

DAVID HERD

from The Hut

[Start] *My name is Stephen Kemp. I have led a double life.*

There, I said it. I have practiced a deception. My name is Stephen Kemp; I have led a double life.

Does saying it make a difference?

Well, actually, as I say it I suspect it might, though in part that will depend on what you do with the information. Put it this way, there is all the difference in the world between thinking the words and saying them. That much I know already. Now there won't be any turning back.

But nor must there be any misunderstanding.

My name is Stephen Anthony Kemp.

I am thirty-three years old.

I have led a double life. [Stop]

[Start] Good. A beginning. And actually it wasn't so difficult. Once you say your name, that is. My name is Stephen Anthony Kemp. Not that everything's in the name. It's just that the name *is* crucial. Naming names, that *is* the thing.

As for me, as for Stephen Anthony, I would just like to point out that the 'Anthony' comes down through my father's family, which if you trace back a few generations lived on the island of Ireland. Not thirty miles from Dublin, where one fine day – actually it might not have been fine, but it was, I'm told, the summer—not two months after his eighteenth birthday, Great Uncle Anthony Kemp upped and left and joined the circus. Whether it was more than a whim, more than a spur of the moment, nobody ever found out, because one night the circus was in town, and the next day it was gone, and Great Uncle Anthony, having glimpsed the future no doubt, a future of work and procreation, and quickly weighed the odds, was gone with them. Just like that. That's how it was. And nobody ever saw him again, though sometimes the family would get news, of Anthony Kemp celebrated acrobat and

sometime clown. Travelers would bring back tumbling stories from America and Europe. It has occurred to me recently it might be him I take after.

As for 'Stephen', that comes from nowhere. The way my parents told it they just plucked it out of a hat. I don't think they actually had a hat, just a finely tuned ear for what might pass as the norm. Suffice to say there were three other Stephens in my class, which meant there was no danger of any of us ever standing out. Even when my teachers defaulted to Kemp, what was understood was a stand-in for Stephen.

Call me Kemp, I once said, to an exasperated teacher when four hands shot up at once. She nodded wryly, I remember, if somewhat dismissively, as though to suggest this was all too common a problem. The more so because all of us were 'ph', four sets of parents having alighted all but simultaneously not only on the same name but on the same, if I might say so, variant. It was many years before I identified a Stephen it was possible to admire.

And as for Kemp, I had always presumed it was a nothing word, until one day a woman with whom I was having a brief affair – the woman was a textile designer; we understood at the time that our involvement was temporary – until one day, one afternoon to be precise, she told me that a 'kemp' was a particularly coarse fibre in wool, originating in a word meaning whisker, or beard. I think when she said it she meant it as a criticism. Though we met up a few times subsequently things were coming to a natural end. She was a few years older than I was, which meant she knew how to change the tone. Not that her being older didn't have its compensations. She had just caught the end of the sixties. I was born in 1973. Which means I don't remember punk, but I do remember the nineteen-eighties. I once saw the Redskins in Clissold Park. They were awesome, totally on the money. I pushed myself right to the front. As for the woman, there have been times recently when I have thought of her as prophetic.[Stop]

[Start] Not that I listen to the Redskins any more. That's another point on which there must be no confusion. And not—it is very important to be clear about this also—that I am any longer operating a double life. Not since I took the decision to simplify things, my existence chiefly. It was a good decision, things have been a great deal calmer since.

These days I just watch, as other people live out theirs. And I don't know if it's because, over the years, I have developed a special instinct, or maybe it's that I have a particular investment, only when I look out I see it in people's eyes, some aspect – how shall we say it? – of their *conduct* they would prefer not to disclose. Some error. Some deviation. Some corner of their personality they'd

like to call their own. Call it the residue. Call it the remainder. Call it, if you like, MY SPACE. Whatever. As I look out I identify it all the time.

And sometimes I think they know I've found it. More than once I've sensed a person look the other way. And often it's people you'd least imagine, people who on the face of it have been happy for many years. People saying one thing and thinking another, smiling and as they smile withholding information—dissemblers, fantasists, serial wishful thinkers. I hear it underneath their breath, between the declarations of concern and the polite exchanges, the mumble of 'if only', the algebra of need. I marvel sometimes at the scale of the feat, at the extraordinary poses people are able to sustain, and I wonder if actually, in every sense, Great Uncle Anthony didn't have it right. Sometimes I'll catch a person's eye, and in the look that passes between us there'll be an understanding. They'll appreciate that I've understood, and I'll know that they know. And they'll look at me for a moment, and silently nod, acknowledge the truth that operates between us, and I'll know, at such a moment, that there's barely any difference between them and me.

Except for the decision. The difference is I made a decision. The people I watch from my hut are the other side of the brink. They're flirting with it perhaps, enjoying the occasional skirmish; some of them, some of the more innocent-looking ones, might even have gone quite deep. Because that's what I learned above all; I learned that for innocence read complicity, I learned that for sweet-natured nonchalance read crucifying guilt.

As for me, I went in deep, Kennedy saw to that, and I've often wondered since if anybody could have known. Anybody, that is, who wasn't in as deep as I was. Anybody who hadn't met George, or their George equivalent. Let's call that equivalent, for the sake of argument, 'G'. If 'G', let's say, then 'Z'. My guess is that nobody did notice, or put it this way, if they did they couldn't say. And to my sure knowledge I looked as innocent as the day is long. That's why I say I got in deep—I saw a turning point and I took a decision, and I swear if you'd seen me in the street you'd never have noticed the water washing in around my head. I can't even say for certain when I noticed it myself. Or even that when I did, I understood it was too late. Maybe the truth is you never realise how late it is, how far you've got. Out far, in deep. Didn't a person say that once somewhere? Even now, in the evenings sometimes, or before the world is quite awake, I can catch myself wondering if I couldn't work my back.
[Stop]

[Start] Not that I want to be thought complaining. Complaint, *now*, wouldn't be the tone at all. And not that the surroundings aren't all they might be. Over

time, I confess, I have even found myself growing to like the hut. I like it, for instance, that the lounge area is so convenient to the stove. I have found that this cuts down on energy loss. Which in turn allows me to cut back on consumption. I haven't weighed myself recently but the other day I caught sight of myself in a shop window.

The sit-ups, I was pleased to notice, were visibly paying off. And I appreciate, of course, that there are some shop windows designed to flatter. Even so, as I looked myself up and down, I felt certain I was back under 150lbs. Which is a good weight for me, for a man of my size, not tall, certainly, but robustly built. It's a fighting weight, a weight for running, a weight to be more than pleased with.

I was pleased with the beard also, so much so that as I caught myself in the window for a moment I caught myself unawares. Which is a strange sensation, catching yourself as yourself. Not that I was unpleasantly surprised. For some time the beard had been a source of mild embarrassment to me, all patchy and adolescent, so that after a few weeks of unhappy scrutiny I decided it was best just not to look. One evening I threw my mirror out with the food scraps, and in the absence of any other reflective surfaces quickly lost sight of the finer details of my appearance. And it's not that I'm suddenly Karl Marx or anything. Nor even, if I'm honest, that I'm up there with Matthew Kelly. It's just that the other day, when I caught myself watching on, caught myself inadvertently in the act of being myself, I saw a man reflected in the window whose beard had become integral to his face.

[But does Matthew Kelly date me? It does seem so important that everything should now be clear. Tall man, *Stars in their Eyes, Game for a Laugh*. There were three others, they sat on stools. Everybody watched it. They caught ordinary people on camera. Really, you had to laugh!]

The beard I was pleased with for all kinds of reasons, and in this I can't discount vanity. I have never discounted vanity. I was a very vain young man. And even now in my thirty-fourth year, living alone and with little to play for, I find something secretly pleasing in the darkness of my look.

But vanity is not security, which is not to say that—as I speak—I suspect the authorities of having twigged. I have grown to wonder in fact, these past few weeks, whether *twigging* is not absolutely their forte. Only the other day one of them passed by the hut. I had the door open and was sitting looking out, so that when he looked in I had little choice but to make a gesture. 'Lovely day,' I said, because in fact it was. 'Perfect,' he said, lifting his arm towards the sea. And for a moment I didn't wonder if this wasn't possibly a skilful double bluff. But then as I peered at him from the gloom it was clear that, actually, he was

simply feeling happy. It was September after all, and the sea had chosen to cast itself as liquid glass. Plovers swept for insects undecided between water and air. The word was 'crystal', and I nearly said it to him – but there seemed no reason to elaborate the exchange. The sweep of his arm was enough to catch the mood. And maybe he *was* bluffing but actually I suspect not. Though I'm on the network, I'm not on the system. I'm convinced that, as yet, there isn't any trace. Even so I reserve bouts of activity for mornings and evenings, and depending on the weather, two or three times a week I manage a run along the beach. [Stop]

[Start] The hut I bought on an impulse. I found it in the back pages of a local paper, although when I say *found* that suggests I was on the hunt. I was browsing the small ads for trade, because it's there that people set out what they're really after, and as I scanned down the various appeals I came across a small, pleasingly inconspicuous notice. 'Beach hut, 50 miles from London.' There was a number but no name. I dialed and a man's voice answered. 'I'm calling,' I said, 'about the hut.' He asked me where I lived. Even at that time I preferred not to be specific, so he suggested we meet in a pub somewhere near the centre of town. We quickly identified a place we both knew and he told me he'd be at the bar drinking a double shot. It was the middle of the day so the pub was almost empty. He had a beard, and he wore an expression I came later to think of as my own. He said he wanted cash because he didn't like handling cheques. I said that was fine, but was it his idea that I'd hand over the money before I'd seen the place? Because if that it was his way of doing business we could shake hands right now and say farewell.

He wasn't best pleased by this and muttered something about a society that had lost all sense of trust. At which I pointed out to him that, as he could perhaps tell, I wasn't born yesterday. So we agreed to meet at the hut on – as it turned out – a ferociously wet and windy October afternoon. He was late and when he arrived said that we had to be quick because he was in a hurry. I said 'Whatever', indicating that I was less than fully impressed. He explained that for water he used a stand-pipe by the municipal toilets, which he pointed out were closed to the public from 8 til 8, and that for *eventualities* he had always kept a bucket. I said it wasn't my expectation that such an arrangement would be necessary. He smiled and asked me how often I intended to use the place. I said I wasn't sure yet, but I imagined only for the occasional short break. He told me with a smile that I found intensely irritating that I should get myself some warm clothes because, in his experience, it got bitter in winter.

The stove, he explained, was wired up to the mains, and that as far as he was aware nobody had noticed, and since the stove had only the one ring it would register, if at all, as nothing more than the smallest leak. Anyway the hut had no address, so there was nowhere to send a bill. This, he reckoned, was sufficiently confounding. His advice was to par-boil vegetables, and if I ever noticed anybody poking around just to keep my appliances quiet. The stove and its stand apart, all the hut contained by way of furniture was a fold-down bed which he said he'd throw in for an extra twenty, and though the mattress looked shot to pieces there seemed no reason to haggle. And then he headed off without counting the cash.

'Don't you want to check it,' I shouted after him.

There was no need he shouted back, he knew where – if he had to – he could find me. What he didn't say, because he didn't have to, was that he was the man who had wired the place up. There was an understanding in this that underwrote our agreement; that made my word rather more than my bond. The money, we both understood, was in lieu of an unfortunate and little publicised accident. 'Unidentified man with beard in beach-hut blaze.' [Stop]

[Start] After I'd bought the hut I sort of forgot about it, though for no reason that I ever articulated to myself at the time, I also didn't mention it to anybody else. Which is odd, perhaps, because these were early days and I was in awe of my own agility. High on it if I'm honest, once I'd broached the first difficult act of deceit, the first lie about my whereabouts, the first shimmy around my silence. ('I'm so sorry, it was switched off. And anyway, what is this, the third degree?') After that my existence was a daily challenge, a test of skill and dexterity only I knew I was taking. Does it date me also to mention 'The Krypton Factor'? Whatever. Soon enough my lying took on a certain panache, more a devastating demonstration of competence than a matter of what, quaintly, somebody else might have called the truth. Anyway, wasn't that the whole point; that the truth, as Kennedy told us, was elsewhere.

But whether it is or whether it's not, the point about lying is that it comes with its own adrenalin spike, so that for months on end I was convinced of my own brilliance. As day after day events turned to my advantage what I witnessed was the unfolding of my design, a design so perfect nobody else could appreciate it as such, that was the true beauty of the situation. And also, if I'm honest, a minor regret.

I had become director of my own affairs. I say 'director' because just now I'm feeling polite. The word I have in my mind is 'god'. Didn't god send his own son down to earth. And didn't he do that for the publicity, because he had to

let people know just how fucking good he really was? Isn't that why all great criminals eventually make mistakes? That's how good I was, and with each day that passed off successfully I felt myself becoming just that little bit more immune. Except that even then, even at my moments of greatest conviction, it's clear to me now my confidence must have been thinly laced with doubt. At some level I must have sensed there would be a crash. This was the difference, perhaps, between Kennedy and me – or maybe, as now I half suspect, even Kennedy had a bolt hole. The beauty of mine was that I barely knew I had it. If I was ever questioned even I could hardly have picked up the trail, a trail that began and ended fifty miles from London, with a man I couldn't identify and an exchange of cash. Which was okay because I dealt mostly in cash anyway, and because the man I was handing it to had nothing on me. From every point of view I had made no provision for myself. What I see now is that the hut was always part of the plan.

For weeks at a time I would hardly give it any thought, and then every so often it would come to mind: if a job fell through, or if I finished one early – if, for some reason, I couldn't get hold of George. And then if the sun was shining, and if I hadn't been out of London for a while, it would some times seem worthwhile making the trip down the motorway, and then because I was taking the trouble anyway there seemed no reason not to bring along a stick or two of furniture. Nothing fancy, and nothing that anybody would miss, nothing that hadn't already made its inevitable journey from the house to the garage. A spare chair, not that I ever envisaged any visitors, an old glass coffee table on which I might one day toss a few books, a deck chair in case of evenings on the veranda, a blue and red, twin-set of buckets and spades. A radio cassette player circa 1986 with a fuzzy black speaker unit, and heavily sprung, push-button controls, so that every time you wanted to start it or stop it you had to jam your finger hard down in to the unit's mechanism. A small, somewhat temperamental, analogue television. The television, it seems, rather likes being by the sea; something about the air, maybe, makes the signal particularly strong. For a while I kept up with the news, but then gradually, as the story moved on, there seemed hardly any point. Just lately I've developed an addiction to Reality TV.

The buckets and spades I'd find hard to rationalize. I bought them on a whim also. Suffice it to say that so far they've never come out of the net.

Then one day I got it into my head that what the hut really needed was decoration. I brought down an IKEA rug, and a print of The Fighting Temeraire. Later on I brought a reading lamp, a one- person kettle, so that while it was hardly a home from home, at least I'd done better than the last guy. The way he had the hut it was nothing more than a shell. At least the way I had it there was evidence of dwelling, which I liked to tell myself was a proof

against squatters. Not that I'd ever noticed anybody squatting a hut. But I figured also signs of habitation might serve to dissuade vandals, on the theory that what vandalism likes is what has been vandalized already. Maybe it's a fear of reprisal. Or maybe the truly degraded just know their place.

Anyway, nobody's ever touched the hut so far, though they've showed one or two neighbouring properties some attention. Ritual torching is not an uncommon event. And then one long, summer afternoon, the sun warm on my city skin, I finally gave the whole place a much-needed lick of paint. [Stop]

[Start] And so here I am. My name is Stephen Anthony Kemp. It's late now, and the oyster-catchers are calling from the shore. They aren't calling to me, they are calling to each other, quizzical and clear above the television. And the weird thing is, the really disorientating thing, is that as I say my name I realise I have no idea how it must sound. Whether as I speak the words they have a place already, a meaning in the public mind, one of those names people recognize though they can't quite remember why. Until somebody makes the connection and the whole story falls into place. 'Oh my god, yes, it was shortly after _____. He disappeared didn't he, I remember the appeal.' Or maybe my name isn't made yet, maybe it's meaning isn't already fixed; maybe as I speak I'm burning the words onto the hard-drive for the first time, to be always recoverable, no matter how many times you hit delete. Like the email you just can't bring yourself not to send, even though you know, you absolutely know, that there is no possibility of it ever being wiped, because the connotation is just too sweet, just too creamy: 'We should be in contact more often.' Best wishes, Stephen, and then, a 'x', and then maybe an other 'x' for good measure. And then 'send'. *Send*. That's the trace.

For a while I thought I might disappear without trace. I thought I might lay low for a while and then move on, and then move on again, always keeping just a step ahead. And then it dawned on me that actually that was just more trace: every pseudonymous registration, every forged signature. So instead I decided to cultivate a taste for seaweed, and the subtle mannerisms of the seaside climate. And if I get bored I listen to a tape, and if I think my head is going to burst I re-arrange the hut.

This I find deeply satisfying, even though the permutations are strictly limited. I like the pleasure, after a morning's maneuverings, of a new point of view. The only tape I can listen to now is Eric Satie, which didn't even belong to me in the first place. I remember, one night after a party, it was lying there on the floor. What anybody was doing bringing Satie to a party I don't understand. Though I do remember Kennedy saying, in rare moment of

confession, that when he relaxed it was to early twentieth-century piano music. Then, as now, I suspected him of pretence.

I grabbed a bag of tapes the day I left. I saw them as I pulled out of the garage. It wasn't a moment for aesthetic considerations. I had already decided against a note. I thought maybe a message for the children, 'Daddy loves you', something along those lines, but in the heat of the moment I decided that the less drama the better. Even minimal fuss, I considered, might attract unnecessary suspicion.

I packed nothing; I wanted there to be no sign of having prepared. I figured I would drive somewhere and then catch a train. If I first drove north that would probably be distraction enough, and as I pulled out of the garage I noticed the bag of tapes. They were almost all of them home-recordings, and most of them dated to the late-eighties and the early nineties. For some time after I arrived I took some pleasure in trying to identify the tracks. I made play lists and filled in the empty cardboard sleeves. Momentarily it was like being a teenager again, like Sunday evenings with Annie Nightingale, except that as it turns out there are only so many times you can listen to Aztec Camera. Or even Billy Bragg for whose radical ebullience I used to have a soft spot. Eric Satie, I find, goes with moving furniture about, with setting everything down, putting everything in its proper place. I like his exactness, the way with him everything seems constantly like it might tip into one big joke. Or like it was one big joke already, and all he's up to is sorting the different elements out. He cracks me up. Sometimes I catch myself breaking into a chuckle. There is no doubt in my mind that Satie led a double life. What are the 'Gymnopédies' if not little lies? Tricksy departures from an unbearable truth?

I play them quietly. I remain keen to go unnoticed, though if you hang about for long enough eventually somebody will register your face. That's why I wear a hat. I moved the furniture about yesterday.

The bloke was right of course—it gets fucking cold. [Stop]
