

ROSE TREMAIN, THE AMERICAN LOVER
AND OTHER STORIES (2014)

21st-Century Juliet

4th March

My thirtieth birthday. Oh well.

Home to Capell House. Mummy and Daddy give a dinner party for me. Before dinner, Daddy takes me aside and makes a big thing of saying he wanted to lay on fire-works for me, but was 'absolutely overthrown' to discover they cost £1,200 a minute.

The Hon. Peregrine Paris, flower of the county, turns up. Not invited by *me*, the toffee-nosed twat. Mummy drinks about five litres of champagne and crucifies me by braying, over the pudding: 'Perry, I just can't understand why you and Juliet have never got together!' Perry went scarlet. Quite sweet, that. But mainly, I wanted to fall off the edge of the planet.

5th March

Long walk with Daddy and the new lurchers, Housey and Montague.

Daddy suddenly grim. Says he didn't want to burden me

with this, but the family finances are in dire shape and he and Mummy may have to sell Capell House. Shocking to see Daddy so miserable. He says: 'Juliet, I just dread what could happen, dread going to the bloody wall. I'd rather the earth swallowed me.'

Montague starts chasing sheep and we have to hare all over the place trying to get him back on the lead. On the way home, Daddy says: 'By the way, what are your thoughts about Perry Paris?'

'I don't have any thoughts,' I reply.

Then Daddy starts on about how much Perry likes me and how he's the richest person in Wiltshire, etc etc. I tell Daddy straight off that imagining Peregrine Paris as a son-in-law is complete fantasy. Then find myself remembering that I'm thirty (shit) and no one has asked me to marry them yet and I'm getting fed up working in PR.

7th March

Back to Fulham and the flat and work. Sometimes it feels awesomely bad slaving away for a lewd Aussie philistine like Jimmy Anselme. His head is a complete *globe* of ephemera. His new thing is to refer to himself as 'Nursey', because (quoth he) he 'massages the egos of the rich and famous'. And this stupid 'Nursey' thing's caught on. Jimmy's referred to like that in the tabloids now.

Feel desolate about the idea of losing Capell House. Like all my childhood would be snatched away . . . Nursey catches me daydreaming and says: 'focus up, Jule.'

Meet Mummy for lunch. She bangs on about Harrods being staffed by 'ignorant immigrants, who don't know how to direct you to the escalator'. Claims Daddy says they all should be sent packing to where they came from because they're skewing the economy.

8th March

Woken at dawn by horrendous *thump, thump, thump*. Lawrence downstairs has got builders in. God knows what he's having done: probably getting some clever heat lamps connected, so he can grow shag by artificial light.

Sometimes, I envy Lawrence his hippie flake existence. He just seems to exist on yoga and weed. Don't think he even *knows the way* to Waitrose.

11th March

Wake at six thirty again. Lawrence's builders jabbering in the garden, in Moldavian, or something. How can anyone jabber that fucking early?

Open my bedroom window and yell at them to shut up.

Long day with Nursey. Perry's featured in the new *Hello!*, lurching out of some posh revels. Reveal to Nurse that the Hon. PP is supposedly thinking of marrying me, and Nurse goes: 'Strewth! Go to, babe. He's number twenty-nine on the Rich List.'

Take a vodka onto the roof terrace when I get home. Then look down and see a face staring up at me. One of

the Moldavians. He's sitting in Lawrence's cannabis patch, smoking. He's covered in white dust. Call down I'm sorry I yelled at him this morning. Then, wow. He just smiles at me with this incredibly amazingly sexy smile. On impulse I raise my vodka glass, like I'm inviting him up. Minutes later, he's ringing my bell. I ask him to take his muddy shoes off. When they come off, his socks have holes in them. Suddenly feel I'm a neurotic, house-proud bitch. Pour him a huge vodka.

Talk for quite a long time. He keeps staring at me. The strangeness of him totally does my head in. Find myself longing to touch him. He leaves when my phone rings: Perry asking me out to dinner on the 22nd. (I say yes, but my thoughts aren't exactly on it.)

16th March

Writing this at work. Nurse's in New York, so I can skive. Got to get down what happened last night.

Well. I did something completely mad, rash and sudden but totally wonderful. Feel dazed when I think about it. I went to bed with the Moldavian builder.

Whole new thing for me. Seriously new, even though I've slept with about forty-six people. I mean, I've never had a lover like that. EVER. Now, I can't think of anything else. I just want him back, now, now, now.

His name's Roméo. Pronounced Ro-may-o. As in Alfa. I've nicknamed him 'Mayo'. Want to spread him all over me.

17th March

Mayo and I make love for eight hours. Voicemail clicks in while we're exchanging lovers' faithless vows: Perry confirming dinner next week. (Guess he's been wondering if I was going to cancel.)

18th March

Think I'm in trouble. Think I've fallen in love with Roméo. Just didn't know sex could be like that.

19th March

Keep hoping I'll come to my senses, but I can't seem to. Phone cousin Tibs and ask him to come round. Have to tell somebody before I go completely insane. Tibs says he'll come on Thursday. He's off to some bloody Formula One race in Verona.

Starting to panic about Wednesday. The thought of sitting through dinner with Perry Paris is unreal. What in the world are we going to talk about?

20th March

Keep bursting into tears. Exhaustion from my mad nights. And confusion.

Roméo tells me he loves me. I know it's all violently insane, but I seem to be hooked.

Mummy phones. She's heard I'm having dinner with Perry. Reminds me that he owns three houses and five polo ponies. Hear Daddy in the background, sending love across the mad barking of Housey and Montague and sounding horribly cheered up.

22nd March

Dinner with Perry.

Out it all comes. He's loved me from afar. (Classic Perry word, that: *afar!*) Can't get me out of his head. Would like to spend the rest of his life with me.

I'm cold as a tomb. Just can't think what to say or how to deal with this.

Tell Perry I'll 'think about it'. (Is this lame and cowardly, or *what?*) Let him kiss me goodnight, then hate myself for doing this.

Now, I'm in bed, weeping.

23rd March

Tell Mayo I love him. He says he was told there was no sun in England, but I'm his sun. His English is definitely improving.

Have an awful dream about Mummy bashing immigrant sales people in Harrods and calling them 'the enemy'.

24th March

Cook supper for Cousin Tibs. I adore the bastard like the brother I never had. We get smashed on the (four) bottles of Corvo he's brought and I tell him about Mayo and about Perry's declaration. Relief to get everything out in the open. And Tibs is really sweet and on my side and agrees with me that good sex is awesomely rare and that Perry Paris is verging on being a pillock.

But then Tibs tells me he's heard Capell House is *definitely* going to have to be sold. Says Daddy got 'burned' by some fool's paradise of an offshore investment.

Our mood goes down. We sit and slug the Corvo, feeling totally sad and useless.

Very late and pissed, we hear Lawrence chanting below, in the garden.

7th April

The other two guys working with Mayo on the downstairs flat are called Beno and Mercut. Mayo brings them up to the roof terrace after work, to introduce them to me. Beno looks daggers at everyone. Mercut is nicer and speaks a sweet, weird kind of English. He says: 'Roméo tell us he going marry you. Is this thing true, Juliet? True or a dream?'

'A dream,' I say.

Perry calls to ask me out again next week. Says he'll take me to Claridge's.

21st-Century Juliet

10th April

Force myself to go to Capell House, even though I'd rather spend the weekend with Roméo.

Mummy starts crying while we're planting out sweet peas. Says piteously she may not be at C. House to see them flower. Says she's just praying for 'something to come along and save us'.

12th April

Dinner at Claridge's with Perry. In the taxi going home, he sticks his hand up my skirt. I come right away. (I guess my body's been re-programmed by Mayo.) So then Perry thinks he's the world's best lover and that I must be crazy about him. Going down the Old Brompton Road, he proposes.

I tell him this is all too sudden and that I need more time. But I take him to bed – just to *see*, just to imagine what it would be like to be the wife of the Hon. Peregrine Paris and own nine cars and a Constable. Make myself feel sexy by thinking about my love, my heart's passion, Roméo. Perry says: 'God, Juliet, you can be a tigress.'

I can't stand it when people add 'ess' on to the ends of words, to make them female.

Shove Perry out at 2 a.m.

13th April

No sleep last night.

When I phone in sick, Nurse says: 'Oh come on, Jule.'

21st-Century Juliet

Do keep up, lamb; have you forgotten we've got the Valentios arriving from Rome?'

Tell him I can't move my limbs, which is virtually true. Perry Paris is 6' 2" and weighs a ton.

Sleep till midday, then phone Tibs.

He slopes round and we sink a few vodkas with the curtains drawn, to hide us from the outside world. Tell Tibs my life is in a complete muddle. After the third or fourth vodka he says: 'Listen, Jule, I understand you like your bit of rough, but we're all fucking broke, so why don't you haul PP into the family and he'll save the whole shebang?'

We sit on the floor, laughing till we feel sick.

14th April

Mayo asks me to marry him. (Marriage proposals are like buses, I guess. You get none for thirty years, then two come along at once.)

His proposal is really touching and old-fashioned. He goes down on one knee. He says he will work hard 'all his life' for me. He's so adorable and sexy and mine and irresistible that I say 'yes' – as a kind of dare. He dances round the flat. Then we make love for about four hours.

What am I *doing*?

15th April

Nurse in a foul mood. Says I expect everyone to be at my beck and call, which, coming from him – saucy, bloody

wind-up merchant – is just totally unfair. Sometimes, I hate Australians. They're so sarky and sure of themselves. And he treats his assistant, Peter, like a serf.

16th April

Mayo brings me a gold ring. It's cheap and ugly and weighs nothing.

But I put it on my third finger etc. As I do this, I feel a kind of dread go right through me.

Beno and Mercut are making an incredible amount of noise downstairs. Sounds like Lawrence's back wall is being felled – with or without his permission. Roméo laughs and says his friends are jealous because he's marrying an English girl, so he can get legal status.

Legal status?

Oh shit. Why don't I *ever* seem to see the totality of any situation?

17th April

Perry keeps phoning. Says he wants an answer to his proposal, which is fair enough, considering what he's offering me in the way of real estate, fine furniture and annual income.

I (stupidly) tell him I've got things to sort out. 'What things?' he snaps.

I tell him I'm in trouble at work, which is sort of true. Nursey is being foul to me. Says to me today: 'Why don't

you just marry that loaded throwback of yours, lambkin, and stop cluttering up the job market?'

20th April

I'm getting in a muddle with Mayo's ring – taking it on and off. Now, I seem to have lost it. Shit. Pray it's in my desk drawer at work. Also, my period hasn't arrived . . .

22nd April

Momentous day. Dinner with Perry. Decide to simplify my life and marry him.

I don't love him. But tell myself I probably will in the future, when I'm living in Upper Grosvenor Street with a Filipino housemaid and a permanent chef and my own chauffeur at the door.

23rd April

BIG celebrations at Capell House. Mummy and Daddy beside themselves with joy and relief. Perry comes over with the ring: vast heirloom of an emerald surrounded by diamonds, but it's far too big for my finger.

I've noticed Perry's got sausagey hands, and so had all the Paris ancestors, judging from this. But he's going to get it cut down to size for me. And I guess I can live with sausages.

Still no period.

Roméo leaves a message on my mobile saying he's looking at the stars and thinking about me.

(I've found his tragic ring. Now I'm on the verge of having to wear two different engagement rings on different days and at different times . . .)

Date set for my wedding to Perry: the fatal day is 14th September.

24th April

Daddy and I play badminton in the rain. He loses. He says: 'Juliet, nothing can touch me now that you're engaged to Perry Paris. Through all my days, nights, hours, work-time and play-time I've hoped for something like this for you. Hand on heart.'

28th April

Nursesey gives me the day off.

Mummy and I have lunch in Harvey Nicks, then hit the bridal departments across Knightsbridge and the West End.

Mummy acts blithe, but I can't help noticing the dresses start at 3k.

We have to put on white gloves just to touch them. We have our own personal assistant in each shop. In Liberty when I put on a veil, Mummy starts sobbing and so do I. For different reasons.

Tibs phones. He's heard the joyful news. Says to me: 'Good decision, Jule. Sensible coz. Now you'd better get that other matter wrapped up and out of your life.'

Spend the night with Roméo. Want it never to be morning.

1st May

Nursesey takes me out for a drink. He's nice at first, then he says: 'I suppose it's your fucking wedding and your girl-brain's turning on the fifteen fucking ways to fold a table napkin, but if you don't focus up, Juliet, I'm going to have to sack you.'

'Sack away,' I say. 'You were never loyal to anyone, Nurse, so why start now?'

3rd May

Call in sick. Nursesey sacks me.

Oh well.

Feel so confused and rotten about myself, I call Tibs. Promises he'll come round tomorrow evening.

4th May

Worst day of my life so far . . .

Tibs arrives at six, high as well as drunk. Immediately starts calling down to Mayo, Beno and Mercut: 'Which one of you illegal fucking migrants is screwing my cousin?'

WHY did I ask Tibs to come round? Why? WHY?

Beno, Mercut and Mayo come up to the flat and start

screaming at Tibs in Moldavian. Tibs calls them 'fucking illegal scum'. Jesus Christ. I yell at them all to calm down. Then one of them (I seriously don't know which one) pushes Tibs and he falls backwards down the stairs

5th May

Couldn't go on with the diary yesterday . . .

Tibs is in hospital. He's on life support. I heard his head hit the bottom step.

Roméo has vanished. He and Mercut and Beno just disappeared moments after Tibs fell.

Can't stop crying. The suddenness of things. AWFUL, AWFUL. All my fault. *Everything*.

6th May

Police come round. Really hard for me to lie to the law, I'm so well brought-up. But I had to say it was an accident. Told the police Tibs was 'a bit drunk on vodka' and just fell. Didn't mention Mayo or the others. Now I've committed perjury or whatever. And if they fingerprint my room, they'll find Roméo's body fluid all over the sheets.

Keep calling and calling Roméo on his mobile, but get the voicemail saying: 'Roméo mobile 'ere. Give me your voice again.' Breaks my heart, this message. But he's gone. They've all gone. Of course they have.

Go to see Lawrence, to see if he knows anything. Says he'll try to find out where Mayo and the others are.

Tibs's 'accident' all over the papers. (Luckily they do seem to think it was an accident.) Also pic of me and Perry and the news that *Hello!* is interested to cover our September wedding. Can't bear to think about Tibs.

Perry and Daddy come up to London. They think I'm just crying for Tibs, but of course I'm crying for the whole fucking mess. I hang on to Daddy and weep and tell him I'm sorry. He keeps saying: 'Not your fault, angel. Not your fault.' If only he knew . . .

Long for Perry to leave, but he doesn't. He's brought the size-adjusted engagement ring. Now, it's on my finger, but I don't exactly love it. I keep thinking about Mayo's little gold ring. Situation so weird and awful and full of lies. Feel I really do love Roméo and not Perry. But if I break it off with Perry and say I'm marrying a (probably illegal) Moldavian builder who may have fatally wounded Tibs, Mummy and Daddy could quite literally die.

7th May

Go to see Tibs on his life support. Poor baby. This sight is so terrible, I can't believe I'm looking at it.

Still nothing from Mayo. And now his mobile is 'no longer in service'.

Guess he's fled away for ever.

Cry for five hours.

8th May

Tibs died in the night. My fault. My fault. My fucking fault!

Uncle Mart and Aunt Helena out of their minds with grief.

I tell Mummy we've got to postpone the wedding. She guts me by saying: 'No, Juliet. No need to make everything worse than it is.'

I tell her I really *want* to postpone it, but she says, 'No, don't be selfish, darling. Think of other people.'

Oh God. Feel Mummy's just casting me away, like she knows I'm responsible for the whole tragedy . . .

Terrible dreams about darling Tibs and fears about more terror to come. Wish I could go to sleep and wake up to find everything had just *been a dream*.

14th May

Tibs's funeral. I wail for him. The only 'brother' I had or will ever have. And he could be such an awesome laugh.

The sadness of Uncle M and Aunt H too hard to bear. If they knew I was to blame, they'd slay me with a fish-gutting knife. Feel I want to confess to them, but a voice in me won't let me do it.

Forgot to wear Perry's ring to the funeral. He looked beadily at my naked hand. I said the emerald was too big to fit under my black gloves. Told him later I couldn't sleep with him until I got over mourning Tibs. He said that was 'a bit bloody steep'. Drove back to London at about 90mph. Don't care if I die.

18th May

No diary for ages. Too wretched to write it.

I get a visit from Lawrence to tell me Mayo got in touch with him. Roméo and the others are being deported as illegal immigrants. They're in a deportation 'hostel' called Mantua House, in Dover. Mayo says he wants to see me to ask my forgiveness for Tibs. Lawrence reminds me I could save Roméo from deportation by going through with a marriage.

I break down like a baby and say to Lawrence: 'What am I going to do? Tell me what to do.' We go into his flat and he rolls me a joint to calm me down. Then he says abstractedly: 'it really is all a bit baleful.'

So much for hippie counsel.

19th May

Feel horribly alone. Keep imagining Tibs's body under the earth.

20th May

Drag myself into the car and drive to Dover. Dull sky. No sun.

Mantua House a desolate shit-hole. Like a prison. Smells of sickness and death. Can't stop shivering all the time I'm there.

Mayo lies on a hard bunk in a dark room. His mouth is dry when I kiss it.

21st-Century Juliet

Says to me; 'How come, with all that happen, you still so fair?' The things he says, the words he chooses, just get to me sometimes. I tell him I know he didn't mean to kill Tibs. He drinks a sip of water and says: 'I drink to you, my love.'

I try to stop crying, because I have to be honest with him at last. I owe it to everyone. I just can't marry him. So I tell him it's impossible, that we're too *alienated*. I remind him we come from different worlds. I return his ring and tell him to forget me.

He barely moves or reacts. He looks terribly ill. He tells me his life is over. While he's talking, I feel my period start. Blood begins to run down my thighs.

30th May

Diary more or less abandoned.

Spend all my money on *stuff* from Lawrence. And not just spliffs.

I miss Tibs like mad. And I miss my lover more than I can bear to admit.

I think his absence will follow me all through my life.

14th September

My wedding day.

Daddy's face shines with joy as he leads me down the aisle. Is he happy for me, or merely happy about not losing Capell House?

I'm far too thin for my dress. When I get into it, it just hangs on me like a shroud.