

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

*Man in the Water*

Fishing was my livelihood and my life.

I'd go out early, on the ebb tide. Put up the ragged sail. Hear my boat, the *Mary Jane*, complaining in the wind. Use my telescope to search the sky for gulls. Watch what the other boats were doing. Then, when I had a sniff of how the herring were moving, heave out my nets, heavy and damp, and lower the sail and take up the oars and set the boat's course and wait and listen with my hand on the tiller and watch the corks idling on the water and feel the vastness of the sky all about me.

Now and then, I'd look back at the land: the long girdle of the beach and the Whetstone Lighthouse. Even from far out, I could see the lane where my cottage stood and it would always return to my mind then, that my home was empty of my wife, Hannah, and my bed cold. And I'd ask myself, what are you going to do, you poor man, alone as you are, to prepare your children for their lives? And never any answer came to me. And never, day by day and month by month, did I do one thing for them that I hadn't done before the death of Hannah, because no one gave me counsel as to what I *should* do. My daughter, Jenny, cooked our meals and washed our linen and hung it to dry in the sun and the salt wind. She was a dutiful

girl. But my son, Pips, he only paid attention to his school lessons one day in three and he stole plums from our neighbours and threw pebbles at their dogs and cats and most of the time was no use to any man.

When I brought the boat in with my catch, Jenny and Pips would bring our old grey mare, Hazel, down to the beach with panniers strapped to her sides. We'd tip the herring into the panniers and while I cleaned the *Mary Jane* and piled up my nets and made everything fast against the tide, the children would lead the horse to the Sheds, where the fish was weighed and sold and we'd get our money wrapped in a scrap of paper. And then we'd go home to the empty cottage and brew tea and put slices of bacon to fry, and I'd wash the sea off my hands and out of my eyes and Pips would run around the table, strewing it with knives and forks and cups and saucers, like an elf strewing a dell with leaves, and Jenny would come after him, straightening everything up. I told them they were good children.

On a summer's morning, when I bring the boat in and we've loaded the horse with the catch and Pips is digging for cockles in the sand, Jenny picks up my brass telescope and puts it to her eye and hunts over the ocean with it. I note the stillness of her back, which, at the age of fifteen, is almost the back of a woman, and I look at her sweet head moving left to right, right to left. And then Pips, he stops digging for cockles and says, 'What can you see, Jen?' But she doesn't answer him and I say, 'Come on, you children, you're not Admiral Nelson. Take Hazel to the Sheds now, and get the catch weighed and paid, then hurry on home.'

And then Jenny, she says quietly, 'Pa, I can see a boat

going down and there's a man in the water and I think he's drowning.'

I snatch the telescope from her hands and put it to my eye and Pips, he's jumping up like a puppy dog and saying, 'Give me the spyglass, Pa, for I'd like to see that: a boat going down and a man in the water!' I cuff his head and say, 'What manner of heartless talk is that?'

In the eye of glass I spy something on the distant swell, where Jenny's pointing, and it looks like driftwood, but she says, 'No, Pa, no that's a bit of the boat, the bow or the keel of it, sticking up above the waves, and you must get back in the *Mary Jane* and hurry now, or the man in the water will be lost.'

'I see no man in the water,' I say.

'He was there,' she says. 'I saw his head above the waves. I could see his mouth, wide open and crying out.'

So we heave the boat down to the water and Pips jumps in and says, 'I'm coming to help you, Pa,' and I notice his cheeks all scarlet with excitement. But Jenny, she stays where she is on the beach with the horse and begins leading her away up to the Sheds as I get the sail up and turn across the wind.

I give Pips the telescope and show him where I saw what I thought was driftwood and we go fast in the offshore breeze, bumping on the wavelets, and he says: 'This is a rotten instrument, Pa. Nothing stays still in it long enough for me to see the drowning man.' I lower the sail and take up the oars and we go round in circles, staring at the water. Then we start to call out to the man, 'Where are you? Where are you?' But no one replies.

'Reckon he be drowned by now,' says Pips.

I say nothing to this, but nudge the tiller with my elbow,

keeping the boat turning and feather the oars to try to steady her in the swell. I don't like the feel of the tide, pulling us out to sea, but we keep on.

We found no drowning man and when we got back to Whetstone, no news came of anyone lost at sea that summer morning.

So then I began asking myself, did Miss Jenny invent the man in the water? Did she want me and Pips out at sea so she could be sure to be on her own, to go where she pleased for that little while? And I longed more than ever to have my wife back at my side so we could wonder about these things together.

From that day, I kept my eye on Jenny. I saw how she carried herself with her eyes downcast and how, when she was ironing sheets or doing the baking, she would sometimes stare out of the window, in a reverie.

I wanted to ask, 'What are you dreaming of? Or who?' And I longed to say to her, 'Don't leave your pa. For God knows, I haven't an ounce of an idea how to do anything in the world except fish for herring, and Pips and I, we'd be no good without you. We'd be like hobgoblins.'

In the middle of a cold night, something woke me and I lay there in the dark listening, imagining I heard Jenny's footsteps going along the lane.

I lit my lamp and got up and went to the room where the two children slept in their wooden beds. There was Pips tucked in with the toy he loved, an old bald bear, pressed against his cheek. And there was Jenny, too, asleep with her arm flung upwards on the pillow. So I turned to go back to my room, but suddenly, as I was at the door, she said, 'Pa, what's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong,' I said. 'Nothing at all.'

I went out early in the *Mary Jane*, at that hour before the dawn has truly come and when I saw the flash of the Whetstone Lighthouse it was then I remembered what Josiah Green, the keeper of the light, had said to me long ago. Jenny had been eight or nine at that time and pretty as a princess and Josiah had said to me, 'I'll have your daughter for a bride when she's grown, and we'll sail to the West Indies, where I'll make my fortune. And Jenny will have a garden of red lilies and pour tea from a silver teapot.'

I'd said to Josiah, 'You'll be too old, boy, for a girl of mine.'

And he'd said, 'No man with a fortune is ever too old.'

I sat in my boat and stared up at the lighthouse and imagined Josiah keeping watch over the great burning lights and over the gleaming cogs that rotated the glass. I stared until the sun came up.

I say to Jenny, 'Teach me how to bake and how to launder. Teach me everything you do.'

'Why, Pa?' she says.

'Just teach me,' I say.

So she ties an apron round me and gets out a mixing bowl and warms it on the range and weighs flour and salt and shows me how to make a well in this for the stirred yeast and fold it slowly in. Then she covers the bowl with a cloth and tells me, 'Now you leave it alone to sponge for a while, then you beat it and knead it, and then you leave it again to rise . . .'

'Sponge and rise?' I say. 'I don't know what these terms mean . . .'

'No,' Jenny snaps. 'But you will. Or else have no bread.'

When I've kneaded the mix and left it to its rising, Jenny heats up the flat irons and lays a blanket on the table and sets down one of my Sunday shirts and shows me, 'Collar first, then cuffs, then sleeves, then back, then front, then shoulder seams . . .'

'Why is there an order to this?' I ask and she says, 'There's an order to everything. That's what my mother taught me.'

My hands burn and sting, but I try to do what she shows me, to get the shirt smooth, and I see her watching me and then I see the pile of sheets and pillowcases and cloths and petticoats and shawls all waiting to be ironed and I think to myself, How will I do all this drudgery and still keep my livelihood? And I longed to be away from the house, in the *Mary Jane*, alone with my nets and my thoughts.

I turn to Jenny and say, 'Has Josiah Green come courting you?'

She goes to the bread bowl and lifts the cloth and looks to see how far the dough has risen. Then she says, 'Josiah Green is your friend, and a good man.'

'I know,' I say. 'But if he's come courting you, you must tell your pa.'

'I would tell you,' she says.

I look at her and say, 'Have you always told me the truth, Jenny?'

'Yes,' she says. 'Always.'

I am on to the front of the shirt and I know the front is the most important bit, for it's the only place that can be seen, and how could I go to church on Sunday with my shirt looking like a rag? But my iron's gone cool and won't get the creases out. I stare down at my work, helpless to know

what to do, and I hear Jenny sigh and she snatches the iron out of my hand and sets down the second one, scalding hot from the range.

I went to visit Josiah Green.

I climbed the nine flights of stairs up to the Whetstone Light Room and my footsteps set up an echo that bounced and flew round the building.

I felt my heart and my lungs complaining and nor did I like the chill darkness and containment of the building and once again what I wanted was to be far out on the ocean, with the sky above me.

Josiah was in a cramped little space, where the cogs of the revolving glass were housed, and his head was close to the machinery, listening to it, just like I listened to the birds and the sea. 'Come on, Josiah,' I said. 'I need to talk to you, friend, and I hope you will be honest with me.'

We went up the iron ladder that led to the platform outside the Light Room and the wind came tearing at us and thrilled me. We held to the little railing that kept us from falling to our deaths and I said, 'Are you courting my girl? Yes or no?'

He was silent a while and I let him be. Then he said, 'I love your Jenny and I'd like to leave this lonely job. I'd like to take her with me to the Caribbean Islands and make my fortune before my fiftieth birthday has come and gone.'

I looked down at the waves beating at the foot of the lighthouse and then I said, 'Does my Jenny love you?'

Josiah shielded his eyes against the glare of the sun. 'The truth of it is,' he said, 'I don't know.'

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*Man in the Water*

I go to Jenny in the early evening. New loaves have been baked and all the ironing is freshly done and set in a neat pile.

‘Now you must tell your pa,’ I say, ‘do you love Josiah Green?’

‘No,’ she says.

I reach out my hand and stroke her dark hair. ‘He could take you to the Indies,’ I say, ‘and you might be a rich woman and grow scarlet lilies and pour your tea from a silver teapot.’

‘I know,’ she says.

‘So tell me again then, if this was to be your future, would you love him then?’

‘No,’ she says.

Her head, under my hand, is warm and beautiful. I take a breath. In that moment of my breath, I hear the familiar sounds of Pips and his friends playing tag in the lane, as the darkness falls. Then I say to my daughter, ‘That morning in summer, when I went chasing after a drowning man, tell me what you saw.’

‘I saw a man in the water,’ says Jenny.

‘Yet there’s no body been swept in,’ I say, ‘and still no report of anyone missing in Whetstone. So tell me the truth, Jenny. Tell me again what you saw.’

She lifts her chin and her dark hair flies as she whips her head away from my caressing hand.

‘I saw a man in the water, Pa!’ she cries. ‘And you can ask me and ask me till the end of time: I saw a man in the water.’

Inspired by the picture *Yarmouth Beach and Jetty* by  
Norwich School artist Joseph Stannard (1797–1830)

