

JAMES KELMAN

*justice for one*

They were marching already when I fought my way to the meeting point up the hill. Now there were voices all around, and of every kind. I was blundering about not understanding what I was to do. How did they know and I did not?

Somebody tried to sell me something or give me something I was unsure which. Somebody else asked me a question. I was not sure about that either. I could not decipher what they wanted to know or even understand what they said. Was it even myself they were talking to? I heard someone saying: Shit he's drunk out his skull.

Me? I was not drunk, not drunk out my skull. Shit man I was not drunk at all. What the hell were they on about? I asked them but they paid no attention. They had made up their mind.

This is what people do, especially in this part of the world. A woman said, We're going this way.

What way? I said but the woman had gone, whoever she was.

A typical life experience. Woman go away: it could be the title of a Spanish movie. Probably it is already.

On all sides folk were walking past. They moved quickly. Some were coming so close I felt a draught from their body, going to bang into me. Somebody said, The army are there and they are waiting for us.

I shouted, I beg your pardon!

Take your hand off my arm, cried a man.

Sorry mate, it is so damn dark and all that smelling smelly shit; what is that smell? said another man, somebody with a hoarse voice. He had quite a kindly voice, and he added, Better get out of here . . . And then he grasped my wrist.

Hey, I said, dont do that. Whereabouts are they anyway?  
Down the hill.  
Are there many?  
I dont know friend, somebody said there were hundreds.  
For God sake!  
I know. And coming in our direction! Then the hoarse man smiled.  
He actually smiled.

Did you say our direction? I said.

He only smiled at me. He was no longer holding my wrist, and I had that sense he was about to vanish from in front of my eyes. I wanted to keep him here, just like hold him back, not let him escape, he was escaping. How come I couldnt escape but he can! That was me, that is what I was thinking. Jesus, our direction, how come?

Instead of answering he glanced at another marcher, another woman; this one had a band wrapped round her forehead and some hair falling over its sides; her cheeks were smudged and the blood was there. He jerked his thumb in my direction, shaking his head in a gesture to her, about me, as if I was somebody to avoid. But I was only wanting to know why they were marching from that direction. I shouted: How come? Surely that's the question.

What do you mean? muttered the woman. I dont like the way you are saying that.

But if they're marching from that direction! I said. Then I stopped and shrugged. She did not care.

I could see another couple of people looking at me; they too were suspicious. I shook my head at them, as if I was just seeing them for the first time.

It was dreadful. But what could I do except walk on. This is what I did, yes, I kept walking. Of course I did. So that was it. Much was explained, even to predictability. One of the folk watching stopped directly in front of me. Another woman. There were many women, yet I could not pass her without making a nonsensical comment. I stopped walking to do it. The earth is good. I said it into myself though perhaps my lips moved. I wondered about myself. It was a surprise I had any self-respect at all. I asked the woman what was wrong, if something was wrong and she replied. You will not get far.

Sure I will.

Not the way we're going. She put her hands onto my wrists and tugged me forwards.

What the hell are you doing? I said.

She smiled. My attention was attracted to her shoulders. It was not a time for physical attraction. Her shoulders were beautiful. At the point where the machine gun opens up on you, on you, your attention is drawn to the curve of a woman, a woman's shoulders. My God, almost I was crying.

Saddened by something. I saw it in her. This was a thought she had had, and in connection with myself. But not sex, it could never have been sex, to have been with me, lying with me, it could never have been that. Shit man. No. Never. She was pointing in the same direction the crowd had marched. Okay. That is the way ahead, she said, that is a proper march.

Yes but that is also how the crowd is advancing. Do you wish me to follow the crowd. Is that an elitist thing to say?

She was gazing at me.

Do you think it is?

She thought I was mad. You do, I said, I can see you do. It is a terribly elitist thing to say.

Now she avoided eye-contact. Just keep walking straight, she said, and stay to the rear.

I shall miss the action.

Is that not what you want? The difference is you will not go wrong.

Oh.

Yes.

So that is the difference?

Yes.

I said, But how do you know what I want?

But I looked at her shoulders when I said it, and I did that so she would notice. It was almost disgusting. I think it was disgusting.

She shook her head. Perhaps she was ashamed of me.

I smiled. You think you know me but you dont. You dont even know when I am being sarcastic.

She turned her back to me, and resumed walking. I managed not to

go after her, nor to call after her. There are times for being funny, this was not one of them. I saw a man spit on the road. It was in regard to me! He was spitting against me!

Shit. What had I done to deserve that. Talking to the woman with the beautiful shoulders. Perhaps he thought it demeaning, that it demeaned us all. He also walked away. Then the chanting began:

Justice for one justice for all.

I looked for the woman but she too had gone.

So many people, they just started chanting, and these slogans. There was nothing wrong with these slogans. I tried to say the words aloud and succeeded. I was pleased. I said the words again. I was laughing, just how I could say them, just as good as anyone.

We all were marching. Armed forces march and so do people. We marched over the brow of the hill. I knew the terrain.

I listened to the slogans and knew them as fair. These were good words, except the way I said them they sounded different, they sounded as though different, as if in some way singular, they became words to actually decipher, as opposed to a slogan, the sort that one marches to. I tried to pick up that latter rhythm, the way everyone else had it. Justice for one justice for all. Great rhythms, great slogans but could I do it? Or was I only emulating the passion of these other people? As a boy I missed the beat – I always missed the beat. Now here it was again, half a line behind, I was half a line behind, behind everyone else.

Justice for one justice for all. Nothing wrong in that. I walked briskly on, one foot in front of the other. A peculiar sensation overtook me. I could no longer see things clearly. People and objects blurred, was that a building or was it a jumbo aircraft? Where the hell was I was this a city street or was it a country lane? Was that a herd of animals or what, what was it? Over now some yards distant somebody was – her, it was her again, it was that woman, one of the women, it was one of the women, which one was she? She was watching me. Hey! I waved to her but she ignored the wave; she was still watching me, and then not.

Beyond here were things. And what things! Things that were guaranteed to scare me. Some folk were heroes. This woman was one of them. Obviously she was. And the man who seemed her companion. I saw him too. Both were heroes. It could not be denied. Their actions were heroic.

Mine were not. The very idea! I smiled. Beyond the current conglomeration I could not perceive one entity, not one single entity, not one, not that.

It was where they were walking, it was down a hill, it is where they were going. And everybody shouting different things, slogans and laughter, somebody, trying to start a new chant, people were. And now the army were into view. Everybody knew it, there was a shiver now and some folk threw down cigarettes and trampled them and others again opened their packets and got out another and snatched at them with their lighters.

If it was for men was it for women! I asked the first person next to me, a middle-aged woman in her forties or maybe fifties.

I beg your pardon?

Is it for men, or is it meant to be women as well? I'm not keen on women being here.

I don't know what you are talking about.

But what does it all mean? I said, I never ever work it out, I was never able to.

What did you say? The woman seemed irritated.

Don't take it too seriously, I said.

A couple of younger fellows rushed past now, arms laden with stones. That meant the army right enough, there would be a pitched battle. That was how it went. History showed us this. It did not require demonstration upon demonstration and does not entail actual changes in how we live our life. I had to go with them, I shouted and ran ahead.