

Untitled

Angus Wilson

As Harrod's drove Hamo Langmuir and Erroll Watton away, Perry breathed heavily.

"Yes, I know, darling," Zoe said, "all kinds of sighs of relief. Especially when I think of my Harlequin. But *some* of regret, if only because there isn't really much contact left. All the same that young man of his seems good for him. Masterful, yet knowing his place. Not a bit like Leslie. And quite another kind of good looks. But I'm glad for Hamo anyway."

"I'm not sure that a relationship of that kind with anyone who works for you is ever a good idea."

"Don't be stuffy, darling."

"I'm sorry. Hamo Langmuir's affairs don't very much burden my mind at the moment. My book . . . it's rather impossible *not* to have Ally a little on one's mind."

"Then don't, sweet. *You* were the one to say, trust her. And now you must do it. It must be the book and nothing else for the whole weekend. Goodness! Alexandra herself insisted on it. You ought to be very touched that she should care at this intensely egotistical period of her life. Anyway, you *are* a fraud. You were about to say that your book was your preoccupation. Why should you hesitate to say so, I can't think. The whole weekend's arranged for it. I've seen to that."

Then and there in the hall, struck by the generosity of her temperament, her mind, her expression, and, thank God, her figure, he drew her to him and kissed her passionately.

Afterwards, as they left the last vestiges of East London's fog and could, at any rate in imagination, smell the first ozone of the estuary's mud, he thought, picking greedily the greasy drumsticks she handed him, with a certain pride that when he had embraced her no trace of any image but her own, no trace of secretarial buttocks had been in his mind; yes, even with considerable pride, for it showed his closeness to his roots, where no sex in the head, no substitute images interfered with the real thing, no middle-class minds reared on masturbation. Such direct sensuality was, no doubt, the mood of Perry as, shaking free of Cambridge concupiscence, he set out once again to pick up a bird on the front as he had in his healthy, slummy Seaside Road days.

Zoe, once again as always, was overcome with happiness as she felt him withdraw into his fiction. The most so when, bumping down the farm lane, they came in sight of the cottage (a nice big roomy cottage that had once been a large farmhouse) she could see the dairy she had made into his writing room, the stables she had made into his boat repair workshop, could hear the plop of water against the estuary jetty, *his* jetty for *his* boats—all the things she could give him

without wrongfully using her money to release him from the novelist's needed common humanity of ten until six. She wondered if it were selfish of her to hope that his creative needs would not crowd out his desire, would not deny her her reward.

And as soon as she saw the two great log fires blazing, one at each end of the vast farmhouse hall, the flame lights playing upon the absurd Victorian primitive portraits and upon the huge Conran leather sofa, she knew that it was to be a weekend that would work. He could not undress her quickly enough. And when, long after midnight, in their huge bed, once more with firelight casting intermittent glows upon their naked bodies, he sought her again and she demurred because of the next day's work before him, he told her almost angrily that this was what fed his work; he didn't want mothering and treats and solicitude, no, nor gaping admiration, but her body, that was what work like his depended upon.

Breakfast next morning was later than she had hoped for, but eaten in suitable silence. At a little before one she took a strong dry martini to him in the dairy. He was not there. From the clang that came from the stables she knew that he had taken the odd minute off to relax with restoring "The Deauville." And so it proved. There she lay, who had been so famous, had cut such a figure at Cowes in her day, rousing a schoolboy 'Sod it!' when the future George V had lost to her, making Mrs. Langtry smile in the Island sunshine, even in her last grand days provoking Tommy Lipton to the doubt that money could always buy happiness. And now Perry, the boy from the seaside back streets, had come to give her youth again.

Zoe put down the martini on an old upturned cask, and gave herself to listen to his bubbling over.

"Look at the line here. This is where it must have run. The accuracy of the measurements! The sense of proportion of those old boys! And the mess that's been made of her since when the shoddy times set in. Look here!" he was triumphant, "just see the effect of restoring the brass screws to this hatch. They aren't replicas either. Turned out on Goodall's lathes. You remember the place, darling, you couldn't think why it was vital for me to go to Lowestoft. Each one a gem. Cost a fortune now, but . . ." Absentmindedly, half listening, half enjoying his enthusiasm, she sipped his martini. Then she heard him distinctly say, "It'll take me all this summer and probably next, but it'll be worth it. An afternoon like this afternoon's nothing for delicate, exact work like this. I might be able to wangle a week off down here later on . . ."

She said, "But Perry, are you *sure* it doesn't distract you from your writing? I mean it's beautifully done, darling, but couldn't we get Mr. Gransden or someone to do the whole job? Or would that be disgracefully extravagant?"

It clearly would not have been for he only said, "If you don't understand the pride of bringing beauty of workmanship back to first rate artifact, I'm afraid we can't easily communicate about this."

She thought of her Harlequin. "I think I can, Perry. But creation is surely more important. I believe in your books so much. I can't bear to see anything come before them."

He threw his hammer to the ground angrily. The sudden shattering clangour took his anger away, for he looked at her like a hurt, wrongfully punished little boy.

"I haven't altogether found it easy to concentrate on a blank page when one sad, lost little female figure insists on floating across it . . ."

"Oh, Perry! don't be so melodramatic. If you were so worried about Alexandra why did you let her have her way? You should have left it to me, darling. I had it all planned."

"That's the trouble, you've always had it all planned. Was it part of your plan to land her in the lap of a couple of degenerates?"

"If you're going to use those sort of emotive words to describe two rather muddled, well intentioned adolescents, I shall go. Generational jealousies are too wasteful. Years ago, my dear."

He looked at her worried, for she never used that endearment unless her bitterness towards him was strongly felt.

"Years ago, my dear, when Ally was tiny and enchanting, you told me that she got in the way of your work. I promised you then that she shouldn't do so again and, so far as I could, I've kept that promise. Anyway, it was a promise you had a right to. You couldn't return after a day's work and get down to the harder, more important task, if I couldn't assure you of a home that would run without the noise of the engine. That's why two children were impossible. It would be easy now to say that Alexandra would have been more integrated, more on an even keel, if she'd had others to share life with. . . ."

"It *would* be easy. It has to be said."

"Not by you, my dear. Since the sacrifice was made in your interest."

"I cannot, I will not go through that horror again."

"You quote words back at me that came from me in a moment of hysteria. Words many other women have spoken at such a time. But you know very well that a few months later, weeks, if I remember properly, I was willing, anxious to have another child. Another child! Children! Until you made it clear that for you if there were to be more children, there were to be no more books."

"That's not at all how I remember it."

"Then you remember wrongly. Good Heavens! I've heard you tell people, even Alexandra, that poor Zoe just couldn't face having another ghastly labour like that. I've never contradicted you. I have always acquiesced. After all people are so blind about the priority of artistic creation that it was only reasonable you should want to protect yourself from their criticism. But I didn't believe you'd really deceived *yourself* about it. I'm beginning to think that you believe *all* the lies you tell me. If it is so, Perry, I don't know how to face it. It means that I've married an irreclaimable man."

He began to hammer loudly at a brass nail he was inserting. She shouted at him, "Don't think I'll forgive you for the elegant workmanship with which you hammer the last nails into the coffin of my hopes for you."

Picking up the empty martini glass, she left the dairy. "Your lunch will be ready for you whenever you want it."

Knowing that it was childish pride to feel, he nevertheless could not help smiling at the fact that he had told her no lie this time. He had said, 'sad, lost little female figure,' but *she* had supplied their daughter.