I had my wages too and they're gone, some bastard's fucking robbed me I think. Ye dont know who's walking the streets these days. Know what I'm talking about, nowadays, ye're no safe walking the streets.

But these sodjers man if ye're no a fucking millionaire or else talk with the right voice, they dont give a fuck.

The guy nearest Sammy looked a bit puzzled by this irritating behaviour; he squinted at his mate for a second opinion. So Sammy got in fast and controlled: Naw, he said, being honest, I had the wages and went straight into the boozer with a couple of mates; and one thing led to another; I woke up in the outer limits somewhere – ye need twenty-two buses to get back home, know what I mean, wild! That was the early hours this morning; all I had was the fare back into the city. And I need to get home, the wife, she'll be going fucking mental, she'll be cracking up. What day is it by the way?

They were playing for time, kidding on they werenay interested. But Sammy knew better and kept his eyes on them; he shifted his stance, relaxing his knees, getting himself ready. Naw, he said, I managed to tap half a quid already but I need another nicker, so that's how I'm asking for that, a pound, to get a train home, I mean fifty pee's nay good to nay cunt, know what I'm talking about, it's thirty bob or nothing.

Fuck off.

Naw but I'm telling ye

Ya fucking idiot... The one that spoke had his hand up covering his mouth like he was hiding the fact he was talking.

Ye alright mate? Ye got a sore tooth?

Move it.

Sammy just sniffed and stood there looking at him like he was totally fucking perplexed by this unexpected knockback. But he was ready, and he was letting them know he was ready and it was all he could do no to laugh I mean really it would get out of control in a minute he was gony get fucking hysterical or something. But there it was again: he felt good; he felt really fucking good. Comfortable. Tense as fuck, but comfortable at the same time. He smiled. Then sodjer number 1 gave a quick jerk of the head and that was that, fuck it man I'm gony hit you ya bastard if ye so much as

Move it ya fucking pest. This was sodjer number 2 talking; then his hand was on Sammy's right shoulder and Sammy let him have it, a beautiful left cross man he fucking onered him one, right on the side of the jaw, and his fucking hand, it felt like he'd broke it. And sodjer number 1 was grabbing at him but Sammy's foot was back and he let him have it hard on the leg and the guy squealed and dropped and Sammy was off and running cause one minute more and they would be back at him for christ sake these stupit fucking trainers man his poor auld toe it felt like it was fucking broke it was pinging yin yin poioioioiong

and he's running up the road and right across the main drag without looking at all man no bothering about traffic or fuck all just straight on eyes down for a full house on ye go man get to fuck get to fuck; and now he heard the chasing parties charging behind and shouting like they were right at his back, but Sammy was going like the auld clappers

till then he skidded on the pavement nearly falling and they were screaming Get the bastard! fucking get him! So angry! Fucking hell man! Sammy was laughing, laughing – though it might have sounded like a snivel but he was laughing, definitely laughing – so pleased with himself, so

fucking pleased! and then his legs went wobbly like a clown's or a rag doll like how they went away from him and he could have done the splits, and he skidded, and now a sound like a crack at the base of his spine, and he was on the ground, splayed out on the pavement.

And there were shoppers roundabout; women and weans, a couple of prams with the wee yins all big-eyed staring at him; then a sodjer was here and trying not to but it looked like it was too much of an effort and he couldnay stop himself, he stuck the boot right in, into Sammy's belly, then another.

Sammy couldnay get away; gulping for a breath, he couldnay get one; he tried to crawl, but he was tottering and he spotted the sodjer stepping back the way and wiping his mouth on his wrist; the other yin was here now as well; and they got him onto his feet, they huckled him into the first available close, an auld building next to a furniture show-room. He could feel them shaking, shaking, so fucking angry man they were just so fucking angry; there was only two of them, that was a thing, fucking hell man, Sammy was thinking, but he was fuckt, fuckt, he couldnay break loose, he fucking couldnay, they had him, they fucking had him man the two of them, one hand gripping the back of his neck and another on his left wrist and another yin twisting his right arm all the way up his fucking back and it was fucking pure agony like it was getting wrenched off man ye could feel it in the fucking socket and the side of the ribs; and then their breathing, big breaths in and out. Then they turned a corner into the back close. But ye're as well drawing a curtain here, nay point prolonging the agony.

After they straightened him out he was in a patrol car, the cuffs were nipping. It was black, things seemed black. It was usual, it was usual; that was what he was thinking, the words in his head, it was the usual. Then they had him into the poky and it was more of the same.

He was fucking dying when he woke up the first time. He didnay know where the fuck he was. He looked about, he was on a floor and it smelled of pish, it was in his nostrils, and his chin was soaking wet and all round the sides of his mouth and like snotters from his nose, fucking blood maybe, fucking hell man, fucking sore.

There was a screw watching. Ye could tell.

But the fucking ribs man and the back! Jesus christ; each breath was a nightmare.

He was lying on his side on the bunk. How had he got up? He had got himself up man how had he managed it! But he had managed it. There was a blanket, he got his hand on it and pulled, it wouldnay budge, it was tight in, it was under his body, fuck, under his body, he closed his eyes. Next time he woke the breathing was worse but it was the lungs, that was where it was hurting, no so much the ribs. He lay there a while, breathing wee bits at a time, no changing his position till the side of his head got sore and he turned onto his front. The screw again. Sammy thought he could see the eye in the gloom. Then it was daylight. He was staring at the ceiling, seeing pictures in the cracks in the paint. He wasnay feeling so hot. Before he had been good. Now he wasnay. There was things out his control. There was things in his control but there were other things out, they were out his control, he had put them out his control.

The cracks looked like a map. A foreign land. There was rivers and forests. Rivers and forests. What kind of a land could that be? A happy land, there is a happy land, there's a happy land.

Later he was up and making the steps to the wall, and back again, wondering what the hell day it was cause he was in deep shit with Helen; that would be it man she would pap him out the door for good. His gear would be out in the corridor. Once he got home, he would find it lying there, in a fucking heap. Auld Helen man what can ye do.

Jesus christ the poor auld back, it was killing him, the base of the spine. So were his legs, the tops of his thighs and behind the knees, but it was the ribs the ribs were really fucking

There was the screw again, the same eye; he must have been doing a double-shift. Sammy started fantasising: the guy was feeling sorry for him; it's me and you brother, we're comrades, I'm gony bring ye in a couple of pills, pain-killers, a mug of tea and a couple of fried eggs on toast, a plate of porridge; maybe a smoke fuck Sammy was gasping for a smoke and he dug into the trouser pockets but they were empty, fuck all, no even a betting slip. And he wore a chain round his neck and that was fucking gone as well and he couldnay mind if he had it when he woke up or did they nab it, or had he fucking pawned it man know what I'm saying he couldnay remember.

His trousers; he hadnay even noticed but they were about falling down every time he moved a leg; his good auld lone-star belt buckle, it was gone too, dirty bastards, how could he go to Texas now, that was the ID fuckt. The trainers were under the bunk; the laces werenay there to make it look official, which is alright, his feet were killing him anyway, who gives a fuck. Sammy dragged the t-shirt out the trousers to examine the body, letting the screw see he knew the score, like he was making notes for future reference, once he stuck in the auld compensation claim I mean ye cannay go about knocking fuck out of cunts and expect them no to submit their claim through the proper channels, no if ye're an official servant of the state I mean that's out of order, banging a citizen.

They were bad but, the bruises. He left the t-shirt out the trousers and turned to the door; the screw was still there: Heh can I make a phone call? Eh!

Christ his voice was croaking. Never mind. He sucked

saliva from the roof of his mouth and gulped it down, then he shouted: Heh, what about a phone call?

The eye blinked a couple of times.

I need to make a call! I need to let the wife know where I am!

The screw spoke. Did you say something about rules? Eh? Did you say something about rules there?

Me, naw.

Aw fine... See a lot of people dont know about the rules. So they ask me about them. You know them but eh! Fine.

Then the eye vanished. A clever bastard. Sammy sat back down on the bunk. He was bursting for a piss. Dehydrated but bursting for a piss. Fucking life. He got off the bunk and knelt at the pail, opened the trousers; but he was trembling like fuck and the pee missed the pail and hit the floor and he jerked back, just managing to stop his prick getting caught in the fly else he would have pished down the inside leg christ man the shaking he was doing, and the piss streamed out, he imagined the sodjers watching the VTR, notebooks in hand: 'peed the floor'. He would have wiped it up anyhow I mean if he was gony be here he didnay want to stumble around in stocking soles, no on a puddle of piss for christ sake he hadnay reached that fucking stage. There was a roll of toilet paper. When he finished he grabbed a handful and wiped the floor dry. He crawled onto the bunk, just about conking out before dragging himself up as far as the pillow. Next time he woke it was black night again, and sore christ he was really really sore; aches all ower. The whole of the body. And then his fucking eyes as well, there was something wrong with them, like if it had still been daylight and he was reading a book he would have had double-vision or something, his mind going back to a time he was reading all kinds of things, weird things, black magic stuff and crazy religious experiences and the writing started to get thick, each letter just filled out till there was nay space between it



and the next yin: no doubt just coincidental but at the time man he was fucking strung out with other sort of stuff so he took it extremely personal, extremely personal man ye know what I'm talking about. Then his head was so itchy. The bed was probably bogging, that auld fucking blanket, what a smell christ, unclean! unclean! If he could have got a hair-wash; that was what he was wanting. But it was his eyes, that was the main fucking problem like he had gone blind but the black had stopped him appreciating the fact. But it felt like morning. He tried some manoeuvres. But naw, he couldnay see a thing. Nothing. Fuck all. He did some more manoeuvres. Still nothing. But at the back of his brain he had this funny sort of recollection, like what was happening was something he had known for a while, he just hadnay registered the fact, as if it was some kind of bad dream running side-by-side with his life. He tried more manoeuvres, his hand up to his face. Both hands. Moving them around. Then he scratched his cheek. Just at the bone beneath where his right eye should have been, then closing the eye and putting his finger on the lid, then opening it and closing it and for fuck sake man nothing, he couldnay see nothing. He studied roundabout, looking for chinks of light, to where the screw would be watching, the flash of the eye maybe; but nothing. He reached his hand ower the bunk and felt about the floor and found something, a shoe; he lifted it to in front of his face. He fucking smelled it man it was fucking ponging, but he couldnay see it; whose fucking shoes were they they werenay fucking his, that was a certainty. He was definitely blind but. Fucking weird. Wild. It didnay feel like a nightmare either, that's the funny thing. Even psychologically. In fact it felt okay, an initial wee flurry of excitement but no what ye would call panic-stations. Like it was just a new predicament. Christ it was even making him smile, shaking his head at the very idea, imagining himself telling people; making Helen laugh; she would be