

*William Trevor*

## *Angels at the Ritz*

THE GAME WAS PLAYED when the party, whichever party it happened to be, had thinned out. Those who stayed on beyond a certain point—beyond, usually, about one o'clock—knew that the game was on the cards and in fact had stayed for that reason. Often, as one o'clock approached, there were marital disagreements about whether or not to go home.

The game of swapping wives and husbands, with chance rather than choice dictating the formations, had been practised in this outer suburb since the mid-1950s. The swinging wives and husbands of that time were now passing into the first years of elderliness, but their party game continued. In the outer suburb it was most popular when the early struggles of marriage were over, after children had been born and were established at school, when there were signs of marital wilting that gin and tonic did not cure.

"I think it's awfully silly," Polly Dillard pronounced, addressing her husband on the evening of the Ryders' party.

Her husband, whose first name was Gavin, pointed out that they'd known for years that the practice was prevalent at Saturday night parties in the outer suburb. There'd been, he reminded her, a moment at the Meacocks' when they'd realised they'd stayed too late, when the remaining men threw their car-keys on to the Meacocks' carpet and Sylvia Meacock began to tie scarves over the eyes of the wives.

"I mean, it's silly Sue and Malcolm going in for it. All of a sudden, out of the blue like that."

"They're just shuffling along with it, I suppose."

Polly shook her head. Quietly, she said that in the past Sue and Malcolm Ryder hadn't

been the kind to shuffle along with things. Sue had sounded like a silly schoolgirl, embarrassed and not looking her in the eye when she told her.

Gavin could see she was upset, but one of the things about Polly since she'd had their two children and had come to live in the outer suburb was that she was able to deal with being upset. She dealt with it now, keeping calm, not raising her voice. She'd have been the same when Sue Ryder averted her eyes and said that she and Malcolm had decided to go in, too, for the outer suburb's most popular party game. Polly would have been astonished and would have said so, and then she'd have attempted to become reconciled to the development. Before this evening came to an end she really would be reconciled, philosophically accepting the development as part of the Ryders' middle age while denying that it could ever be part of hers.

"I suppose," Gavin said, "it's like a schoolgirl deciding to let herself be kissed for the first time. Don't you remember sounding silly then, Polly?"

She said it wasn't at all like that. Imagine, she suggested, finding yourself teamed up with a sweaty creature like Tim Gruffydd. Imagine any schoolgirl in her senses letting Tim Gruffydd within two million miles of her. She still couldn't believe that Sue and Malcolm Ryder were really going in for stuff like that. What on earth happened to people? she asked Gavin, and Gavin said he didn't know.

Polly Dillard was thirty-six, her husband two years older. Her short fair hair had streaks of grey in it now. Her thin, rather long face wasn't pretty but did occasionally seem beautiful, the eyes deep blue, the mouth wide,

becoming slanted when she smiled. She herself considered that nothing matched properly in her face and that her body was too lanky, and her breasts too slight. But after thirty-six years she'd become used to all that, and other women envied her her figure and her looks.

On the evening of the Ryders' party she surveyed the features that did not in her opinion match, applying eye-shadow in her bedroom looking-glass and now and again glancing at the reflection of her husband, who was changing from his Saturday clothes into clothes more suitable for Saturday night at the Ryders': a blue corduroy suit, pink shirt and pinkish tie. Of medium height, fattening on lunches and alcohol, he was dark-haired and still handsome, for his chunky features were only just beginning to trail signs of this telltale plumpness. By profession Gavin Dillard was a director of promotional films for television, mainly in the soap and detergent field.

The hall-door bell rang as Polly rose from the chair in front of her looking-glass.

"I'll go," he said, adding that it would be Estrella, their babysitter.

"Estrella couldn't come, I had to ring Problem. Some Irish-sounding girl it'll be."

"Hannah McCarthy," a round-faced girl at the door said. "Are you Mr Dillard, sir?"

He smiled at her and said he was. He closed the door and took her coat. He led her through a white, spacious hall into a sitting-room that was spacious also, with pale blue walls and curtains. One child was already in bed, he told her, the other was still in his bath. Two boys, he explained: Paul and David. His wife would introduce her to them.

"Would you like a drink, Hannah?"

"Well, I wouldn't say no to that, Mr Dillard." She smiled an extensive smile at him. "A little sherry if you have it, sir."

"And how's the old country, Hannah?" He spoke lightly, trying to be friendly, handing her a glass of sherry. He turned away and poured himself some gin and tonic, adding a sliver of lemon. "Cheers, Hannah!"

"Cheers, sir! Ireland, d'you mean, sir? Oh, Ireland doesn't change."

"You go back, do you?"

"Every holidays. I'm in teacher training, Mr Dillard."

"I was at the Cork Film Festival once. A right old time we had."

"I don't know Cork, actually. I'm from Listowel myself. Are you in films yourself, sir? You're not an actor, Mr Dillard?"

"Actually I'm a director."

POLLY ENTERED the room. She said she was Mrs Dillard. She smiled, endeavouring to be as friendly as Gavin had been in case the girl didn't feel at home. She thanked her for coming at such short notice and presumably so far. She was wearing a skirt that Gavin had helped her to buy in Fenwick's only last week, and a white lace blouse she'd had for years, and her jade beads. The skirt, made of velvet, was the same green as the jade. She took the babysitter away to introduce her to the two children.

Gavin stood with his back to the fire, sipping at his gin and tonic. He didn't find it puzzling that Polly should feel so strongly about the fact that Sue and Malcolm Ryder had reached a certain stage in their marriage. The Ryders were their oldest and closest friends. Polly and Sue had known one another since they'd gone together to the Misses Summers' nursery school in Putney. Perhaps it was this depth in the relationship that caused Polly to feel so disturbed by a new development in her friend's life. In his own view, being offered a free hand with an unselected woman in return for agreeing that some man should maul his wife about wasn't an attractive proposition. It surprised him that the Ryders had decided to go in for this particular party game, and it surprised him even more that Malcolm Ryder had never mentioned it to him. But it didn't upset him.

"All right?" Polly enquired from the doorway, with her coat on. The coat was brown and fur-trimmed and expensive: she looked beautiful in it, Gavin thought, calm and collected. Once, a long time ago, she had thrown a milk-jug across a room at him. At one time she had wept a lot, deploring her lankiness and her flat breasts. All that seemed strangely out of character now.

He finished his drink and put the glass down on the mantelpiece. He put the sherry bottle beside the babysitter's glass in case she should feel like some more, and then changed his mind and returned the bottle to

the cabinet, remembering that they didn't know the girl: a drunk babysitter, an experience they'd once endured, was a great deal worse than no babysitter at all.

"She seems very nice," Polly said in the car. "She said she'd read to them for an hour."

"An hour? The poor girl."

"She loves children."

It was dark, half-past eight on a night in November. It was raining just enough to make it necessary to use the windscreen wipers. Automatically, Gavin turned the car radio on: there was something pleasantly cosy about the glow of a car radio at night when it was raining, with the background whirr of the windscreen wipers and the wave of warmth from the heater.

"Let's not stay long," he said.

It pleased her that he said that. She wondered if they were dull not to wish to stay, but he said that was nonsense.

He drove through the sprawl of their outer suburb, all of it new, disguised now by the night. Orange street lighting made the façades of the carefully-designed houses seem different, changing the colours. But the feeling of space remained, and the uncluttered effect of the unfenced front gardens. Roomy Volvo estate-cars went nicely with the detached houses. So did Vauxhall Victors, and big bus-like Volkswagens. Families were packed into such vehicles on summer Saturday mornings, for journeys to cottages in the Welsh hills or in Hampshire or Herts. The Dillards' cottage was in the New Forest.

Gavin parked the car in Sandiway Crescent, several doors away from the Ryders' house because other cars were already parked closer to it. He'd have much preferred to be going out to dinner at Tonino's with Malcolm and Sue, lasagne and peperonata and a carafe of Chianti Christina, a lazy kind of evening that would remind all of them of other lazy evenings. Ten years ago they'd all four gone regularly to Tonino's trattoria in Greek Street, and the branch that had opened in their outer suburb was very like the original, even down to the framed colour photographs of A.C. Milan.

"Come on *in!*" Sue cried jollily at Number Four Sandiway Crescent. Her face was flushed with party excitement, her large brown eyes flashed adventurously with party

spirit. Her eyes were the only outsize thing about her: she was tiny and black-haired, as pretty as a rose-bud.

"Gin?" Malcolm shouted at them from the depths of the crowded hall. "Sherry, Polly? Burgundy?"

Gavin kissed the dimpled cheek that Sue Ryder pressed up at him. She was in red, a long red dress that suited her, with a red band in her hair and red shoes.

"Yes, wine please, Malcolm," Polly said, and when she was close enough she slid her face towards his for the same kind of embrace as her husband had given his wife.

"You're looking edible, my love," he said, a compliment he'd been paying her for seventeen years.

He was an enormous man, made to seem more so by the smallness of his wife. His features had a mushy look. His head, like a pink sponge, was perched jauntily on shoulders that had once been a force to reckon with in rugby scrums. Although he was exactly the same age as Gavin, his hair had balded away to almost nothing, a rim of fluff not quite encircling the sponge.

"You're looking very smart yourself," Polly said, a statement that might or might not have been true: she couldn't see him properly because he was so big and she was so close to him, and she hadn't looked when she'd been further away. He was wearing a grey suit of some kind and a blue-striped shirt and the tie of the Harlequins' Rugby Club. Usually he looked smart, he probably did now.

"I'm feeling great," he said. "Nice little party we're having, Poll."

IT WASN'T REALLY little. Sixty or so people were in the Ryders' house, which was similar to the Dillards' house, well-designed and spacious. Most of the downstairs rooms, and the hall, had coffee-coloured walls, an experiment of Sue's which she believed had been successful. For the party, the bulkier furniture had been taken out of the coffee-coloured sitting-room, and all the rugs had been lifted from the parquet floor. Music came from a tape-recorder, but no one was dancing yet. People stood in small groups, smoking and talking and drinking. No one, so far, appeared to be drunk.

All the usual people were there: the Stubbses, the Burgesses, the Pedlars, the Thompsons, the Stevensons, Sylvia and Jack Meacock, Philip and June Mulally, Oliver and Olive Gramsmith, Tim and Mary-Ann Gruffydd and dozens of others. Not all of them lived in the outer suburb; and some were older, some younger, than the Ryders and the Dillards. But there was otherwise a similarity about the people at the party: they were men who had succeeded or were in the process of succeeding, and women who had kept pace with their husbands' advance. No one looked poor at the Ryders' party.

At ten o'clock there was food, smoked salmon rolled up and speared with cocktail sticks, chicken *vol-au-vent* or beef Stroganoff with rice, salads of different kinds, Stilton and Brie and Port Salut, and meringues. Wine flowed generously, white burgundy, and red. Uncorked bottles were distributed on all convenient surfaces.

THE DANCING began when the first guests had eaten. To *Love of the Loved*, Polly danced with a man whose name she didn't know, who told her he was an estate agent, with an office in Jermyn Street. He held her rather close for a man whose name she didn't know. He was older than Polly, about fifty she reckoned, and smaller. He had a foxy moustache and foxy hair, and a round stomach, like a ball, which kept making itself felt. So did his knees.

In the room where the food was Gavin sat on the floor with Sylvia and Jack Meacock, and a woman in an orange trouser suit, with orange lips.

"Ralphie wouldn't come," this woman said, balancing food in the hollow of a fork. "He got cross with me last night."

Gavin ate from his fingers a *vol-au-vent* full of chicken and mushrooms that had gone a little cold. Jack Meacock said nothing would hold him back from a party given by the Ryders. Or any party, he added, guffawing, given by anyone. Provided there was refreshment, his wife stipulated. Well naturally, Jack Meacock said.

"He wouldn't come," the orange woman explained, "because he thought I misbehaved in Olive Gramsmith's kitchen. A fortnight ago, for God's sake!"

Gavin calculated he'd had four glasses of

gin and tonic. He corrected himself, remembering the one he'd had with the babysitter. He drank some wine. He wasn't entirely drunk, he said to himself, he hadn't turned a certain corner, but the corner was the next thing there was.

"If you want to kiss someone you kiss him," the orange woman said. "I mean, for God's sake, he'd no damn right to walk into Olive Gramsmith's kitchen. I didn't see you," she said, looking closely at Gavin. "You weren't there, were you?"

"We couldn't go."

"You were there," she said to the Meacocks. "All over the place."

"We certainly were!" Jack Meacock guffawed through his beef Stroganoff, scattering rice on to the coffee-coloured carpet.

"Hullo," their hostess said, and sat down on the carpet beside Gavin, with a plate of cheese.

"You mean you've been married twelve years?" the estate agent said to Polly. "You don't look it."

"I'm thirty-six."

"What's your better half in? He's here, is he?"

"He directs films. Advertisements for TV. Yes, he's here."

"That's mine." He indicated with his head a woman who wasn't dancing, in lime green. She was going through a bad patch, he said: depressions.

They danced to *Sunporch Cha-Cha-Cha*, Simon and Garfunkel.

"Feeling O.K.?" the estate agent enquired, and Polly said yes, not understanding what he meant. He propelled her towards the mantelpiece and took from it the glass of white burgundy Polly had left there. He offered it to her and when she'd taken a mouthful he drank some from it himself. They danced again. He clutched her more tightly with his arms and flattened a cheek against one of hers, rasping her with his moustache. With dead eyes, the woman in lime green watched.

At other outer-suburb parties Polly had been through it all before. She escaped from the estate agent and was caught by Tim Gruffydd, who had already begun to sweat. After that another man whose name she didn't know danced with her, and then Malcolm Ryder did.

"You're edible tonight," he whispered, the



warm mush of his lips damping her ear. "You're really edible, my love."

"Share my cheese," Sue offered in the other room, pressing Brie on Gavin.

"I need more wine," the woman in orange said, and Jack Meacock pushed himself up from the carpet. They all needed more wine, he pointed out, guffawing. The orange woman predicted that the next day she'd have a hangover and Sylvia Meacock, a masculine-looking woman, said she'd never had a hangover in forty-eight years of steady drinking.

"You going to stay a while?" Sue said to Gavin. "You and Polly going to stay?" She laughed, taking one of his hands because it was near to her. Since they'd known one another for such a long time it was quite in order for her to do that.

"Our babysitter's unknown," Gavin explained, "From the bogs of Ireland."

The orange woman said the Irish were bloody.

"Jack's Irish, actually," Sylvia Meacock said.

She went on talking about that, about her husband's childhood in Co. Down, about an uncle of his who used to drink a bottle and a half of whisky a day—on top of four glasses of stout, with porridge and bread, for his breakfast. If you drank at all you should drink steadily, she said.

GAVIN FELT UNEASY because all the time Sylvia Meacock was talking about the drinking habits of her husband's uncle in Co. Down Sue clung on to his hand. She held it lightly, moving her fingers in a caress that seemed to stray outside the realm of their long friendship. He was in love with Polly: he thought that deliberately, arraying the sentiment in his mind as a statement, seeing it suspended there. There was no one he'd ever known whom he'd been fonder of than Polly, or whom he respected more, or whom it would upset him more to hurt. Seventeen years ago he'd met her in the kitchens of the Hotel Belvedere, Penzance, where they had both gone to work for the summer. Five years later, having lived with one another in a flat in the cheaper part of Maida Vale, they'd got married because Polly wanted to have children. They'd moved to the outer suburb

because the children needed space and fresh air, and because the Ryders, who'd lived on the floor above theirs in Maida Vale, had moved there a year before.

"She'll be all right," Sue said, returning to the subject of the Irish babysitter. "She could probably stay the night. She'd probably be delighted."

"Oh, I don't think so, Sue."

He imagined without difficulty the hands of men at the party unbuttoning Polly's lace blouse, the hands of Jack Meacock or the sweaty hands of Tim Gruffydd. He imagined Polly's clothes falling on to a bedroom carpet and then her thin, lanky nakedness, her small breasts and the faint mark of her appendix scar. "Oh, I say!" she said in a way that wasn't like her when the man, whoever he was, took off his own clothes. Without difficulty either, Gavin imagined being in a room himself for the same purpose, with the orange woman or Sylvia Meacock. He'd walk out again if he found himself in a room with Sylvia Meacock and he'd rather be in a room with Sue than with the orange woman. Because he wasn't quite sober, he had a flash of panic when he thought of what might be revealed when the orange trouser-suit fell to the floor: for a brief, disturbing moment he felt it was actually happening, that in the bonhomie of drunkenness he'd somehow agreed to the situation.

"Why don't we dance?" Sue suggested, and Gavin agreed.

"I think I'd like a drink," Polly said to Philip Mulally, an executive with Wolsey Menswear. He was a grey shadow of a man, not at all the kind to permit himself or his wife to be a party to sexual games. He nodded seriously when Polly interrupted their dance to say she'd like a drink. It was time in any case, he revealed, that he and June were making a move homewards.

"I love you in that lace thing," Malcolm Ryder whispered boringly as soon as Polly stopped dancing with Philip Mulally. He was standing waiting for her.

"I was saying to Philip I'd like a drink."

"Of course you must have a drink. Come and quaff a brandy with me, Poll." He took her by the hand and led her away from the dancers. The brandy was in his den, he said.

She shook her head, following him because she had no option. Above the noise of Cilla

Black singing *Anyone Who Had a Heart* she shouted at him that she'd prefer some more white burgundy, that she was actually feeling thirsty. But he didn't hear her, or didn't wish to. "Ain't misbehaving", the foxy estate agent mouthed at her as they passed him, standing on his own in the hall. It was an expression that was often used, without much significance attaching to it, at parties in the outer suburb.

"Evening, all," Malcolm said in the room he called his den, closing the door behind Polly. The only light in the room was from a desk-lamp. In the shadows, stretched on a mock-leather sofa, a man and a woman were kissing one another. They parted in some embarrassment at their host's jocular greeting, revealing themselves, predictably, as a husband and another husband's wife.

"Carry on, folks," Malcolm said.

He poured Polly some brandy even though she had again said that what she wanted was a glass of burgundy. The couple on the sofa got up and went away, giggling. The man told Malcolm he was an old bastard.

"Here you are," Malcolm said, and then to Polly's distaste he placed his mushy lips on hers and exerted some pressure. The brandy glass was in her right hand, between them: had it not been there, she knew the embrace would have been more intimate. As it was, it was possible for both of them to pretend that what had occurred was purely an expression of Malcolm Ryder's friendship for her, a special little detour to show that for all these years it hadn't been just a case of two wives being friends and the husbands tagging along. Once, in 1965, they'd all gone to the Italian Adriatic together and quite often Malcolm had given her a kiss and a hug while telling her how edible she was. But somehow—perhaps because his lips hadn't been so mushy in the past—it was different now.

"Cheers!" he said, smiling at her in the dimness. For an unpleasant moment she thought he might lock the door. What on earth did you do if an old friend tried to rape you on a sofa in his den?

WITH EVERY STEP they made together, the orange woman increased her entwinement of Oliver Gramsmith. The estate agent was dancing with June Mulally, both

of them ignoring the gestures of June Mulally's husband, Philip, who was still anxious to move homewards. The Thompsons, the Pedlars, the Stevensons, the Suttons, the Heeresmas and the Fultons were all maritally separated. Tim Gruffydd was clammily tightening his grasp of Olive Gramsmith, Sylvia Meacock's head lolled on the shoulder of a man called Thistlewine.

"Remember the Ritz?" Sue said.

He did remember. It was a long time ago, years before they'd all gone together to the Italian Adriatic, when they'd just begun to live in Maida Vale, one flat above the other, none of them married. They'd gone to the Ritz because they couldn't afford it. The excuse had been Polly's birthday.

"March the twenty-fifth," he said. "1961". He could feel her breasts, like spikes because of the neat control of her brassiere. He'd become too flabby, he thought, since March 25th, 1961.

"What fun it was!" With her dark petite head on one side, she smiled up at him. "Remember it all, Gavin?"

"Yes, I remember."

"I wanted to sing that song and no one would let me. Polly was horrified."

"Well, it was Polly's birthday."

"And of course we couldn't have spoiled that." She was still smiling up at him, her eyes twinkling, the tone of her voice as light as a feather. Yet the words sounded like a criticism, as though she were saying now—fourteen years later—that Polly had been a spoilsport, which at the time hadn't seemed so in the least. Her arms tightened around his waist. Her face disappeared as she sank her head against his chest. All he could see was the red band in her hair and the hair itself. She smelt of some pleasant scent. He liked the sharpness of her breasts. He wanted to stroke her head.

"Sue fancies old Gavin, you know," Malcolm said in his den.

Polly laughed. He had put a hand on her thigh and the fingers were now slightly massaging the green velvet of her skirt and the flesh beneath it. To have asked him to take his hand away or to have pushed it away herself would have been too positive, too much a reflection of his serious mood rather than her own determinedly casual one. A thickness had crept into his voice. He looked

much older than thirty-eight; he'd worn less well than Gavin.

"Let's go back to the party, Malcolm." She stood up, dislodging his hand as though by accident.

"Let's have another drink."

He was a solicitor now, with Parker, Hille and Harper. He had been, in fact, a solicitor when they'd all lived in the cheaper part of Maida Vale. He'd still played rugby for the Harlequins then. She and Gavin and Sue used to watch him on Saturday afternoons, playing against the London clubs, Rosslyn Park and Blackheath, Waterloo, London Welsh, London Irish, and all the others. Malcolm had been a towering wing-three-quarter, with a turn of speed that was surprising in so large a man: people repeatedly said, even newspaper commentators, that he should play for England.

Polly was aware that it was a cliché to compare Malcolm as he had been with the blubbery, rather tedious Malcolm beside whom it was unwise to sit on a sofa. Naturally he wasn't the same. It was probably a tedious life being a solicitor with Parker, Hille and Harper day after day. He probably did his best to combat the blubberiness, and no man could help being bald. When he was completely sober, and wasn't at a party, he could still be quite funny and nice, hardly tedious at all.

"I've always fancied you, Poll," he said. "You know that."

"Oh, nonsense, Malcolm!"

SHE TOOK the brandy glass from him, holding it between them in case he should make another lurch. He began to talk about sex. He asked her if she'd read, a few years ago, about a couple on an aeroplane, total strangers, who had performed the sexual act in full view of the other passengers. He told her a story about Mick Jagger on an aeroplane, at the time when Mick Jagger was making journeys with Marianne Faithfull. He said the springing system of Green Line buses had the same kind of effect on him. Sylvia Meacock was lesbian, he said. Olive Gramsmith was a slapparatus. Philip Mulally had once been seen hanging about Shepherd Market, looking at the tarts. He hadn't been faithful to Sue, he said, but Sue knew about

it and now they were going to approach all that side of things in a different way. Polly knew about it, too, because Sue had told her: a woman in Parker, Hille and Harper had wanted Malcolm to divorce Sue, and there'd been, as well, less serious relationships between Malcolm and other women.

"*Since you went away the days grow long,*" sang Nat King Cole in the coffee-coloured sitting-room, "*and soon I'll hear ole winter's song.*" Some guests, in conversation, raised their voices above the voice of Nat King Cole. Others swayed to his rhythm. In the sitting-room and the hall and the room where the food had been laid out there was a fog of cigarette smoke and the warm smell of burgundy. Men sat together on the stairs, talking about the election of Margaret Thatcher as leader of the Conservative party. Women had gathered in the kitchen and seemed quite happy there, with glasses of burgundy in their hands. In a bedroom the couple who had been surprised in Malcolm's den continued their embrace.

"So very good we were," Sue said on the parquet dance-floor. She broke away from Gavin, seizing him by the hand as she did so. She led him across the room to a teak-faced cabinet that contained gramophone records. On top of it there was a gramophone and the tape-recorder that was relaying the music.

"Don't dare move," she warned Gavin, releasing his hand in order to poke among the records. She found what she wanted and placed it on the turn-table of the gramophone. The music began just before she turned the tape-recorder off. A cracked female voice sang:

"*That certain night, the night we met, there was music abroad in the air. . .*"

"Listen to it," Sue said, taking Gavin's hand again and drawing him on to the dancing area.

"*There were angels dining at the Ritz, and a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square.*"

The other dancers, who'd been taken aback by the abrupt change of tempo, slipped into the new rhythm. The two spikey breasts again depressed Gavin's stomach.

"Angels of a kind we were," Sue said. "D'you think we've fallen, Gavin?"

Once in New York and once in Liverpool he'd made love since his marriage, to other girls. Chance encounters they'd been, ir-

relevant and unimportant at the time and more so now. He had suffered from guilt immediately afterwards, but the guilt had faded, with both girls' names. He could remember their names if he tried; he once had, when suffering from a bout of indigestion in the night. He had remembered precisely their faces and their naked bodies and what each encounter had been like, but memories that required such effort hadn't seemed quite real. It would, of course, be different with Sue.

"Fancy Sue playing that," her husband said, pausing outside the den with Polly. "They've been talking about the Ritz, Poll."

"Goodness!" With a vividness that was a welcome antidote to Malcolm's disclosures about the sex life of his guests, the occasion at the Ritz returned to her. Malcolm said: "It was my idea, you know. Old Gavin and I were boozing in The Hoop and he suddenly said, 'It's Polly's birthday next week,' and I said, 'For God's sake! Let's all go down to the Ritz.'"

"You had oysters, I remember." She smiled at him, feeling better because they were no longer in the den, and stronger because of the brandy. Malcolm would have realised by now how she felt, he wouldn't pursue the matter.

"We weren't much more than kids," he said. He seized her hand in a way that might have been purely a sentimental way, as though inspired by the memory.

"My twenty-second birthday. What an extraordinary thing it was to do!"

In fact, it had been more than that. Sitting in the restaurant with people she liked, she'd thought it was the nicest thing that had ever happened to her on her birthday. It was absurd because none of them could afford it. It was absurd to go to the Ritz for a birthday treat, Martinis in the Rivoli Bar because Malcolm said it was the thing, the gilt chairs and the ferns. But the absurdity hadn't mattered because in those days nothing much did. It was fun, they enjoyed being together, they had a lot to be happy about. Malcolm might yet play rugby for England. Gavin was about to make his breakthrough into films. Sue was pretty, and Polly that night felt beautiful. They had sat there carelessly laughing, while deferential waiters simulated the gaiety of their mood. They had drunk

champagne because Malcolm said they must.

With Malcolm still holding her hand, she crossed the spacious hall of Number Four Sandiway Crescent. People were beginning to leave. Malcolm released his hold of her in order to bid them good-bye.

She stood in the doorway of the sitting-room watching Gavin and Sue dancing. She lifted her brandy glass to her lips and drank from it calmly. Her oldest friend was attempting to seduce her husband, and for the first time in her life she disliked her. Had they still been at the Misses Summers' nursery school she would have run at her and hit her with her fists. Had they still been in Maida Vale or on holiday on the Italian Adriatic she would have shouted and made a fuss. Had they been laughing in the Ritz she'd have got up and walked out.

They saw her standing there, both of them almost in the same moment. Sue smiled at her and called across the coffee-coloured sitting-room, as though nothing untoward were happening.

"D'you think we've fallen, Polly?" Her voice was full of laughter, just like it had been that night. Her eyes still had their party gleam, which probably had been there too.

"Let's dance, Poll," Malcolm said, putting his arms around her waist from behind.

IT MADE IT WORSE when he did that because she knew by the way he touched her that she was wrong: he didn't realise. He probably thought she'd enjoyed hearing all that stuff about Philip Mullally hanging about after prostitutes and Olive Gramsmith being a slapparat, whatever a slapparat was.

She finished the brandy in her glass and moved with him on to the parquet. What had happened was that the Ryders had had a conversation about all this. They'd said to one another that this was how they wished—since it was the first time—to make a sexual swap. Polly and Gavin were to be of assistance to their friends because a woman in Parker, Hille and Harper had wanted Malcolm to get a divorce and because there'd been other relationships. Malcolm and Sue were approaching all that side of things in a different way now, following the fashion in the outer suburb since the fashion worked wonders with wilting marriages.



"Estrella babysitting, is she?" Malcolm asked. "All right if you're late, is she? You're not going to buzz off, Poll?"

"Estrella couldn't come. We had to get a girl from Problem."

He suggested, as though the arrangement were a natural one and had been practised before, that he should drive her home when she wanted to go. He'd drive the babysitter from Problem home also. "Old Gavin won't want to go," he pronounced, trying to make it all sound like part of his duties as host. To Polly it sounded preposterous, but she didn't say so. She just smiled as she danced with him.

They'd made these plans quite soberly presumably, over breakfast or when there was nothing to watch on television, or in bed at night. They'd discussed the game that people played with car-keys or playing cards, or by drawing lots in other ways. They'd agreed that neither of them cared for the idea of taking a chance. "Different," Malcolm had probably quite casually said, "if we got the Dillards." Sue wouldn't have said anything then. She might have laughed, or got up to make tea if they were watching the television, or turned over and gone to sleep. On some other occasion she might have drifted the conversation towards the subject again and Malcolm would know that she was interested. They would then have worked out a way of interesting their oldest friends. Dancing with Malcolm, Polly watched while Gavin's mouth descended to touch the top of Sue's head. He and Sue were hardly moving on the dance-floor.

"Well, that's fixed up then," Malcolm said. He didn't want to dance any more. He wanted to know that it was fixed up, that he could return to his party for an hour or so, with something to look forward to. He would drive her home and Gavin would remain. At half-past one or two, when the men threw their car-keys on to the carpet and the blind-folded women each picked one out, he and Sue would simply watch, not taking part. And when everyone went away he and Sue would be alone with all the mess and the empty glasses. And she would be alone with Malcolm.

Polly smiled at him again, hoping he'd take the smile to mean that everything was fixed because she didn't want to go on dancing

with him. If one of them had said, that night in the Ritz, that for a couple of hours after dinner they should change partners there'd have been a most unpleasant silence.

Malcolm patted her possessively on the hip. He squeezed her forearm and went away, murmuring that people might be short of drink. A man whom she didn't know, excessively drunk, took her over, informing her that he loved her. As she swayed around the room with him, she wanted to say to Sue and Malcolm and Gavin that yes, they had fallen. Of course Malcolm hadn't done his best to combat his blubberiness, of course he didn't make efforts. Malcolm was awful, and Sue was treacherous. When people asked Gavin if he made films why didn't he ever reply that the films he made were television commercials? She must have fallen herself for it was clearly in the nature of things, but she couldn't see how.

"IT'S TIME WE went home, Sue," Gavin said.

"Of course it isn't, Gavin."

"Polly—"

"You're nice, Gavin."

He shook his head. He whispered to her, explaining that Polly wouldn't ever be a party to what was being suggested. He said that perhaps they could meet some time, for a drink or for lunch. He would like to, he said; he wanted to.

She smiled. That night in the Ritz, she murmured, she hadn't wanted to be a blooming angel. "I wanted you," she murmured.

"That isn't true." He said it harshly. He pushed her away from him, wrenching himself free of her arms. It shocked him that she had gone so far, spoiling the past when there wasn't any need to. "You shouldn't have said that, Sue."

"You're sentimental."

He looked around for Polly and saw her dancing with a man who could hardly stand up. Some of the lights in the room had been switched off and the volume of the tape-recorder had been turned down. Simon and Garfunkel were whispering about Mrs Robinson. A woman laughed shrilly, kicking her shoes across the parquet.

Sue wasn't smiling any more. The face

that looked up at him through the gloom was hard and accusing. Lines that weren't laughter lines had developed round the eyes: lines of tension and probably fury, Gavin reckoned. He could see her thinking: he had led her on, he had kissed the top of her head. Now he was suggesting lunch some time, dealing out the future to her when the present was what mattered. He felt he'd been rude.

"I'm sorry, Sue."

They were standing in the other dancers' way. He wanted to dance again himself, to feel the warmth of her small body, to feel her hands, and to smell her hair, and to bend down and touch it again with his lips. He turned away and extricated Polly from the grasp of the drunk who had claimed to love her. "It's time to go home," he said angrily.

"You're never going, old Gavin," Malcolm protested in the hall. "I'll run Poll home, you know."

"I'll run her home myself."

In the car Polly asked what had happened, but he didn't tell her the truth. He said he'd been rude to Sue because Sue had said something appalling about one of her guests and that for some silly reason he'd taken exception to it.

Polly did not believe him. He was making an excuse, but it didn't matter. He had rejected the game the Ryders had wanted to play and he had rejected it for her sake. He had stood by her and shown his respect for her, even though he had wanted to play the game himself. In the car she laid her head against the side of his shoulder. She thanked him, without specifying what she was grateful for.

"I feel terrible about being rude to Sue," he said.

He stopped the car outside their house. The light was burning in the sitting-room window. The babysitter would be half asleep. Everything was as it should be.

"I'd no right to be rude," Gavin said, still in the car.

"Sue'll understand."

"I don't know that she will."

She let the silence gather, hoping he'd break it by sighing or saying he'd telephone and apologise tomorrow, or simply saying he'd wait in the car for the babysitter. But he didn't sigh and he didn't speak.

"You could go back," she said calmly, in

the end, "and say you're sorry. When you've driven the babysitter home."

He didn't reply. He sat gloomily staring at the steering wheel. She thought he began to shake his head, but she wasn't sure. Then he said:

"Yes, perhaps I should."

They left the car and walked together on the short paved path that led to their hall-door. She said that what she felt like was a cup of tea, and then thought how dull that sounded.

"Am I dull, Gavin?" she asked, whispering in case the words somehow carried in to the babysitter. Her calmness deserted her for a moment. "Am I?" she repeated, not whispering any more, not caring about the babysitter.

"Of course you're not dull. Darling, of course you aren't."

"Not to want to stay on? Not to want to go darting into beds with people?"

"Oh, don't be silly, Polly. They're all dull except you, darling. Every single one of them."

HE PUT HIS ARMS around her and kissed her, and she knew that he believed what he was saying. He believed she hadn't fallen as he and the Ryders had, that middle age had dealt no awful blows. In a way that seemed true to Polly, for it had often occurred to her that she, more than the other three, had survived the outer suburb. She was aware of pretences but could not pretend herself. She knew every time they walked into the local Tonino's that the local Tonino's was just an Italian joke, a sham compared with the reality of the original in Greek Street. She knew the party they'd just been to was a squalid little mess. She knew that when Gavin enthused about a fifteen-second commercial for soap his enthusiasm was no cause for celebration. She knew the suburb for what it was, its Volvos and Vauxhalls, its paved paths in unfenced front gardens, its crescents and avenues and immature trees, and the games its people played.

"All right, Polly?" he said, his arms still about her, with tenderness in his voice.

"Yes, of course." She wanted to thank him again, and to explain that she was thanking

him because he had respected her feelings and stood by her. She wanted to ask him not to go back and apologise, but she couldn't bring herself to do that because the request seemed fussy. "Yes, of course I'm all right," she said.

In the sitting-room the babysitter woke up and reported that the children had been as good as gold. "Not a blink out of either of them, Mrs Dillard."

"I'll run you home," Gavin said.

"Oh, sir, it's miles and miles."

"It's our fault for living in such a god-forsaken suburb."

"Well, it's terribly nice of you, sir."

Polly paid her and asked her again what her name was because she'd forgotten. The girl repeated that it was Hannah McCarthy. She gave Polly her telephone number in case Estrella shouldn't be available on another occasion. She didn't at all mind coming out so far, she said.

When they'd gone Polly made tea in the kitchen. She placed the tea-pot and a cup and saucer on a tray and carried the tray upstairs to their bedroom. She was still the same as she'd always been, they would say to one another, lying there, her husband and her

friend. They'd admire her for that, they'd share their guilt and their remorse. But they'd be wrong to say she was the same.

She took her clothes off and got into bed. The outer suburb was what it was, so was the shell of middle age: she didn't complain because it would be silly to complain when you were fed and clothed and comfortable, when your children were cared for and warm, when you were loved and respected. You couldn't forever weep with anger, or loudly deplore yourself and other people. You couldn't hit out with your fists as though you were back at the Misses Summers' nursery school in Putney. You couldn't forever laugh among the waiters at the Ritz just because it was fun to be there.

In bed she poured herself a cup of tea, telling herself that what had happened tonight—and what was probably happening now—was reasonable and even fair. She had rejected what was distasteful to her, he had stood by her and had respected her feelings; his unfaithfulness seemed his due. In her middle-aged calmness that was how she felt. She couldn't help it.

It was how she had fallen, she said to herself, but all that sounded silly now.

## Admission

Welcome, sir, to purgatory.  
You look like one who might have wintered here  
Already.

How? The stance, man—the sheer  
Extreme experienced weariness we come  
To recognise,

The dazed courtesy, the shocked accuracy,  
The almost-smile, on encountering once more  
The intolerable.

Yes, you are welcome, sir, to purgatory.  
Here is your uniform. We make no charge  
On re-entry.

*Elma Mitchell*