

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

*The Closing Door*

The children assembled at the station barrier.

Their trunks had been sent on ahead of them, so what they had with them were small suitcases, as though they might have been going away for the weekend. But the youngest of the children was ten years old, and it was from the violent weeping of this one girl that it was possible to imagine the long stretch of boarding school time to which the waiting train would carry them.

She was a stumpy little person, optimistically named Patience. The elastic of her grey school hat dug into her dimpled chin. Her mother, Marjorie, held her close and the hat was knocked to the back of her head, revealing a disorderly festoon of brown curls. Marjorie pressed her mouth to these curls, kissing them and trying at the same time to whisper words of courage, but it was very difficult for her. She felt herself to be embarking on a furiously misguided enterprise. It was the early autumn of 1954. She had surely not nurtured and fed her War Baby and single-handedly kept her from all harm and depredation in order to surrender her to this expensive school . . .

‘Why do I have to go? *Why?*’ wailed Patience.

'Darling,' said the mother, 'I hate it, too. Hate it as much as you do. What am I going to do when I get home and you're not there?'

But this was the wrong thing to say, absolutely wrong. It was what she felt, but should never have said, for it only brought on a new Niagara of tears in Patience. For now, not only was the child going to suffer the loss of her mother; she was also going to have to imagine this mother in distress, crying probably, sitting by the gas fire with a cup of tea and weeping, forgetting to make herself any supper, forgetting everything but this awful separation . . .

What Marjorie should have said, but could not say, was that her parents-in-law had insisted upon Patience going to what they called a 'reputable school'. They had not thought any of the London day schools were reputable enough. Children only learned to become responsible adults, they believed, if you sent them away from home. No matter if these children suffered a bit. Who in the world had not suffered? And who, indeed, more than they, who had lost their only son, Timothy, in the last week of the war?

'Tim would have wanted it,' they'd told Marjorie kindly but firmly. 'Tim despised mollicoddling. Tim would have insisted upon it. He would have wanted us to pay the fees, and we will. And you know, Marjorie dear, Tim was a very wise young man. He was almost always right.'

But she couldn't lay the responsibility for the separation on them, couldn't alienate Patience from her grandparents, because it wasn't fair on them. She was all that remained to them of Timothy. She even resembled him, with the same chunky body and disobedient hair. Marjorie saw how much they loved to stroke Patience's curls, remembering their son.

They yearned to be as proud of Patience as they had been of him, and they believed, somehow, that boarding school was the key to bringing this about.

In the group of children and parents who surrounded her, Marjorie now sensed a movement. The ticket barrier had been opened and the moment was coming when all the girls would have to get on the train.

She had paid no heed to any of these people. They were nothing to her. But now she looked round at them, to see how they were managing this moment. She saw, with a feeling of relief, that there was a little crying going on among the other children. One of them, a tall, slender girl of twelve or thirteen, carrying a new lacrosse stick, had pressed the net basket of the stick over her face and was sobbing into that, while a tall man, evidently her father, helplessly patted her shoulder.

'Come on, old thing,' she heard this father say, 'think of midnight feasts and all that malarkey. Think of being Captain of Junior Lax! And half-term will be here in a jiffy.'

'I miss Jasper!' cried the girl.

'I know you do. But we'll take good care of him. Mummy will take him for a walk every morning.'

So then, thought Marjorie, if it's hard for these two, then probably it's hard for everybody, except that for most of them there might be 'Mummy and Daddy' and not just 'Mum' as Patience called her.

Patience had never known 'Daddy'. She had often been shown a black-and-white photograph of him, wearing his Irish Guards uniform, holding her in his arms in 1944: tiny Patience, swaddled in a white lace shawl, clasped in Daddy's broad-fingered hands. He had been smiling for

the camera – the anxious smile of the proud father, proud soldier – but that was the last picture ever taken of him.

Since then, for Patience, there had only been Mum: Mum alone in her small flat with her part-time job in a bridal shop, Mum who had never seen anything of the world, Mum who saved string and borrowed her books from Boots' Library, Mum who loved her daughter more than life.

And it was coming nearer, nearer, the moment when Marjorie would have to unwind Patience's arms from round her waist and lead her forwards to the barrier. She tried to stand a bit more upright, but the weight of Patience clinging to her was implacable, as though she had been roped to the ground. And she thought, I am bent like an old person, bent down by the gravity of love.

'Come on, angel,' she said, as firmly as she could. 'I'm going to come with you as far as the ticket man. But then you're going to have to be brave and get on the train. Everybody else is going now. See? You can't be left behind.'

'I want to be left behind!' screamed Patience. And now she raised one of her determined little fists and hit Marjorie on the shoulder. 'I hate you for making me go!' she cried out. 'I hate you. I hate you!'

Marjorie knew that this now risked to become what Tim would have called 'a scene', and that the other parents would pity her, or even despise her, for not crushing it the minute it started, so, with surprising strength, she grabbed Patience by the fist that had struck her and turned the sobbing child round to face the trains and the great vaulted station roof above them, still black from the years of war.

'Patience,' she said, 'nothing you do or say is going to change the fact that you are going away to school. You are

going to learn Latin and Greek and do chemistry experiments and act in plays and read Shakespeare and run round a huge park in the sunshine. You are going to be happy there. I'm going to write to you every day. *Every day*. But now you're going to say goodbye to me. Here's your train ticket. You are going to say goodbye to me now.'

Patience's crying ceased quite suddenly. She looked shocked, as though Marjorie had slapped her. She stood still and let her face be wiped with a handkerchief. She was shuddering and pale, with eyes puffy and red, but Marjorie knew that now she would find the courage to board the train.

Marjorie kissed her on both cheeks, set her hat gently back on her curls, mortified to notice how the wretched elastic cut into the flesh of her chin, and trying to ease it with her finger, but with her heart beating in relief that, at last, the child was attempting to master her grief.

'Well done,' she said. 'Well done, Patience.'

Then she watched her go, joining the cluster of grey-uniformed children walking to this new piece of their lives and trying not to look back, but looking back all the same and waving and then suddenly running on. She saw that the ticket puncher at the barrier was trying to laugh and joke with the boarding school girls, and she thought, Acts of kindness are not rare. We still live in austere times, but people have not exhausted their reserves of compassion.

She stood quite still until she could no longer see Patience.

In fact she hadn't been able to catch sight of her for a long moment because two women, two mothers of departing girls, their arms linked together, had barged in front of her

and were waving and calling out to their girls: 'Bye, darlings! Bye! Bye-by-e!'

Something about these women – their expensive suits, perhaps, their gloves and small velvet hats, their ridiculous *Bysey-byes*, or was it their seeming gladness of heart? – awoke in Marjorie a feeling of instant dislike. She wanted to push by them, elbow them out of her way, trample on their feet, even, so that she might catch a last glimpse of Patience climbing onto the train or straining out of a window. But they somehow prevented her. They had taken up a position and would not be moved from it. Marjorie was forced to stand where she was, unable to see anything. Then a whistle was blown and the train's great engine hissed into life and it was gone, and Patience was gone.

When the train could no longer be seen, the women hugged each other, laughing delightedly.

'Right,' said one, 'now we can get on with life!'

'What a blessed relief!' said the other.

They turned and walked past Marjorie. She saw that one of them was dazzlingly pretty, with great blue eyes like Bette Davis. The other looked plain by comparison, but had a beautiful slim figure like Wallis Simpson, and you got from them the idea that they complemented each other, and knew it, and now, freed from their children, they were going to walk together back into lives they believed to be wonderful.

They went out of the station and walked towards the Number 11 bus stop. Marjorie followed. To get home to North London, she would have taken the tube, but the thought of going home – to sit alone and imagine Patience arriving in a cold dormitory and unpacking her trunk and putting her new tartan rug on some hard, iron bed

– dismayed her. She preferred to shadow these strangers. She wanted to observe what life it was they were going to get on with.

They sat on the top deck of the bus, at the very front, looking down in fascination on the scurry of the suited City men. They took off their little velvet hats and shook out their shiny hair.

Marjorie sat near the back, pretending to gaze out of the window, but in fact barely letting her eyes stray from the women, who were now smoking cigarettes jammed into long black cigarette holders. She couldn't hear what they were saying to each other, but they reminded Marjorie of people at a party, laughing, waving their cigarettes about, having a good time.

Marjorie began to wonder if their children, freed from them and now being carried through the Hertfordshire countryside, were also laughing. She tried to imagine them: 'Little Bette', 'Little Wallis'. Laughing as they sped back towards their dormitory nights, their cold classrooms, their thin food.

Or was the lost and scented presence of these mothers already making them sad? Did they suspect, or even *know*, that, as soon as the train had gone, they would rush back to the grown-up world with such terrible alacrity?

On crawled the bus, going towards Victoria and the river. These were not parts of London Marjorie often visited. Nothing much ever seemed to lead her south or west. All she'd known for ten years was staying in one place and caring for Patience and working in the bridal shop. On work days, Patience would come to the shop after school and sit



quietly in one of the fitting cubicles, reading her book, or else help with pinning and measuring, while the brides stood on little stools, staring at themselves, trying on veils, their eyes brimming with tears of hope.

She wondered how much further the women would travel. And when they got off at last, what would she do? She was miles from Muswell Hill. The September afternoon was already shading to evening. Perhaps she should get off at Victoria Station and begin her long tube ride home? For what right did she have to sit on a bus, passing judgement on strangers?

But she did not get off. She thought, If I see where they live, then, perhaps, I will know. Then, I will get some picture of the life their children prevent them from living. I will understand what it is – by loving Patience so desperately – I've missed and might one day have.

As the bus approached Sloane Square, the women stubbed out their cigarettes and got up and came swaying along towards her, smelling of expensive perfume and of all the smoke they had inhaled. The great blue eyes of Bette stared at her for a moment, and she imagined her whispering to Wallis, 'Wasn't that the woman with the caterwauling child at the station? What's she doing on our bus?' But they went down the stairs and walked away. They did not look up.

Marjorie jumped off the bus just as it was pulling away. She stumbled, but didn't fall. Keeping her distance, dreading to be seen for the busy-body she was, Marjorie followed Bette and Wallis to a square of tall red-brick houses, arranged around private gardens. Bette had a key to one of the houses and the two women went in and the black front door was shut.

Marjorie stood some distance away, in the shadow of a lilac tree that hung over the railings of the gardens. She stared at the closed door.

After ten or fifteen minutes, a taxi stopped, not in front of Bette's house, but just opposite to where Marjorie was standing. A man wearing a City suit got out. He didn't pay the cab driver, but just walked hastily away. Marjorie pressed herself deeper into the shade of the lilac tree. The taxi drove on, and as it passed her, Marjorie could just glimpse the silhouette of a young woman, visible in the rear window.

Now, she saw the man ring the bell of Bette's house. He looked anxiously behind him, as though to make sure that the taxi had gone. Then the door was opened and Marjorie saw Wallis, whose husband this man must be, throw her arms round his neck and draw him inside the house.

'Darling!' she heard her say. 'Darling, come in!'

Then the door closed once more.

Marjorie stared at the door until the darkness shrouded it. Lights came on in the house and she looked up at these, but could see no one at any of the windows. So here, she thought, is where this has to end – with the closing of a door. How much more did I imagine I was ever going to know?

Yet she felt that she had seen something important, something that might end in ruin.

She imagined Wallis, ten or eleven years ago, wearing her bridal gown, standing on a little plinth, while seamstresses crawled on the floor, tucking and pinning. She imagined her trying on different veils and, as she laid them over her shiny hair, dreaming of her marvellous future with this man, this man in his City suit, with a safe job and a beautiful income.

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But now, it was all beginning to slip away. She wasn't pretty enough for him, not as pretty as her friend Bette, not as young and pretty as the girl in the taxi. Today, freed from her child or children, she had imagined she was moving back into the selfish, grown-up life she loved, but, unknown to her, that life had turned its back and was moving away from her.

It was late now. Marjorie left the square and walked until she found a telephone box. She counted out some money and fed it into the slot – almost all the coins she had in her purse – hoping it would be enough.

She had the number of the school scribbled down on a piece of paper. She dialled it and pressed Button A when a voice answered. She asked to speak to Patience. But it was the school secretary who had picked up the telephone and this severe woman informed Marjorie curtly that calls from parents were not allowed, except in emergencies.

'This is an emergency,' said Marjorie. 'I'm ringing from a coin box and I have only limited money. My daughter was very, very upset when she got on the train. I need to know that she is all right. So please go and find her as quickly as you can.'

She was told to wait. Time passed and it got very dark in the box, dark and cold. Marjorie emptied her purse and found one more shilling in it.

At last, a subdued voice said: 'Mum? Why are you ringing from a phone box? Where are you?'

Hearing this little voice, far away, and with only a shilling of time left to her, Marjorie felt exhausted, on the very edge of collapse. She wanted to say, 'I don't know where I

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am. I'm miles from anywhere familiar to me. I don't know what I'm meant to do now.'

Instead, she said brightly: 'I'm fine. I just went on a little walk, to clear my head. I wanted to know you're all right. Are you all right?'

'Yes. I put my new rug on my bed, like you told me to.'

'Good girl,' said Marjorie. 'Is the dorm OK?'

'Yes.'

'Good. That's what I wanted to know. Oh, and one more thing I wanted to say: I love you very much.'

'I love you, too, Mum,' said Patience. 'But I'm trying not to think about you. It's better if I don't.'

'I understand, darling,' said Marjorie. 'I completely understand. That's very sensible of you. What matters now is getting on with your life.'