

PORT MEADOW (1960/1961). Oil on tea tray.

Only recently identified as an early Kelly thanks to a document the new owner found among their late father's papers, this brooding study of cows on Oxford's Port Meadow in weather so bad the landscape has all but drowned, dates from Kelly's unhappy year in the city. Largely self-taught, she attended lectures and life classes at the Ashmolean when she could but was so poor she was often reduced, as here, to painting on any found object with a sufficiently large flat surface. *Port Meadow* shows unmistakable signs of having been used as a tea tray again after the painting was finished.

(From the collection of Miss Niobe Shepherd)

It was Antony's favourite time for taking refuge, just before dusk on a dirty February afternoon. There were no tourists, not even parties of schoolchildren. He was free to wander from room to gloomy room, studying the cases of treasures unobserved and dreamy-minded. He should have been in the Bodleian poring over the old newspapers he had ordered up to his desk that morning but his brain was itchy.

It was the first year of his study for an MPhil and he was hardly daring to admit to himself that his choice of the novels of Smollett on the thin basis of having enjoyed *Humphry Clinker* more than anyone else he knew was a mistake. Since committing to the topic he had dutifully read all or most of Smollett's other works, to find to his dismay that *Humphry Clinker* was the only one that appealed to him and even that book was fast losing its attraction under too close an inspection. He was begin-

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

ning to feel like a fraud and wondering how long it would be before his supervisor saw through him.

Security was lax in the museum at that time of day unless a school party was coming round. The few guards who patrolled the galleries seemed loath to return to their posts after the mid-afternoon tea break and would find excuses to loiter in the lobby, chatting to the woman who sold postcards, so he was surprised to find he was no longer alone.

She was tall and thin, almost gaunt. Her short, dark brown hair was swept behind her ears and tucked under a beret. She wore black slacks and black slippers like ballet shoes and a huge mackintosh surely meant for a man. She reminded him of a feminine actress trying to pass herself off as a boy: Katharine Hepburn in *Sylvia Scarlett*. She was perhaps his age, perhaps a little older; he had little experience of women and was a poor judge of age.

She was examining a case of porcelain, one of those whose contents had the irregular even haphazard look of a collection willed to the museum by a well-heeled supporter on condition it be left unedited.

As he watched, she slid open the glass door of the case, seemingly with no thought for who might be watching, took out a small, blue and white bowl and its label then shut the door again. She didn't stuff the bowl in her pocket or bag but merely walked with it to the window to look at it more closely. Perhaps she was a member of staff but her mac made that unlikely.

He could not believe one could commit a crime with such graceful nonchalance. As he drew closer she made no attempt

PATRICK GALE

to hide the bowl away but merely met his gaze for an incurious moment before returning to her contemplation.

‘You really . . .’ he began then stopped to clear his throat because his voice had come out wrong. She was looking at him now, her boyishness revealed as a wafer-thin disguise. ‘You can’t simply take things out of the display cases,’ he said.

‘Oh but I just did,’ she told him. Her voice was harsh, at odds with her appearance, her accent American or Canadian, dry, oddly theatrical. ‘I had to see this in a better light; those cases are so gloomy. Look. What if . . . ? How did they do that colour? Is that truly blue, do you think, or a kind of green? It’s both really. Maybe they did the colour in layers. And the background’s not really white but a kind of grey-blue.’

He was sweating. Someone might come in at any moment. He glanced around them. There was laughter from the postcard counter downstairs and a flurry of steps and voices as people arrived for an art-history lecture.

‘It’s Ming,’ he said. He came here so often he almost knew some parts of the collection by heart. She glanced quickly at the label and tossed it on the floor.

‘Oh I don’t care about that,’ she said. ‘It’s the colour I’m interested in. But even this light’s hopeless! How can we live with all this cloud and drizzle? We should all head south, the whole lot of us. I’ll just have to look at it at home with the Anglepoise.’

She stuffed the bowl in her pocket and strode away towards the stairs and the voices.

He hurried after her. ‘You can’t,’ he said. ‘Please. I . . . Don’t you see I’d have to tell someone?’

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

‘Why?’ She stopped and looked at him inquisitively.
‘What’s it to do with you?’

‘Because I saw. If I didn’t say anything I’d be an accessory.’

‘The case was left unlocked. Nobody saw,’ she said.
‘It’s really not that important.’

‘Please,’ he said.

‘Oh really,’ she snorted. ‘You put it back, then. I’ve got a lecture to go to,’ and she pushed the bowl into his hands so abruptly he almost dropped it.

He started to protest but she was stalking downstairs, her slippered feet as quiet on the marble as any cat burglar’s. Frightened to find himself standing on the landing openly clutching a stolen artefact, he hurried back to the gallery they had left and replaced the bowl in what he guessed to be its correct place. Too late he remembered to retrieve its label from the floor and was forced to pocket rather than replace it by the return of one of the absentee guards.

Shaken to the brink of anger, he fled downstairs and, seeing her near the front of it, joined the queue that was filling in for a lecture. As an undergraduate he had swiftly become frustrated at the artificial unconnectedness of the various faculties. As a dare to himself he infiltrated a few lectures on subjects officially alien to his own yet obscurely connected to it, on law, on zoology, on ancient history, and once he discovered that the faculties were so mixed, with students from so many different colleges that he was just another stranger among strangers and was never challenged, the dare became a habit.

This was the first of a series of lectures of Vasari’s *Lives*

PATRICK GALE

and the Renaissance but it might have been on double-column accounting for all the attention he paid the speaker. He was focused entirely on her. She sat in the very middle of the front row, taking careful notes yet seeming barely to glance at what her hand was writing. It could not have been the lecturer who held her attention so – he was at least forty and had a forbidding manner and an etiolated, bony elegance. So perhaps she lived for the Renaissance. He had squeezed into a place in the row behind her but she paid him no heed even when he pointedly coughed and he would have bravely given up on her as a skinny swot who stole things had she not turned to look at him, after they had all stood while the lecturer swept from the room, smiled and said,

‘Bet you forgot to put the label back too.’

By the time he had recovered from his embarrassment she had left the room.

Several times in the days that followed he hung about the Ashmolean doors in the hope that she was an art student, scanning the clusters of young would-be artists as they came or left, and returned to the museum so often that one of the guards mortified him by winking at him over the postcard woman’s head. He arrived at Sunday’s Meeting like a drunk at opening time, thinking to lose the thought of her in prayerful silence, but the quiet of the Meeting House was no freer of her than the quiet of the various libraries where he tried to lose himself in study.

At last, a week to the day, half an hour before the next lecture in the Vasari series, he found her sitting on the Ashmolean’s steps sketching something and heedless of the chill that was sending other walkers scurrying for

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

shelter. Instead of the beret she had on a crimson headscarf. It had the effect of making her huge old mac look glamorous instead of merely bohemian.

She smiled myopically, as though not quite sure who he was, but he sat down beside her and admitted that he had been searching for her all week in the hope of seeing her again.

'You're a virgin, aren't you?' she said, closing her sketchbook and shivering now that she was returning to the world.

'Yes,' he admitted.

She paused, floored by honesty where she had looked for indignation, then laughed, her rough voice startling some pigeons into flight.

'You're not meant to admit that.'

'Sorry. I can't lie. Never could.'

He offered her an arm but she rose unassisted.

'Are you going to the lecture?' he asked.

'Yeah,' she said, though she pronounced it somewhere between yur and yah.

'Me too.'

'Really?'

'Yes,' he said.

'For it's own sake or for me?'

'For the lecture. It was interesting last week.'

'Hmm.'

They climbed the steps together as he gathered his courage to blurt, 'But perhaps you'd let me buy you a drink afterwards or . . . or go to a film?'

She stopped just short of the doors and stood aside to let other people pass. 'Oh you're sweet,' she said. 'But I can't. I'm . . . spoken for.'

PATRICK GALE

'Oh.' The last week seemed to stretch like so much elastic then smack him on the back of the head. 'Of course you are. I'm so sorry.'

'Don't. It's kind of you. I don't know your name.'

'Tony.'

'I can't call you that.'

He laughed. 'But it's my name.'

'Not with me. It's how my mother used to describe places that were high-class or fancy. *Tone-y*. Makes me think of red plush and cheap candelabra. I'll call you Antony,' she smiled. 'Give you some dignity to makeup for being a virgin still.'

'OK. And what's your name?'

She hesitated. 'Rachel,' she said. 'It's Rachel Kelly.'

'What's your real name?' he asked.

'I just told you.' She flushed, he noticed.

'You hesitated as if you were making it up.'

'Don't be stupid,' she said. 'Why should I do that? Come on. We'll lose the good seats.'

Once again she pushed her way into a seat in the front row but there wasn't room for him too so he slipped in where he could which, because he kept letting others go first, was some six rows behind her.

That week's lecture was on Donatello and, because his view of her was blocked and because the lecturer was the kind who seized attention through fear, catching one student's eye after another's and holding it, he thought he would listen and make an effort to learn so that they'd have something to talk about afterwards. He listened to a discussion of the relative values of bronze and marble in Florence of the 1530s and retained the outlines of the

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

lecturer's points about Renaissance attitudes to sculpture from antiquity but then the lights went out so they could look at slide projections and all he could think about was her face and that voice of hers that raised goosebumps like a fingernail on his skin. That the words she had spoken to him were mocking and teasingly made it clear she already had a boyfriend, mattered less than that she had appeared to take an interest and had seemed to offer him friendship at least. She had given him a new name and he suspected he liked the version of himself it offered back to him.

When the lecture finished and the lecturer began to stride from the room, she pushed past people to be first out of her row and amazed Tony by running to catch up with the man. Her face was alight with enthusiasm.

'Professor Shepherd?' she called out. 'I wonder if I could just . . .' She drew level with him at the end of Tony's slowly emptying row.

The lecturer's face was mild enough as he stopped and turned but when he saw who was calling him it froze into a look of unmistakable contempt. 'Not now, Miss er . . .' he said and passed on.

Strangely she retained her expression of exhilaration, as though a public smack to her face could not have been more welcome than this dismissal. Other people had witnessed the little scene and they averted their eyes from her as they left, as though the mortification that should have been hers had become their own. By the time Tony had reached her, however, her eyes were misted and reddening with tears and she let him steer her by the elbow like an old friend.

PATRICK GALE

‘Let me buy you a cup of tea,’ he urged. ‘Please.’

‘No.’ She shook her head, taking the handkerchief he offered. ‘It makes my heart spin. Anyway if I sat I’d be scared I’d never get up again. Could we just walk?’

‘Of course.’

‘You could walk me home, then.’

‘Of course I could.’

He put her heavy book bag in his bicycle basket, glad he was not in his car so the journey could last longer. She struck out towards Jericho.

‘My hovel’s this way,’ she said. Then she laughed weepily and added, ‘He’s in love with me. Crazy in love. He can’t show it, naturally, because of his position and family. But all that’s going to change very soon.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh yes. He’d got my letter, I could tell. He’ll probably call round this evening, once he can get away. The wife’s a cow. Are you shocked?’

He thought a moment and found that he was merely elated.

‘No.’

‘Men can be so judgemental. They know so little about compromise.’

‘Have you known Professor Shepherd long?’

‘Several months now. He’s the reason I came to Oxford. We met on the boat that brought me to England.’

‘From Canada?’

‘Why’d you say that?’ Her tone was sharp suddenly.

‘No reason. There are a lot of Canadian students here, that’s all.’

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

‘Well I’m not a student and the boat was from New York. He’d been on a lecture tour in New England and he gave a talk during the crossing. On Rembrandt’s self-portraits.’

‘It’s hard to imagine him not lecturing,’ he dared. ‘Does he ever relax?’

‘Oh he’s a volcano in bed.’

Tony barked his shin on a pedal and she apologized.

‘It’s because he’s so tense, I think,’ she said. ‘And he suffers from post-coital loathing because he hates you for seeing him with his guard down. And in nothing but socks.’ She tried to laugh at this but started to cry instead with hiccupping sobs that sounded as though they must hurt.

Tony dropped the bike against some railings with a clatter and held her, which he would never have had the courage to do were she not crying. She was only slightly shorter than him and her grasp was strong and immediate. Beneath the bulky coat she was far bonier than he had imagined, like a starving person. She smelled of shampoo and soap and he guessed she had taken a bath and washed her hair especially for Professor Shepherd’s lecture and picked this red headscarf – at once passionate and demure – with a view to pleasing him.

She pulled away, sensing perhaps how much he enjoyed holding her, and walked on. ‘Tell me about you,’ she said. ‘I need a bulletin from the real world.’

And in trying to honour her request he realized afresh how unreal the world of the university had become to him. They walked on and he told her about Smollett and his fears that he had picked the wrong MPhil topic but would

PATRICK GALE

be thought a lightweight if he asked to change it now. He told her about continually feeling an impostor among adults and she was shocked to discover he was only months younger than her. 'It's the lack of experience,' he said, which made her laugh without crying. He told her about the Quakers and being raised by his grandfather and about being Cornish.

'Is there more light there?' she asked.

'Much. Even when the weather's bad you can always see lots of sky. And variety in the sky. It feels odd here, having no horizons.'

'It's like being at the bottom of a weedy pond,' she snapped. 'That's why everyone here does those fucking watercolours.'

They walked on in silence for five minutes then she said, 'This is my street,' and led the way down one of the sad, low terraces that bordered the canal.

'It's nice,' he said automatically.

'It's miserable,' she corrected him. 'Though there's a wild little garden, which is good. When the sun shines. If the sun shines.'

'Are you going to be all right, Rachel?'

'Nope,' she said and smiled at him wanly. 'There's nothing you can do for me, Antony. I can't be saved.'

'Can I see you again?'

'Same time next week,' she said. 'How's about that? Another Renaissance genius, another walk home in the drizzle. Maybe I can watch you drink a cup of tea beforehand? This is my house.' She stopped on the side of the street that didn't back on to the canal, by an especially pinched-looking house. He still wasn't used to so much brick everywhere.

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘All right. Your bag.’

He handed her back her shapeless satchel and must have looked especially needy or hangdog because she gave him a rapid hug and said quickly into his ear, ‘I could drag you in and get you drunk on cheap wine and my record collection but it would make me feel like an old hooker and I’d hate you for it.’ She pulled away and felt for her latchkey in her bag. ‘You’re a good, clean Quaker,’ she said. ‘You believe in truth and the little bit of God in all of us but I’m a miserable, hooked-on-sin Presbyterian and I’d be nothing but bad for you. Go back to the light, little boy and I’ll see you for Piero next week.’

She let herself in and he was alone in the drizzly street except for an enormous cat trying to fish something out from a deep crack in the pavement.

He should have been wretched. She had rejected him, as much for youth and perceived goodness as for lack of experience. She had belittled him and treated him like a sort of provincial English eunuch who would never catch up with or understand her. But as he pedalled home to the institutional reassurances of dinner in hall and a long, lonely evening in the college library stacks with an article on Georgian pamphleteers, he swung between happiness at being taken into her confidence and the qualified promise of her friendship and excitement at being initiated into a world previously closed to him.

This euphoria lasted all week. He worked hard, wrote a long, reassuring letter to his grandfather and miraculously found Smollett funny again. The week seemed to fly along and by the evening of the next lecture he was determined to impress her as less immature than she

PATRICK GALE

thought him. He had read up on Piero della Francesca for a start and had found her secondhand copies of the first two volumes of Dorothy Sayers' translation of Dante. He had met a few refugees from hard-line religions and had decided that her throwaway references to their faith differences and her slightly over-dramatized sense of her moral waywardness made her the ideal audience for Dante's mix of harsh religious mythology and humane storytelling.

He arrived a whole hour before the lecture was due to start, in case her quip about watching him drink tea had been in earnest, and chilled himself waiting for her on the steps until the now half-familiar faces of the other art students began to shuffle in past him. He waited on in the lobby until Professor Shepherd appeared, with a squeak of shoe leather, then slipped in and sat in the rear row of seats, holding a place for her by the aisle in case she arrived late.

It had been raining intermittently all day and the fug of wet overcoats and Harris tweed was stifling but he found himself drawn in by Professor Shepherd. He had thought a good deal during the week about what she had told him and had decided it was a fantasy. She had met the professor on the liner, as she had said, but they were probably both with their respective families and nothing significant was said. It was a crush. One of those inexplicable crushes to which even clever girls were prone. She needed a father-figure. Perhaps her own father was weak or foolish and an eminent lecturer in her own field was safely symbolic. When he had rebuffed her so publicly, she reversed the situation in her mind to save her fragile

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

self-esteem. After Tony's foolishly admitting his virginity she delighted in seizing the opportunity to deceive and shock him. But at bottom she had done so because he interested her and she had given him reason to hope.

Faced afresh with Professor Shepherd he was not so sure. He was younger than he had thought at first – in his late thirties, perhaps – but with the manner and dress of his elders. And even in the things that aged him there were touches of the dandy: the black shoes were polished to a mirror shine, the three-piece suit was sharply cut, the white shirt that matched the silvered gloss of his hair, brilliantly clean and creaseless, and his tie was iridescent petrol-blue. His voice, too, was at once commanding and silky. Even as it pronounced on Piero's mastery of space and precocious suggestion of frozen time, Antony could imagine it saying, 'Take off your dress and stand where I can see you.' This was not the voice of a man who loved in helplessness but that of a predator who captivated by withholding affection. So why was his latest slave not here?

Anxiety began to take hold of him until he could sit there no longer. Under cover of darkness, while Professor Shepherd was having difficulty with his slide projector, he slipped out, unlocked his bicycle and rode to Jericho through a fresh downpour that blinded him. Her little house was lit up, looking cosier than it had the week before, but when he knocked at the door an old woman answered, in a housecoat and clutching a bath sponge gritty with Ajax.

'So it's you,' she said, not letting him in, when he asked for Rachel.

PATRICK GALE

'I'm sorry. We haven't met.'

'No, but it's obvious who you are. You're too late. Ambulance took her to the Radcliffe an hour ago. The state of our bathroom! You've a nerve showing up here now.'

Her husband shuffled into view in the narrow corridor behind her asking, 'Is that him?' but Tony was already back on his bike and riding up the street towards the back entrance of the hospital.

There was an oddly similar scene on the ward where he finally tracked her down. He had bought flowers from the hospital stall on his way up, which was perhaps a mistake on top of the Dante. The nurse he approached took them as all the explanation she needed and was cold towards him.

'You're lucky,' she said. 'Not sure I can say the same for her. She's in the last bed on the left. You can have five minutes then she'll need rest.'

There was little more colour in Rachel's face than in her pillow. She was all sore-looking angles beneath her borrowed nightdress. Without beret or scarf her hair hung, lank and greasy, behind ears which he now saw were small but slightly protuberant. She stirred sleepily, then, seeing who was visiting her, tried to sit up, which was when he saw that both her wrists were thickly bandaged.

'Antony' she slurred.

'Don't,' he said, pulling up a chair. 'Don't try to speak.'

'Not drunk,' she said. 'It's pills. Oh *amazing* pills. When I shut my eyes I don't dream, I just switch off like a light and the darkness is so soft and pillowy.'

She shut her eyes for several slow seconds during which he distinctly heard another woman on the ward

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

murmuring the Lord's Prayer. She opened them again, took him in afresh and said, 'You brought me *flowers*.'

'Yes. Sorry. They're not very . . .'

'They're hideous. You're so sweet. Sweet Antony.'

'And this.' He put the brown paper parcel from the bookseller on her blanket. 'But maybe it's a bit heavy going for here.' He had a growing sense of being surrounded by female patients who were all in a more or less similar state of wretchedness. She looked unimaginably lovely to him. 'What can I do?' he asked, trying not to weep but feeling tears welling up. It was as though he could feel her damaged spirit fluttering between his hands. 'Who can I tell for you? Your parents?'

'Christ, no.'

'A tutor?'

'I'm not a student.'

'Professor Shepherd, then.'

'Fuck!' she said loudly, startling him. She giggled and shook her head. 'Nobody,' she sighed. 'Just you's nice,' and shut her eyes again.

The nurse was approaching so he stood to forestall her. She took the flowers from him with a hint of disdain. 'I'll put these in a vase for her,' she said. 'Time to go now.'

'When can I come back?'

'Tomorrow. Visiting hours are two until four. You left your parcel on the bed.'

'Oh. No. That's for her.'

'Ah.' She shut the books, still bagged, in the locker by Rachel's bed.

When he visited the next day, bringing fruit this time, a smuggled bar of chocolate and a Georgette Heyer

PATRICK GALE

romance from the bookstall because it looked more comforting than Dante, he was waylaid by a woman doctor about the same age as Professor Shepherd and as severe as a nun, with a stethoscope where her crucifix should have hung. She was kinder than the nurse, however.

‘Are you the father?’ she asked.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You’re Miss Kelly’s friend?’

‘Yes.’

‘Perhaps she didn’t tell you. She’s two months pregnant.’

‘Oh.’

He sat, unwittingly confirming her assumption.

‘You’re not engaged or . . .’

‘No but . . .’

‘Hmm?’

‘I can look after her.’

‘Can you take her out of Oxford?’ she asked. ‘A complete change of scene would be best.’

‘I live in Penzance.’

‘Perfect. She’s held on to the baby despite the overdose and losing all that blood. She’s a toughie. They both are.’

‘Oh,’ he said, reeling. ‘Good. When could she leave?’

‘End of the week? She hurt herself quite badly and I want to be sure she’s strong enough. The antidepressants will keep her pretty woozy. Presumably you have a doctor at home she could see?’

‘Yes,’ he said, having no idea because he was never ill and neither was his grandfather. He thought of his best friend, Jack, who had recently qualified and returned home

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

but seemed uncertain whether to set up as a GP or be a painter.

And that was it. At no point was Rachel consulted. She was simply told. She was asleep that day so he just sat and held her hand for an hour until people started to stare at him but when he came the next day she was sitting up, waiting for him. She said, with the woozy slur he was beginning to find worryingly attractive, 'They tell me you're taking me home with you.'

'Well . . . They assumed all sorts of things and I just . . . I could just take you back to your digs if you like. The doctor needn't know.'

But that upset her and she shook her head and started to cry.

So it was settled. He called on his supervisor and managed to break the news in a way that wasn't a lie but sounded more of a moral imperative than it perhaps was. 'Someone very close to me, a young woman, is extremely ill and needs me to look after her,' he said. 'As she has no one else. I know this means dropping out and I've thought very hard but I can't see any other way.'

His supervisor had evidently sensed his waning enthusiasm for Smollett and research and was immensely understanding.

'If you can come back next term, let me know and we'll see what we can do but . . .'

'I think I'm probably going to have to get a job,' Antony said, which was only just dawning on him. Half the reason he had opted for research when his first degree came through was because the only other future he could imagine with an English degree was as a teacher.

PATRICK GALE

'I suppose you could always teach,' his supervisor said, echoing what everyone at home had said when it was announced he was to study English rather than something useful, like law or engineering. And he offered to write Tony a reference should a suitable opening suggest itself.

He had a car, a Ford Popular badly rusted from living so near the sea at home. He could barely afford to keep it on the road, still less run it, and used his bicycle whenever he could, but it represented adult possibilities, however laughable, to set against the suspicion that his staying on to pursue an MPhil was somehow immature.

He settled his buttery bill and packed his suitcase and few possessions into the boot and lashed his bicycle to the roof. There was no one he felt he must see before he left. He hadn't acquired the knack of making friends. At home and at Oxford the Quakers were so sustaining they left him as lazy socially as any man dependent on a wife. Growing up with only a deaf old relative for company had left him shy of novelty and the challenges of his peers. His grandfather was so deaf now that even if he was close enough to hear the phone ring and answer it he could hardly hear what one was saying so that making phone calls to him about delicate matters was unbearable. So, rather than risk yelling at him from a kiosk an arrangement he could hardly explain to himself, he had settled for a calming, matter-of-fact letter presenting the two salient points as independent bits of news rather than a cause and effect.

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

Dear Grandpa, my research hasn't worked out so I've decided to cut my losses, come home and see if I can find a job, probably as a teacher.

I'll be bringing Rachel with me, a painter friend who has been ill and needs a change of scene.

She was sitting at the end of her bed, dressed and ready, suitcase standing by her feet. She had on a navy-blue duffel coat he had not seen before so that he supposed some friend of hers had called by her lodgings to bring her things she needed. The coat was fastened up to the familiar red scarf at the neck, as though she were waiting at a bus stop in the icy cold, not in a well-heated ward. She looked bloodless, blank and exhausted but she mustered a weak smile when she saw him and stood, wordlessly, bag in hand, eager to be off. The doctor intercepted them on their way out to press a jar of pills on him.

'See that she has two three times a day,' she said. 'I'm afraid it's not safe to trust her with the whole bottle. Not just yet. Good luck. Your local GP can fix her up with another prescription.'

Once they were down in the car park, Rachel became quite animated. She admired the colour of the Ford. 'I thought we'd be getting in a taxi,' she said. 'I never pictured you with a car.'

As he opened her door for her, he noticed there were brown bloodstains at the cuffs of her coat and realized her landlady must have bundled her into the ambulance with the first clothes that came to hand. Now that she was sitting, he saw they were a wild mismatch, even by bohemian standards.

PATRICK GALE

'I'll need to pick up my other things,' she said. 'Do you mind?'

'Of course not. Maybe I can help you pack.'

It transpired that she didn't live in the little cottage with the faintly hostile couple he had met but in a studio at the end of their tiny garden. It was really a converted garage, basic even by student standards. There was an outside privy and hot water from an Ascot over the tiny, much-chipped sink. Presumably when sponge washing was not enough, she borrowed the landlady's bathroom. Otherwise there was a bed that doubled up as a sofa, a single rickety dining chair, a card table, a kettle and a toaster.

She saw him taking it in. 'It was the only place I could afford that had a bit of privacy,' she explained. 'Once the door's shut, they couldn't see in and I could let friends in at the window.' She indicated the room's window, which had been crudely inserted into what would have been the garage door, and he immediately pictured Professor Shepherd taking off his hat and wincing fastidiously as he climbed through it.

She had pulled out a careworn cardboard suitcase from under the bed and was rapidly emptying the chest of drawers into it. He was struck by how few possessions she had. (He was shocked to watch her casually throw her few paperbacks into the wastepaper basket.) The meagre collection of plates, cutlery and dented pans were the landlords'. The only thing of beauty was an incongruous old pewter candlestick which she thrust among her clothes when he began to show an interest in it. Her painting things stood near the window: an old easel, which he dismantled and

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

bundled up for her, and several shoeboxes stuffed with an assortment of paint tubes, bottles of turpentine, brushes and little palette knives. When he asked her where all her paintings were, she said she had got rid of them, with a kind of flash in her voice that warned him off the subject. She clearly did not mean she had sold them.

She flung the window up and told him to bring his car round so they could load that way rather than trailing stuff through the house. Then she handed things out to him while he loaded. He had assumed she would need to leave through the house so as to settle up with her landlords and say goodbye so was surprised when she ended her labours by climbing through the window and closing it behind her.

‘But they’ll think we’re still in there together,’ he pointed out.

‘Oh probably,’ she said, shivering as she got back in the car. ‘I hate them. They don’t matter any more. Can you drive quite fast now, please?’

He drove as fast as the car and the law allowed, which wasn’t very, but she seemed satisfied and palpably relaxed as they put more and more streets between themselves and the scene of her recent troubles. Then, as they left the city and began the drive towards Swindon, she asked a few questions about where they were going, about Penzance and his grandfather. Just how deaf was he? How big was the house? Were they near the sea? Was there somewhere she could paint? She wasn’t making conversation; she was asking questions so that he would talk so she didn’t have to. And he duly talked and found he wanted to.

PATRICK GALE

As if offering himself up, he told her everything. How his father had gone missing in the War and never returned and his mother effectively pined away with the stress of waiting for him.

‘Nobody pines away,’ she cut in scornfully. ‘Did she kill herself?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, startled. ‘I was never told.’

He related how his father’s parents raised him, how his grandfather had been the town’s best tailor. Her grasp of English geography seemed hazy – she thought Bristol was near Oxford and that Devon came before Somerset – so he tried to explain about Penzance and West Cornwall’s proud remoteness and how it was wisest not to think of it as part of England at all but as a kind of island nation linked to it by a railway.

Thinking he had talked enough, he tried to encourage her. ‘Tell me about your family,’ he said. ‘I don’t even know where you’re from or how long you’d lived in Oxford or anything.’

‘I don’t want to talk about that,’ she said shortly. ‘I never want to talk about that.’

She said no more and shortly afterwards began to cry.

She didn’t sob or wail. Her grief was horribly discreet but as persistent and almost as silent as bleeding from an unstitched wound. He drove on in silence, glancing across at her, letting her cry. He believed it was healthy to let people cry – friends and onlookers were always far too ready to stifle grief with handkerchiefs and dubious comfort. But he also let her cry because her weeping somehow filled the car with the scent of her and he found it intoxicating. He noted how she didn’t apologize from

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

time to time, the way weepers usually did, as though their crying were a breach in decorum, like belching or hiccupping. Her flow of tears and occasional sniffs and noseblowing were so regular, so placid almost, it was as though they were not simply beyond her control but beneath her notice.

After an hour, by which time her grief was threatening to mist up the windows, he stopped in a village on the pretext of buying petrol and bought her some tissues along with some ham sandwiches and two bottles of pale ale. He was prepared for her to wave the offer of food and drink away but he returned to the car to find her quite recovered and, she said, as hungry as a horse.

She ate her share of the sandwiches ravenously, poring over the road map, then suggested it might be a good idea if he gave her the pills the hospital doctor had prescribed. Remembering the doctor's orders, he shook out two of the pills into his hand and passed them over.

'I need three,' she said.

'But the label says -'

'I've been taking these, or versions of them, since I was a little girl,' she said drily. 'I think I know a little more about psychiatric medication than you do. Give me the bottle.'

He held back.

'Oh it's OK, Tony,' she said with a defeated sort of smile that gave him goosebumps. 'I won't do anything silly. Not now. Not now you've rescued me.'

She took a third pill, washed all three down expertly with a swig of pale ale, made him pause outside the village so she could relieve herself behind a hedge then fell asleep.

PATRICK GALE

It was late at night, nearly one, when they arrived at his grandfather's house. Tony carried their suitcases into the dark and silent building, where his grandfather would long since have gone to bed, then gently woke her, taking the car blanket off her lap and draping it round her shoulders against the chill before he led her in. Perhaps from sleep, perhaps from pills (of which she had taken three more when they stopped at Exeter for supper) she was as solemn and wordless as a sleepy child. He showed her where the bathroom was then led her to a spare room, his mother's room, where his grandfather would expect a female guest to be lodged. She gave a little whimper of exhaustion and pleasure on seeing the bed so neatly made in readiness and started to undress so quickly he left her at once.

The idiocy of what he had done struck him only on waking from a deep and dreamless sleep. He had grown used to waking slowly in Oxford to the distant groan and chink of a punctual milk float then the muffled bell of the college clock and finally the alarm clock of the heavily sleeping research fellow in the room beside him. In Penzance the first cackle of seagulls woke him shortly after dawn. He would gladly have rolled over and slept again but nagging worry and a creeping sense of doom kept him awake and staring from his pillows at the too-familiar room, still so full of boyhood that it seemed to mock him for thinking he could become a man so easily.

He had thrown in his future for what? The thin promise of a badly paid teaching post in the town he had thought to escape and the still narrower possibility of a relationship with a pregnant woman in love with someone else?

NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

This was a woman who thought of him, if she did so at all, as a kind of devoted page, less man than spaniel.

Thinking more clearly now than he had for weeks, he made himself sit up, listening to the creaks of the waking house and laying realistic plans. He had done the right thing in bringing her here. It was a healthier place, far away from bad associations and bad love, where she could paint again and meet other painters, like-minded souls rather than corrupt academics. He would find some useful woman, one of the Friends, to look in occasionally and perhaps cook meals. Rachel would mend. She would become the person she was meant to be, unwarped by influences and needs. For himself, however, he saw he had no further role in the happy scenario and that to linger longer than was necessary to settle her would be only to complicate matters and risk hurting both of them. He would stay on with her a week, maybe ten days, no more. He would write to his supervisor, who was far more worldlywise than he, and plead over-hastiness. His romantic folly would go understood.

Then he remembered the nurse's words about the baby and the doctor's and landlady's easy assumption that it was his. The Friends were famously non-judgemental in matters of unmarried couples and welcomed those other congregations branded, but that was only one morning out of seven. For the rest of the week she would be just another unmarried mother with all the trials and expense and disapproval to deal with the although he knew his grandfather would gladly take her in and, in time, her child, he doubted she had the strength to bear the burden of compassion.

PATRICK GALE

He shaved and pissed at his bedroom sink and dressed hurriedly. She was not in her room and his grandfather was not in his. He heard his grandfather's scratchy laugh from overhead but was distracted by the smell of burning and raced down to the kitchen in time to tweak a tray of flaming toast from under the grill and tip it into the sink under a running tap. He opened windows to clear the billowing smoke then climbed the stairs, following voices.

Like several houses in the neighbourhood of Morrab Gardens, it had an extra room, a kind of lookout built out of the attic. Long since retired from tailoring, half-gratefully defeated by the arrival of John Collier's and racks of off-the-peg suits in Simpson's, his grandfather had retreated to his first love: seafaring. He spent hours in his eyrie, telescope or binoculars trained on the water, or down at the harbourmaster's office gossiping, and received a regular fee for a weekly half-column in *The Cornishman* called 'About The Bay' in which he gave details or stories of any vessels of note currently at anchor or being repaired in the dry dock.

They were laughing again as he climbed the narrow wooden steps and he thought how long it must be since the dapper and lightly flirtatious old man had entertained an attractive woman in the house.

They had all the windows flung up and his grandfather was showing her how to use the binoculars. They turned as he came up.

'Well here's the man!' his grandfather exclaimed and she hurried over, laughing and enthusing about how beautiful it all was and how the light was so strong even in



NOTES FROM AN EXHIBITION

winter and how she wanted to live there for ever and ever.

And before he had even climbed up off the steps into the tiny, dazzling room, Rachel had stooped and was kissing him on the lips with an eagerness that made his grandfather laugh again and clap his hands.

