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# Notes from an Exhibition

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Extract

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**FISHERMAN'S SMOCK (date unknown).** Cotton. Navy blue.
Throughout her working life in Penzance, Rachel Kelly bought smocks like these from the chandlery at Newlyn to wear, as other painters might wear overalls, to protect her clothes. (Not that Kelly ever greatly minded paint splashes or working in the midst of fertile chaos, as the large photographs of her two chief working environments behind you attest.) Neither of her studios was ever heated so the smocks may have afforded warmth as well as protection. She made much use of the pockets, once joking with Wilhelmina Barns-Graham that they were the one place she could tuck chocolate biscuits to keep them free of paint. (See postcard with cartoon below). It was characteristic of her contrary attitudes that she despised the vogue for producing false fisherman's smocks in softer cotton, and colours other than navy blue, yet never set foot on a yacht in her life. She was wearing an even more torn and splattered example the day she died, and was buried in it.

Rachel was woken by a painting or, rather, by the idea of one. Her first response on waking was anguish such as one felt when torn from any dreaming rapture and she shut her eyes again, breathing deeply in an effort to return to sleep at once and recapture the dream where she had left off. But she was awake and her brain was fizzing in a way that would have had Jack Trescothick testing her blood and reviewing her prescription had he known.

The painting was there still, scorched on to her retinas like the after-image of something seen in a dazzle of sun. If she blinked she saw it again for a second. She saw the

colours, the great, vibrating, humming globe of it but she was afraid that if she moved too soon or were forced to speak it would leave her.

She had always worked this way before, when she was young. Or younger. An image or elements of an image would come to her quite suddenly, often unprompted by anything around her, but then it was up to her and her wild brain to hold on to it long enough to fix it on paper or canvas. She was superstitious of describing the process but, if forced to put it into words by a trusted friend she would have likened it to taking dictation – if one could take dictation of an image – from a quixotic teacher who could never be relied upon to repeat anything one failed to catch. Once she could find even a rough way to translate the image into crayons or pencil or lipstick or whatever lay to hand – she had once used a green boiled sweet of her daughter's – she could be fairly sure of accessing it again at greater leisure for a more polished rendition.

She knew without turning that Antony was still asleep beside her. Now that he was getting so deaf nothing but the *Today* programme could rouse him and the radio was still silent. She listened to his breathing and heard it still had the full depth of sleep upon it. She sat up as slowly as she could. The room was still dark and she might only have been asleep a few hours. She slid her side of the duvet up and off her taking care that no shock of cold should wake him, and groped her way across the landing to the bathroom.

She turned on the light in the ferociously Teutonic bathroom cabinet Hedley and Oliver had given them last

Christmas. Blinking in the dazzle, she was amused to find last night's pill stuck fast to the hot skin of her temple.

Since her last episode, Antony had connived with Jack Trescothick in taking control of her medication. He doled out her daily dose of lithium each evening and watched her wash it down with a sip of water. Or had it changed to something else recently? Valproate? She forgot. Pills had been a part of her daily routine for so long she would have swallowed arsenic tablets without a second glance.

Only not any more. She had recently perfected a pass or two from the *Puffin Book of Magic* so he only thought he saw her swallow the pill. In fact it was glued to the underside of one of her fingertips, sticky with a quick stroke across her tongue as she opened her mouth for the pill. It worried her to flush drugs down the lavatory – pollution troubled her – so she hid the pills under her pillow then slipped them into her bedside table drawer or through a gap in the floorboards once they switched their reading lights off and Antony had turned his back.

Last night's slumber must have stolen up on her and the hand concealing the pill beneath her pillow must have ended up pressing it to her face. She smiled at the thought that its concentration of circularity might have mysteriously transferred itself through the thinnest part of her skull and into her dreams. She had thought it was a sun she saw, a dying or emerging star, but perhaps it was a planet-sized pill. Perhaps it was both?

She washed her face, cleaned her teeth, tugged a brush through her hair and fastened it back in the clasp she had been wearing so many years she took it, without even looking at it, from the place she always left it overnight.

Antony had not yet scooped yesterday's clothes into the laundry basket so they were still handily draped over the edge of the bath where she had dropped them the previous night. They weren't especially dirty – she hadn't been gardening in them – and there was no one there to see. Besides, she was worried it would wake Antony if she returned to the bedroom for the clean things she had forgotten.

It was not quite light still but that didn't bother her. She drew aside the curtains to peer out of the bathroom's narrow window. A thin drizzle was falling but it was preferable to the fog that seemed to have been blanketing the house for days. Fog did strange things to the light whereas the sort of drizzle she saw lending a shine to the slate windowsill merely filtered out the glare.

She left the bathroom and stood a while on the landing, listening to the house. The boiler was firing up, the radiators making their waking sounds, the clicks and gurgles that were probably a sign the system needed more maintenance than either of them could be bothered to give it. Even at this distance she could hear the ticking of the kitchen clock and the rattling cries of blackbirds as they hunted the food lured out by the drizzle. Antony was so deaf now that all these sounds were lost to him. He said the higher tones were going first – birdsong, children's voices, the wretched tin-whistle busker by the bank – and she couldn't think of it without imagining the frightening visual equivalent; losing all the blues, perhaps, or the yellows.

The landing was dominated by one of her paintings, so old and familiar that it hardly registered with her any

more than the big one over the staircase. Usually she swept by them, preferring to keep her eyes straight ahead or on the double-height window that let so much light on to the stairs. But this morning she consciously looked at them for a few minutes each, as though she were in a gallery, and wondered at the size and energy of them and where she had found the confidence and time to produce such work with children hanging off her like fat koalas.

But this only increased the chill of excitement that had woken her so early and she moved on. The steps to the loft lay at the far end of the landing from their bedroom and the bathroom. They were so steep one instinctively climbed them as one might the ladder between the decks of a boat, with hands as well as feet. She pushed open the trapdoor – she had nailed a double thickness of carpet underlay to it years ago so that it would fall back without a sound. Then she climbed all the way up, shut it behind her and shot the little bolt that held it fast.

This had not been practically necessary for years – the last inquisitive child had left long ago and at sixty-nine – was he *really* that old already? – Antony had reached the age when he preferred using the intercom to climbing stairs. The click of the bolt in its catch, however, was fixed in her mind as a necessary, ritual precursor to starting work. Antony had a similar ritual involving house keys. Having once been told it was a useful habit for preventing keys being stupidly mislaid about the house, he imposed a house rule, when the children were still young, involving a Newlyn copper bowl into which everyone dropped their keys on coming through the front door. The days of children losing house keys were long past but he had confessed

that because of its ingrained association with their homecomings he now found the kerchink of his own keys landing on copper whenever he came in profoundly comforting.

There was no heating up there and it was still bitterly cold as the sun had yet to warm the glass. Cold suited her, provided her hands did not become stiff with it, and Penzance rarely caught that sort of weather. She poured water into the kettle from a plastic drum she filled in the bathroom and hauled up the ladder periodically, then pulled on an old sailing smock because she felt the need of an extra layer. She helped herself to a couple of biscuits, sat munching in the armchair and began to draw on the first blank page she found in the nearest of the pads scattered about the place. She drew the view of her feet, because the bunched-up extra pair of socks on them were a nice challenge. Then she brewed a big mug of builder's tea and, now the sun was up, she started to paint.

She lost track of time, as was often the case. At first she was dimly aware of the sounds of *Today* blaring out of Antony's clock-radio and of Antony getting up and using the bathroom but then, once he took himself downstairs and entered the part of the house diagonally opposite the loft, she stopped hearing him and focused instead on the almost ceaseless shufflings, murmurs and squawks of the seagulls inches over her head. Visitors found the sound of them impossibly intrusive but Rachel was so used to it she found it as soothing a background to work as rain or wind.

The painting was all but mapped out on a piece of canvas slightly under a square yard. Without taking her

eyes off it, she groped for the phone on the table by the kettle, rang the carpenter who made her stretchers for her and ordered five more of the same. No. Eight, to be safe. She exchanged phone for palette – she had never let go of her brush – and laid down a little more colour. When the phone chirruped in the way that indicated Antony was calling her internally she ignored it for twenty rings or more. But he was insistent; he would have spotted the light going on and known she was sufficiently back in the land of normal people to have placed a quick phone call. She swore and answered brusquely, 'Yes?' scratching her scalp with the satisfying sharp wood of the brush handle.

'You've forgotten,' he said.

'What? I've no idea what time it is,' she bluffed. That old trick. 'Watch is in the bathroom.'

'You're due down there at eleven and it's ten to. I'll come too. Give you a hand.'

'But I . . . Couldn't the bloody woman manage without us?' she sighed.

'What was that? Rachel?'

'You're getting even deafer!' she shouted.

'I know,' he said, cheerfully enough.

'I'll be down in a tick,' she said and tossed the phone back on the table where it spilled something.

There was just a little of the cadmium yellow left so she carried on until he came and thumped on the trapdoor, startling her.

'Jesus, OK. OK!' she shouted. 'I'm coming, all right?'

She had an opening that night. Only that sounded too grand for the unveiling of a modest show in Newlyn.

Forty people would come at most, the majority of them not collectors. The only critics would be from the toothless local press; older writers who hadn't actually criticized anything or anybody in years for fear of giving offence and blithely ignorant younger ones used only to producing what Antony, pained at the neologism, called *advertorial*.

It was a small gallery, so akin to a shop in the pressures it was under to bring in customers and sell them things that the art on its walls almost took second place to its trade in earrings and handmade cards. It could never really afford to close so one show had to be taken down and another hung in the space of just half a day, the morning of the new show's opening. In Rachel's glory time, an opening involved only a brief, gracious visit to thank staff and check that everything had been hung correctly. With her star now so much lower in the sky, she and Antony performed the hanging themselves, battling with hammer and picture hooks and reels of salmon-strength fisherman's twine while all the gallery did was stick up labels on the walls giving titles, sizes and prices.

Antony enjoyed being more closely involved; he chatted amiably to the young couple still packing away some cynically naïve boat pictures and to Suraya. This was the gallery owner, surely born Susan, who had so many piercings one could hear them click on the receiver during her phone calls. She had arrived in the art business via crafts – she made something called lunar jewellery – one didn't ask – and knew so little of recent art history that she was mercifully unaware of who Rachel was or how curious

it was that she should now be showing her work in a converted pilchard cannery instead of in Cork Street. Rachel suspected Suraya thought she and Antony were sweet because they were old and game and no bother.

After a few arguments, they had worked out a routine. Rachel would hold the picture at the height she thought would look best and Antony would mark the wall and tap in a picture hook and tie the twine on the back of the frame then pass it back to Rachel who, being the painter, would hang it. And so on.

As they worked their way around the room, Rachel tuned out from Antony's conversation with Suraya who was sticking up labels in their wake as though it were a science, and brooded on the ordeal to come.

Jack would be there, bless him. Of all their friends, he was the one who most often actually bought something although she suspected he gave them away as presents later because she never saw them on his walls, not her more recent stuff.

Garfield, their eldest, would come because he was dutiful and only lived in Falmouth. Although he had the pictorial equivalent of a cloth ear, so would either ask hopelessly literal questions about the paintings or be at pains to talk about anything but what was on the walls around him. His wife, Lizzy, might come with him although, since the last time Rachel had snarled at her about something, she had developed a tendency to discover tedious last-minute crises that kept her away.

Hedley, second son, might come down from London for it. It had been known. Since he was little better than a househusband these days, he had few excuses, but she

had snarled at him recently too so he would probably make do with sending flowers that pointedly cost more than the petrol would have done and she would get the message.

Her daughter, Morwenna, would certainly not be coming.

And then, naturally, there would be all the people who came to support Antony, all those friends, not forgetting the Friends, for whom she was the heaviest of his crosses nobly borne. Worst of all, there would be the enthusiasts, the self-proclaimed fans, those terrible people who would go on and on about not being able to decide between this one or that one, the tree or the leaf; the people who thought it would cause no offence when they confessed they hadn't really liked her work or even known it until the late Eighties, when she started doing pictures they could understand.

*Focus*, she told herself. *It couldn't matter less. By nine-thirty this evening this room will be empty, they'll all have gone home and you might even have some red dots on those labels of hers. Hey! You can even take some beta-blockers!* But all she could think about, now that she had spent an hour picking over all this work that suddenly meant nothing to her, was the interrupted canvas in the loft. And the others. Because she saw now, had seen just before the bloody intercom started squawking at her, that it was part of a series. She was starting a series that would speak a vibrant language she had never quite forgotten but had allowed to become rusty with disuse.

Her heart beat faster as she made a mental list of things she needed. At least eight more yards of canvas for the

new stretchers she'd ordered and size and brushes and turps and colours, a great raft of colours she felt she hadn't used for years because they weren't found in hedges and ditches and ponds.

'Rachel?'

'I'm sorry,' she sighed. She took the picture Antony had just threaded with twine and hung it on the picture hook he had tapped in. She stood back, as if appraising the hanging but in reality looking at the picture and seeing something with no meaning or purpose at all. A nice, pretty blah.

'This is all just . . .' she started more firmly. 'It's all wrong. It doesn't mean anything.'

'Oh but it's lovely,' Suraya said, as if reassuring someone about an unwise hair colour. 'I like it. I love the one of the red trees. And those shells there are *beautiful*!'

'Sorry,' she told him. 'I've got to get back. Sorry.' And she hurried out of the gallery, blinding herself expertly to the start of his quiet protest.

She took the car. He would enjoy the walk back now the rain had stopped or Jack would give him a lift. She had things to buy and quickly. She drove fast, jumping the lights by the Newlyn Gallery and swerving over the mini-roundabout by the Queen's Hotel without giving way, so that somebody honked at her and a man with a dog had to jump back on the kerb. She sped left up Queen's Street, so as to grab a few minutes on the yellow line in Chapel Street while she bought a pile of supplies on account in the art shop there. They knew her. She was a good payer. They liked her. Oh God, they wanted to *talk*! No time for any of that.

Then home. Damn! No parking space. She drove the car sharply on to the pavement. Antony could park it for her later. No time now to go all round the houses looking and hoping. And then back to the loft with all her booty, slam down the trapdoor, shoot the bolt!

And relax. And deep breath. And kettle back on. And another biscuit. And more cadmium yellow. (Nice fat tube.) And start to paint.

She painted constantly, presumably for what was left of the morning and for most of the afternoon. (Her watch was still in the bathroom.) The dream that had scorched on her mind took shape on her easel and once it was safely down beyond all risk of evaporating, it took on new definition and began to evolve as she had hoped it would. She was talking the language again. Hell, she was *singing* it!

Everything else, those irrelevant pretty little daubs that had tried to shame her in the gallery in Newlyn, the sounds of Antony being shouted at by a lorry driver about the badly parked car, the sounds of lunch coming and going, of Garfield and then of Lizzy (Oh Christ! Of all the women he could have married!), and then the need to shower and wash her hair and choose a dress to wear that evening: all of it she found she could push, with an instinctive technique, to the other side of a thick, plate-glass screen where it didn't matter any more and couldn't interfere with the crucial business at hand.

'Rachel?' Garfield's voice from the landing. 'Mum? Do you want a cup of tea? Or anything?'

She ignored him and, used to it, poor sod, he went away.

She painted on. She snatched the phone up to have the carpenter confirm that yes, he could have those stretchers with her Tuesday. Great! What a star! She painted on.

She became aware by degrees of who was watching her. If she looked full on, of course, there was nobody there but she could *feel* her when her back was turned and from the corner of her vision, if she turned her head just slightly, she could see her outline, perched imperiously on the edge of the old armchair as if it were a throne, smoking – Rachel could smell her cigarettes now, could hear the faint sizzle of the tobacco burning whenever she took a drag – and staring at her from under that huge granite brow from those unblinking, judge, mental, Old-Hollywood eyes.

*So you're back*, she told her, only in her head. Christ, but she hoped it was only in her head! *Do you like what you see?*

But the old girl wasn't going to speak; nothing so cheap. She was simply going to sit there, like some terrifying retired ballerina, all black headband and rigid discipline; sit there and invigilate until the job was done and done *properly*.