

The Kindest Betrayal

by Rosalyn St Pierre

It starts on that car journey, a premonition, a sense of despair that grows until the limousine sweeps up before the steps of the Prep school. I weep, cling to my silent mother, while my father fumes.

‘For god’s sake stop blabbing,’

and so, incoherent with stifled sobs, I am passed to the care of the Housemaster. My mother makes a feeble request,

‘You will take good care of him, won’t you?’

He replies, ‘Of course he will be my special boy.’

So it continues. I make frequent cries for help, ask to change schools. My father responds with, ‘Boys get buggered at prep school and public school pointless to change, it will make no difference, happened to me, no harm in fact some advantages’ He laughs, ‘Look where I am today.’

Betrayal.

Summer holidays, I am sixteen, lonely, silent, have to accompany parents on a bloody stupid weekend to a distant cousin’s country estate. I avoid the tennis, the croquet and mooch around the grand house. Until... Yes that is the moment my life changes.

A painting.

A glorious landscape, clouds race across the wide skies, fields are abundant with crops, lone farm workers stand in their horses. Such peace.

Then a movement, a girl stands beside me,

‘My favourite too, I love it, wish I could be there, on that hill. There are others you know, want to see them?’

She takes me by the hand and we walk through the house, finding paintings, gradually talking about the artists. Gongs are sounded, tea time. We join the throng.

‘Where have you two been?’

My father’s growl,

‘Don’t worry Lady Sybil, she’s quite safe with him.’

She takes my hand again.

I see the smirks.

January 1934 returning to Cambridge for Lent Term, (it was Oxbridge or nothing), I look out of the taxi to Kings Cross and see a chap, my age, with a cart of vegetables. We meet each other’s eyes where I see no envy of my comfortable taxi, my expensive jacket, but I can see he works with dignity, he makes an independent living. Is this the future if ever there was to be a revolution? What was I doing learning about dead artists so to trade them from one wealthy owner to another.

Is that my future, to betray those artists who died in poverty while their work fetches unimaginable prices, while workers toil to produce the wealth that will never reach them

1937, a private viewing at the Royal Academy, the noise, the sycophancy, I am nauseated. Until. A hand in my hand, a gentle kiss.

‘So here we are again looking at landscapes portraits and lurid patterns.’

I turn, the girl now a sophisticated woman, hair rigidly curled, lurid lipstick, but still the same sweet smile.

‘So here we are again,’ I repeat, adding, ‘I’ve sold my soul, to an art gallery in Mayfair, advising them on whether the paintings bought in by the refugees are forgeries or not. To be honest if I like the seller or the artwork I always say it is genuine.’

‘I’ve sold my soul too,’ she mutters, ‘or more accurately I have been sold.’

She doesn’t look at me appears to be studying some particularly vile example of post- modern art.

‘Into marriage, the fate of women of our class, but an offer than cannot be refused.’

A glance at the throng tells me who is the chosen.

‘He’s alright, but it’s the brother, that’s the viper, I swear he’ll cause real trouble.’

She makes a move to join the others, but then takes my hand,

‘No matter what we’ll be pals for life.’

World War Two and to the amazement of all I become a very successful officer in the army. By 1944 it is discovered I am very fluent in German and sent to undertake secret missions. The arrogance of the ruling classes are such no one ever asks me if I speak other languages. I do not betray my secret.

December 1945 she calls. 'We have a dreadful problem, the Americans have found the papers and publish them. We will be ruined. My bloody brother in law. Can you get them back?'

A dilemma, a successful secret mission ensures the continuation of all I despise, but I cannot betray her trust. On my return I hand over most...I may need some insurance for the future. I am rewarded, farewell Mayfair and its sleazy transactions, I have proper sinecure at last.

A quiet old age may not be for me. After all these years, a knock on the door, was I a friend of the infamous spy group? Will I betray my friends? Did I betray my country? The vultures circle. A phone call. My only friend, will she betray me, she knows some files were incomplete at handover? Then silence, I am left alone, I am safe.

There are nine letters in treachery and one fewer in betrayal, the lesser sin. I may have sinned but I remain true to friends and to the cause.