**The August Affair**

I wasn't aware of her approaching. She just appeared, looking over my shoulder at my sketchbook. I was sitting on a bench on Wray Common early one evening, contemplating my future and sketching the windmill that had been a Reigate landmark since the early 1800’s. Now in disrepair, standing forlornly in a vast bramble patch, it made a good water colour subject and the early evening, late summer light was haunting. The blackberries were excellent too; fortified, no doubt, by a hundred and fifty years of discarded grain husk.

“Can I see?” she said easing my sketchbook from my hands. “These are great, where are you studying?” She was slim, wearing a brick-red smock dress I think, about my age with long, almost black, wavy hair. If she wasn’t wearing a brick-red smock dress, she should have been – she seemed a smock sort of girl. I didn't really notice her eyes – grey perhaps but I imagined them to be alluring; wonderful thing, imagination. However she wasn't watching me, she was thumbing intently through the book opening pages and then looking back over previous sketches. Valerie, as I learned later.

“I'm not studying anything at the moment.” I said, “I was at the grammar school doing physics, maths and chemistry.” I had harboured dreams of becoming another Isambard Kingdom Brunel, but they were shattered when I lost hold of reality in the middle of the A level exams a couple of months previously. Not surprising really, looking back. During the previous two years I’d worked my brain to the point of exhaustion, catching up in education all that I had missed.

I had struggled with dyslexia all my school life and ended up going to what in those days was dubbed 'a school for backward children'. But by some miracle one of my teachers, Monsieur Boret, had taught me how to make myself understood on paper and how to recite accurately; he had a disgusting habit of frequently cleaning his right ear with an endless supply of matchsticks that he kept in his waistcoat pockets. All the teachers were a bit flawed – it was after all a school for misfits, staff included.

M Boret had previously worked in Canada where there was a greater understanding of the subject of dyslexia than in the UK. For me and I suppose for others, dyslexia didn't mean I couldn't read or understand; it meant that I couldn't communicate what I knew, either verbally or in writing. As an aside, what was never addressed was what I suppose to be similar conditions in music and faces – when I hear a piece of music it is always the first time I’ve heard it, and when I meet people I know it is always the first time I have met them – or so it seems to me. Prosopagnosia is the proper name for that unfortunate condition. The music thing has a name now as well – music agnosia. Nice to know I’m not the only one.

During my journey into normality, I had come across my sister’s textbooks on physics and chemistry. They intrigued me. I built a bicycle with bits reclaimed from the local dump, more sporting than Grandad’s old bike that my mother had donated to me on his death. With my magnificent machine, which I called Flook after the magical animal dreamed up by Wally Fawkes (of Troglodytes fame), I could cycle to evening classes two days a week to study those subjects of such mysteries. It says something of my home life that, until almost the end of the second year of the classes, my parents thought I was going to the coffee bar.

My evening class tutor entered me for physics and chemistry O levels, and I passed them both plus all the subjects taught at my school, beating by some margin the previous average of subjects passed – one. Thus I was accepted for the sixth form at Reigate Grammar to do my chosen subjects for A levels, plus advanced mathematics which was proclaimed as essential. It also marked my parting with my best friend, Frank Watkins, the only bloke that my prosopagnosia would allow me to recognize because of his surprising shock of pure white hair; he had decided to go to the local art school. For me, art was just a relaxation; I did not enjoy the twice weekly practice of *The Corps* (marching around the playing fields dressed up as soldiers) so I was allowed to choose a class as an alternative. I chose art and as luck would have it the tutor was Harold Watts, the art teacher at Kingston College of Art who had recognised the potential in John Bratby, who himself went on to create the art movement known as the Kitchen Sink school. Watts showed a great interest in my work and took me, rather as he did with Bratby, under his wing. I came first in art in the end of year exams, but Watts awarded the prize to the guy who came second; I guess not to show favouritism or something. I was, though, a bit miffed.

In the science subjects the essential thing I lacked, leading to my downfall, was *background*. It’s not enough to study the exam syllabus alone. In any subject, you need years of background work to call on. That I didn’t have – so, endless hours of study and reading guided again by my evening class tutor. It was too much, and in the middle of the exams I had a complete nervous breakdown; my first. I couldn’t continue and went to, or maybe was summoned by, the Education Committee at Surrey County Council to explain myself. It must have been early August because I drove there as a brand new 18 year old and about to take my driving test. Mum was fuming at me from the passenger seat because I almost annihilated a motor cyclist when overtaking a bus, just as he was turning right in front of the bloody thing. I think she was more worried about her car than the fate of the motorcyclist.

The committee expressed a degree of sympathy with my exam predicament and asked if I did anything else. I explained my dabbles in art and one of them, the head of the Kingston College of Art and therefore an acquaintance of Harold Watts, suggested I returned the following week to show them some of my stuff. This I did (Mum fuming again). To my surprise, the conversation about my art went surprisingly well and I left as an elated young man with the possibility of a new career.

This had happened a week or so before I met Valerie, but I told her nothing of it. “So you’re not studying art? You should be. Look, have you got time to come over to my house? It’s over there, behind the trees. Scrambled egg for tea sound OK? I can cook eggs.” She said something like that; the deal was made, and in youthful anticipation I followed her across the road and through the trees. Big Victorian house and no one was in.

I don’t remember any eggs, scrambled or otherwise, and I don’t remember what we did until, a shortish time later, her dad came in presumably from work. She immediately handed him the sketch book, saying nothing. He looked through it, again silently. Minutes passed.

I can only speculate as to what prompted him to ask, “You’re not the chap exhibiting in the art shop in Redhill?” I was. The shop proprietor had asked me what on earth I was doing with the large amount of paint I was buying – I’d bought paint there for years and the volume had grown over time. I tried to describe one of my early works and he suggested I brought it down to show him, which I did, the next day – I’d just passed my driving test much to my mother’s surprise. The painting was a big one called ‘Vice’, that I had painted some years previously. On leaving the kerbside, a coal lorry decided to give my mother’s cherished 1937 Vauxhall 14-6 drophead coupe a little hug, dampening the occasion somewhat.

For years I had dabbled with painting, coming first or second in art at my useless school; second always to the same person, Frank, who later became Head of Graphics at Philips Home Appliances in Eindhoven and a sufferer of Alopecia Universalis when all his amazing hair fell out after a severe attack by a swarm of bees. He stopped wearing a wig when a car crashed into the back of his and he, livid, jumped out of the car pushing his wig back in place and screamed at the other driver, who astonish Frank by laughing loudly. Frank had put his wig on back to front.

I don’t remember much of the proprietor at the art shop except that he had the regulation goatee beard and had studied at the ubiquitous Kingston College of Art, but he explained he had a large room – proudly called his gallery – in the back and would be delighted to display one of my paintings in the window, hang some others in the ‘gallery’ and invite a few chums to view the works. I suppose one of those chums was Valerie’s dad. A by-the-by is that somehow Graham Sutherland also got to see the paintings and sent me a letter of encouragement, via the art shop.

I had started to paint big works when, for some reason, my parents had gone away for a few days. I was about 14, and I attacked my dad’s Sapele-lined study door with a painting of a headless torso with tree branches in place of arms flaying above its neck, entangling the Sword of Damocles indicating imminent peril, all reflected in a purple lake stained with the blood of the torso. Reflected in the lake was the Staff of Asclepius, indicating healing. The foreground was a cliff featuring a broken fence – all my paintings had featured a broken fence. This was ’Vice’, the one I took to the art shop and which I later sold to the Jehovah Witnesses for, they said, their London England Temple which, oddly, was in Newchapel just 10 miles down the road. Dad took down the door, stuffed it in the garage and said not very much. I painted the replacement door with an equally obscure work called “Ambition”. I think there must have been words, because after that I used six by four foot sheets of marine plywood – how I got them home is lost in time. Frank had suggested the ply because he had come across it when he built a canoe from a kit. Other paintings included ‘Solitude’, featuring a naked blind man dragging chains and about to walk through the broken fence towards the cliff edge, and another with the pointing finger of God creating, not Adam, but an empty sardine can. The art shop chap rather generously peeled off the Sapele and framed the door paintings in a very suitable black.

“These are quite impressive.” said Valerie’s Dad of my sketches. “I’m Tom Eckersley, Head of Graphic Design at the LCP”. The LCP was London’s most prestigious printing and graphics college – there, Eckersley *(1914-1997)* had founded in the 1950’s the first undergraduate graphics course in the UK and is credited with transforming British graphic design. He is famed for his brilliant poster art that used geometric and flat graphics to visually punch the advertiser’s message forward with the minimum of language; he was awarded the OBE for services to British poster design in 1948.

He’d seen my paintings and my sketchbook, but said no more about them during what I thought was a general conversation. Actually, I believe he was ‘interviewing’ me; I was taken aback (*no, don’t be silly Rod, you were blooming well flabbergasted*) when there and then he offered me a place in his college. Should, that is, “you ever get a grant.” I had not mentioned my conversations with the education committee to Valerie, so it was her turn to be surprised when I told them that the committee had awarded me a full County Major Scholarship on the back of my work. Not as a bridge designer, but as an artist, without the need to re-sit any exams. With the scholarship, I could rent a flat in London, pay my living expenses and attend any art college I wanted, again with a caveat “should you find a college that will accept you”. The committee had wanted me to go to the Slade School of Fine Art but had left me with an open choice. Brilliant! Brilliant and difficult at the same time and I was mulling over the options as I sketched the windmill.

Eckersley ended my ‘difficulty’ by saying, “See you in a few weeks then.” I suppose I stuttered something to the effect that I needed a little time, but I don’t remember the end of that conversation. I guess I had every right to be speechless. From failed potential civil engineer to an arts placement in a senior college and an open grant, all in the space of a couple of weeks – incredible.

I called Frank the next morning. “Unbelievable!” he yelled and said something to the effect of, “I’m going to the LCP as well – graphics are the thing, you never make any money as an artist. I’m going to London tomorrow to look at a flat. And I need a flatmate. Want to join me?” Indeed I did. The last piece of the jigsaw had fallen into place. We took the flat and Frank persuaded me to join the fraternity at the LCP. Incidentally, it was a condition of the scholarship that I did well in the first year; I came first but the award was made to a lanky, scruffy and older second-time-around student who came second. I was considerably more than miffed this time. I never found out why.

Valerie was a studying at the LCP too, although a year above me and there was never an egg in sight, nor even a friendship. But I was right – her eyes were striking, brown though, not grey, and I thank her for that day in August during which she set in motion events that changed the course of my life.