



Tricky Times Ahead Pal

BY JAMES KELMAN

For Pat Whitelaw



WHEN I presented myself at the Emergency section of the Social Security Office I knew things could go wrong but I was not expecting a leg amputated. But that was the situation. I would have expected an alternative but there was none. This was clear to anybody who knows anything about anything. Not just about the British welfare system, nor indeed state-run hospitals. Nor legs for that matter, at the risk of sounding facetious. This is what they gave me to understand.

Neither was it a situation facing me. They made that clear. It was a situation in itself. It would have faced anybody who was human. If you were not human then no, obviously. Most entities who walked were human but there are other possible worlds and I would never discount them, nor intelligences within.

Furthermore, it was my own negligence concerning the cause, secondly the effect; thirdly the relation between the two. This required not only a basic grasp of atomic theory but the results thereon of the faculty of common sense and that relation. But what does that mean, that last statement, its apparent meaninglessness.

At that time I did not grasp the significance of my bodily functioning and the changes then taking place. A logic was in operation. At least I grasped that, and my culpability. I was not one to fool myself. I simply had not realised what was happening. Had it been some

other body I would have, especially that of an acquaintance. One's perception alters when it is you yourself.

Before the amputation they once again advised me of its necessity. I had a sudden horror flash about those poor creatures who have a fetish about amputation; left to their own devices they would have every limb on their body chopped asunder. Let them be under no illusions! Only if it is absolutely essential, I said.

Beyond all shadow of a doubt, commented someone in regard to the medical findings.

I thought it in bad taste. The comment may have occurred while I was under anaesthetic. I accepted its truth eventually. It depressed the very air in my body. A mist descended behind my eyes, entering my mind, seeping its way into what remained of my brains. This was after the operation. I was removed to the Homeless Recovery Unit which was located in the very bowels of the earth. To the embarrassment of the staff responsible for administering the anaesthetics I clung onto my dreams. One concerned the possibility of one-legged midfielders playing in a World Cup. Would I ever play football again!



How embarrassing. Can we even describe such nonsense as thought? I had not played a game for ten years so who was I kidding.

But can a man not dream?

No, not in this manner. I was referred to Counselling. It then transpired that in the darker recesses of my inner being and prior to the amputation I assumed I might still play for my country. Certainly in international matches. This though I had never played professional football at any time, not having progressed beyond the lower divisions of the outermost community leagues. Our womenfolk paid money that we men might play. In those far off days I was a family man and expected such money to be skimmed off the housekeeping.

Down in the Recovery Unit I lost and found consciousness, a veil ascending; a human shape by the foot of the bed was passing through and I called: Is it true that one-legged midfield players will not be selected for national honours?

Once I had recovered enough to crawl about, a couple of welfare orderlies assisted me upwards, and a belated return to the Emergency section. The Homeless Physiotherapy Unit lay three corridors distant. I spent a while here. Sad to relate, as will have become apparent, I had nowhere to hop, one's long-term relationship having failed four years and three months previously. I could pinpoint the time to the day. There is nought surprising about that, rather the



reverse, as clever rhetoricians would argue.

I do not know what legs might have to do with that. I do not care about legs, about my legs. Not then, not now. Never. I do not care.

Lump it.

I had given up alcohol prior to this low point in my life which, according to Form 12/7bd, was Week 3 Post-op. It seemed longer but that was normal, due partly to the medication. I was fit enough to deal with the paperwork. If not the Reception Clerk was there to help. The condition I was in helped matters but not sufficiently, I still had to deal with it. The Reception Clerk was pleasant and humane. At first I enjoyed her femininity. I have to say that. I want to be clear and honest. These are significant matters, empirical matters.

She helped me fill in the forms then faxed copies to Human Resources for corroboration. At this juncture our relationship soured. I asked why everything must go through Human Resources? I said: Surely if we are dealing with Social Security then Human Resources does not enter the equation. Let us posit analogies; one thinks of the Social Security department of Great Britain as the political arm of a fascist state; does one therefore consider the Human Resources section of said department as the Gestapo?

Contrary to what the Reception Clerk believed I was not taking this at or on a personal level. I did not feel in anyway compromised. But I was angry and confessed that I was. I had

been divested of a damn leg, I said, in circumstances that are less than transparent.

Oh but that is how it is, she said. She smiled a smile that progressed beyond the merely polite. Affairs are more difficult for us.

I frowned, for this was a surprising gesture of solidarity. The woman gazed sideways. I thought Human Resources had become a euphemism, I said.

Fortunately she pretended not to have heard and called over a young chap. She asked him to visit the local Oxfam shop on my behalf. I sat on a bench to wait. He soon returned with a pair of trousers. The woman produced scissors, snipped off one leg and passed me the needle and thread with which one might sew up the loose end.

The cost of the purchase was deducted from next week's allowance. I borrowed the key to the toilet, leaving a £5 deposit for its safe return. I hopped along to try on the breeks. Inside a cubicle I held them up for inspection. Obviously the young chap had treated my future with impunity. These breeks must have been far too large, far too large, this leg was like – fuck sake man it was like a fucking pillow case. But better that than the other way, too small or something, tight and just

I pulled it on. Oh my Jesus Christ almighty it was the left leg the woman had snipped off. Oh man I was toppling, flapped my hands at the wall, steadied myself.

Why had she not allowed me to do it myself! Obviously it was

the right leg that required the amputation. She had watched me approach her damn desk. So now I had to wear the trousers back to front.

The pain was excruciating; I was biting my lip, brow pressed against my wrist, propped against the wall, eyes closed. Its intensity subsided, passed. I reached round to close up the top of the garment which was now round at my arse but it was too difficult. There was a mirror but it was too high up the wall and of no assistance unless if I sat up on the washhand basin. If I did my rear-end would be hidden. I would be unable to reach round myself given I was thin. I used to be thickset. I still – could – not – reach – round. I could not. So aggravating, just damn bloody aggravating. I twisted and turned. I bit into my lower lip again and made further stabs at it. Try as I might I just could not fasten the garment.

Fortunate was I that the pain ceased. By now the good leg was numb. I call it the good leg, of course it was the only one. I hopped back out, clinging onto the waistband of the trousers, hopping to the rear of the queue.

I was thinking of one good leg and one bad leg, the good being the whole and the bad being the stump. This was a defence mechanism of the emotions.

When I reached the Emergency desk it was to find another receptionist on duty. A woman of about 36 years of age. She had that maturity, allied to youth, allied to blouse; women wear such blouses, I



heard of a fellow whose nose dropped down a cleavage. She looked at me. I explained that which had transpired. She was attentive, noted all the details which she emailed immediately to Human Resources. She keyed in additional data and that was that, my presence, its necessity.

Along the way to the exit an old guy was guarding a space by a radiator. He wore an eye-patch and had a bandage wrapped round his head; a twisted bandage, it must have been uncomfortable. Judging by the lack of a bump on the left side of his head he was missing an ear. That may have explained why his posture was so curious. He was somehow not even standing, not what you would call standing. He rocked on the very rearmost edge of his heels though he seemed asleep. But he was not asleep. He was heating his hands.

He looked at me, noting the problem I had with the back-to-front one-legged garment. How would he have described me? The one-legged bloke with the back to front trouser(s).

Behind us was the queue of people at Emergency reception. The old guy seemed to be wondering what explanation existed for my present state. There was none, it was just the way of the world. He hesitated, adjusted the bandage about



his head. When I passed him by he called after me: Heh pall!

Yeh? I hopped a step sideways to look behind.

Will I zip up yer trousers at the back?

That would be good, I said, thanks, thanks a lot.

Saves a wee bit of embarrassment, he added.

Definitely. I balanced myself against the wall. When the zip was applied I could relax, and I did relax, just that little bit; that little bit was not only necessary it was enough. I flexed my wrist muscles.

Okay? said the old guy.

Yeh.

But when I went to put my hands in my pockets it was so very awkward, very very awkward, just about damn impossible.

What's up? he said.

Aw nothing. Just life, always something.

Dont I know it!

Thanks anyway.

Take it easy pal. Tricky times ahead.

You're right, I said.

He was, he was spot on. The

experience of age. Suddenly I remembered the £5 deposit on the key to the toilet but I had left the damn thing in the door-lock. It would have vanished by now. There was a cafe I knew where £5 bought you a cup of tea and a baked potato. The same £5 got you two cups of tea and a sandwich. That was what ye got for yer £5. Not bad really, although it was not so much a cafe as a snackbar, located at a supermarket entrance. This entrance was also the exit and folks like me, well, anyway, I did go along on occasion. The Security man was always a snag. If he was there individuals had to dodge through.

That was the supermarket this was the Social Security. It too had an exit and I was interested to see it. In the old days I named it 'the escape hatch'. My heart leapt when I spied it. In future times, whenever I returned here, and was obliged to leave, I would view it differently. But I should have told the old guy about the £5 deposit, he could have taken a chance on the key, but no he wouldnt, he wouldnt, an old fellow like that; to some he was a hero.

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MOST of my stories begin from nothing, no ideas or anything like that. It is time to be writing and I sit down and do it.

It can happen sometime that I go for it, the wilder the better. This story is like that. It took a bit of working through, resolving and so on. Once I had finished with it

thought: Yes, contemporary Scotland, this is it. Like many people in this country, even into my 60s, I still dream of emigration.

James Kelman