



ANOTHER PLACE

Another Place

Peter Kendell

BY THE TIME MELANIE ROBERTS CHECKED IN TO THE NORTH Midlands Airport DriveInn it was a quarter to ten in the evening. She was exhausted, so it was more of a relief than a disappointment to find that her arrival was registered by a computer rather than a human being. It made no real difference – either would have followed the same robotic script – but she could work out her frustration on a machine in ways that would be socially unacceptable if directed at a person. She was in a foul temper after a bad planning meeting and the stop-start journey from the office to the hotel had not improved her mood.

‘Thank you, bellend,’ she said to the machine’s display as it returned her credit card and disgorged a magnetic key to Room 406. ‘And if you’ve put me next to the lift shaft, I’ll be back, I promise.’ She stuffed the key and the credit card into her purse, picked up her overnight bag and crossed the purple-carpeted lobby floor to the elevators. Unseen and unheard, the check-in system wished her a good tonight and a great tomorrow.

Despite her irritation, Melanie had taken a certain pride in managing her interaction with the register quickly and

efficiently. There had been no queue of weary hotel guests building up behind her, no impatient muttering at her time-wasting female ineptitude. Get it done, get it right, don't mess about. That was the way she went about her business.

The key carried the slogan *Sweet Dreams, Miles of Smiles™* embossed on the back in corporate script. It slipped easily into the door lock, a LED glowed green and the latch clicked. Melanie pushed the door open and lugged her bag after herself into Room 406. The light turned on automatically, revealing a standard-grade room decorated in the same mauve-and-green colour scheme as downstairs. Someone had once told her that the reason chain hotels were so garishly tasteless was to prevent the guests from being tempted to make off with the contents of the bedrooms. Those that weren't screwed down, at any rate.

Melanie dropped her bag on the bed and considered her options. Should she take a shower, go to bed, and let the TV lull her to sleep, or just leave her stuff and go down to the bar? She was feeling so tired and a nightcap might help relieve the accumulated stresses of the day. A double cognac would be just the thing and she could probably slip it through her expenses without anyone noticing, not even that suspicious cow Harriet Smyth in Accounts. On the other hand, she needed to check through her PowerPoint for tomorrow's Amsterdam meeting and you met some pretty obnoxious characters in late-night hotel bars. That decided her. She had had quite enough bad experiences with off-the-leash middle-aged sales managers.

The shower was hot and sufficiently forceful to sluice away

the grime of the day. Melanie dried herself off with the room's sole bath-towel (Only one towel? In a double room? That would be going on the feedback form), pulled on cotton pyjamas, got into bed and fired up her laptop. Just one last run through her presentation and a final check on the next quarter's forecast. Oh, and set the alarm on her phone. That was her checklist before turning in. Fail to prepare, prepare to fail. Get it done, get it right, don't mess about.

Sleep came easily. Tomorrow would be a busy day, but Melanie thrived on busy days, and she no longer allowed the prospect of hard work and tough negotiations to disturb her rest. She had done her preparation, she was ready, she knew what she was doing.

Melanie woke in broad daylight and immediately realised that something had gone badly wrong. It should still be dark. She should have been up hours ago. She checked her watch. Nine-thirty. Her flight was due to leave at half-past ten. How could she have forgotten to set her alarm? Oh shit, shit, shit!

She had one hour to make her flight. It was barely, just barely, possible. She had once caught a plane within fifteen minutes of reaching the airport. Her boarding card was ready-printed in her bag. If there was no security alert, if the airport wasn't clogged with clueless holidaymakers and their screaming brats, if the departure gate wasn't somewhere out in the boondocks, she could still do it. Melanie threw on last night's clothes, grabbed her bag and crashed out of the door. No time to wait for the lift – she flung herself down the stairs and into the lobby. Fifty minutes left. Still possible, but probably not if she had to find somewhere to park at the

airport. She'd have to take a cab. There was a phone in the lobby. She lifted the receiver and tried to dial the taxi firm whose number was prominently displayed above it. No answer. She rattled the phone. No dial tone.

'Fuck!' Melanie dropped the receiver on the floor. She'd have to chance the airport car park after all. It could still be done. The taxi would probably have been late arriving anyway. No good calling them on her mobile. She ran out of the door and hared across the car park to her car. Knowing her luck today she'd have dropped her keys somewhere or left the lights on. A flat battery would really sink her. But no, the doors unlocked and the lights flashed and the engine started. At last something was working right.

Forty-five minutes to go. Melanie smoked the tyres out of her parking space, narrowly missing a Mondeo on one side and a Vectra on the other. She floored it down the narrow road to the exit. There was a barrier. 'Open!' she shouted. She wound down her window and pressed the button under the speaker grille. 'Could you open the barrier please?'

No answer. Melanie thumped the grille. Still nothing. Then she saw it. There was a notice: INSERT TOKEN TO EXIT, and beneath it: TOKENS AVAILABLE AT RECEPTION.

Damn. That had probably finished her. Forty-two minutes to departure. But the plane might be late leaving. They might hold it for her. She couldn't quit now. Melanie backed up to the hotel entrance and dashed into the lobby. Just like last night there were no staff on reception. Would there be a supply of tokens, on a plate, perhaps, or in a jar? No. Nothing.

At this point Melanie came close to giving up. But... there was a bell push on the desk, so she leaned on it. And waited.

And leaned on it again. And felt the panic that had been surging through her begin to subside as her hopes of catching her plane receded and she started to think about alternatives. She needed a Plan B. Should she give up, return to the office and phone into the meeting? Or do it from the hotel, so nobody back at base would know how badly she'd fouled up? Or take a later flight and try to reschedule the rest of the day? After all, most of the real work on these foreign jaunts was done in the bar afterwards. The rest was mere box-ticking. But boxes were still important, and they still needed to be ticked.

Thirty-seven minutes left, and at last someone answered the bell. A man wearing a DriveInn uniform appeared through a door behind the desk. 'Good morning,' he said. 'How may I help you today?'

'Car park token,' Melanie said. 'I need a token. Could you give me a token please?'

'Token, token,' said the man. 'Oh, yes. Just a moment. They're round the back. With you in a minute.' He disappeared through the door.

Five minutes later, at thirty-two minutes to take-off, he returned. 'Sorry to keep you,' he said. 'I thought we'd run out, but I've had a bit of luck and found you one in the back of a drawer. Here.' He held out an aluminium disc. Melanie took it.

'Thank you,' she called over her shoulder.

Her car had been blocked in by a wheelie bin, but after some frantic manoeuvring she extricated herself and drove back to the barrier. She inserted the token and the machine swallowed it with a solid clunk. The barrier rose. At last; now if the traffic wasn't too bad... Melanie let out the clutch and pressed her foot on the gas.

The car stalled. It did that sometimes. No panic. Just depress the clutch and turn the key. The starter motor spun, but the engine didn't fire. Try again. Whirr-whirr-whirr. Again. Whirr-whirr-whirr. And at last the motor caught. Melanie revved it hard to stop it stalling again.

And the barrier lowered. It had timed out to prevent tailgaters slipping out behind bona-fide guests and stealing free parking from the hotel.

The man was still behind the desk when Melanie returned. 'I'm sorry,' she said, not feeling at all apologetic, 'but I need another token. The barrier lowered before I could get out.'

'That's odd. People don't usually have problems with the barrier.'

'I stalled it, OK?'

'I see. Just a minute, I'll try to find another one for you.' He disappeared again.

Another five minutes later, with twenty-five minutes left until departure time, he came back with a shake of his head. 'Sorry,' he said, 'but we're all out of tokens. Tell you what, though, I've got a code that'll open the barrier for you. I can't give it to you, but if you take me out there I'll sort it.'

'Oh, thank you,' said Melanie. Could this state of affairs get any more humiliating if it tried? She must look ridiculous – face flustered, hair everywhere, ruffled clothes, no make-up – to this little DriveInn employee in his green and purple uniform, his white shirt and his chrome tie pin. They went out to her car.

'Lexus, isn't it? My brother's got one of these,' said the man. 'Diesel. Very economical to run. Goes well, too.'

When they reached the barrier, the man got out and tapped

From *The Boy*

a long list of numbers into a keypad. The barrier rose. 'There you go then.' He gave her the thumbs-up. 'Have a great today!'

The car lurched forward and stalled. The barrier fell and landed on the bonnet with a metallic thump.

'Never mind,' said the man. 'I expect it'll polish out.' He leaned in at the driver's side window. 'There's your problem,' he said, pointing to the dials. 'You're out of petrol. See?'

Yes, she was out of petrol.

'Do you have any petrol I could buy?'

'Sorry, madam. We're a hotel, not a garage.'

*This is an extract of 'Another Place' from the short story collection
The Boy by Peter Kendell.*

Visit [Chalk Path Books](http://www.chalkpathbooks.com) for more information.

Text © 2013 Peter Kendell
Art © 2013 Christopher Cavill
Published by Chalk Path Books