

Alan Gillespie

The Arcade

The old man waited. Stood holding an umbrella next to the Argyll Arcade's¹ side entrance. He wore a good navy suit and waistcoat, a white shirt with the top button open. The crowds on Buchanan Street moved quickly through the rain although it was not as heavy as forecast.

5 The woman appeared beside him and made him jump. Well, she said, here I am. She had a thick, silver fringe and big brown eyes. Short eyelashes and warm-looking cheeks. She looked older but better than in the photographs he'd seen online. A bright orange scarf wrapped around and across her shoulders.

Gaynor, the man smiled. Thank you for coming. I'm Bill.

I know, she said. I recognise you. Do I look all right, then?

10 He stepped back and made a theatre of appraising her outfit and said that she looked perfect. He touched her shoulder, folded up his umbrella and shook off the rainwater. Are you ready? he asked.

You haven't even told me where we're going.

Just in here.

15 He put his hand out as a guide and they stepped into the Arcade, lined on both sides with jewellery shops. A few other couples stood side by side looking at diamonds and antique watches. It was quiet. The security guard wore a top hat that was a little too large. He nodded, his moustache drooping, blazer frayed at the cuffs. Afternoon, he said to them. Bill replied with a wink.

The woman raised her eyebrows. What are we doing here?

Browsing. I think you'll like it.

20 They stopped first outside the window of Laings². The upper display was all watches, and below that, diamond rings. The pink copper of rose gold, the snowy flash of platinum.

Which ring would you choose?

She frowned at him.

If you had to? he asked.

25 She placed both palms flat against the cold window's surface. I don't like any of them.

None?

Nope.

30 He pointed at an expensive range near the back of the display. Those ones are nice, he said. The jewellery nestled in pale green cushions. One of the salesgirls who worked in the shop came through the door and smiled at them. Her makeup was pristine and she wore black tights with black heeled shoes.

Are you looking for anything specific?

The woman was about to say no, but Bill interrupted. We're looking for an engagement ring, he said. For my beautiful fiancée.

35 The salesgirl smiled widely. Congratulations! Why don't we step inside. We have lots of rings to choose from. She rubbed Gaynor's arm and held the door open for them.

Well, asked Bill. Gaynor was staring at him, her fingers stretched out in front of her.

What are you doing, she whispered. No, no.

Trust me.

40 She looked back towards the security guard and the drizzle of Buchanan Street beyond the Arcade's exit.

Stay just for a minute, he said. It'll be okay.

She walked past him and into the shop, smiling at the girl, and Bill came in behind her.

¹ *Argyll Arcade*: a shopping arcade in Glasgow, Scotland

² shop selling jewellery and watches

45 The old man and his date sat side by side on a purple couch. The salesgirl put a bottle of sparkling water with two glasses on the table in front of them. The room had soft lighting and textured wallpaper. A thick carpet. So, she said. Do you know what you're looking for?
We're open minded, said the man. Aren't we, darling?
Wonderful. We have lots of different options. Do you have a budget in mind?
Gaynor looked at Bill. She tightened her scarf around her.
50 I'm thinking, he said, we can go to about ten thousand.
Fantastic, said the girl. We've got some really special pieces in that price range. But first let me get you two some champagne, to celebrate.
She went downstairs and left Bill and Gaynor sitting on the couch.
Ten thousand?
55 Sure, he said. You're worth it.
The salesgirl returned with two flutes and a bottle of champagne. She tore at the foil and twisted the cork from the bottle. For the next twenty minutes, they talked about diamonds, their clarity, their unlikeliness. About settings and precious metals. The salesgirl asked the man how he had proposed.
60 Oh, there's a story there, said the woman. Isn't there, honey?
Bill pushed the wispy hair back on his head and sipped his champagne. We were in Paris, he said, over Easter. The girl filled both their drinks again as he spoke. I'd bought a padlock from Timpson's³ and had it engraved on one side with both our names, inside a wee love-heart. We took it to the bridge over the river with all the love locks – I knew they were taking the padlocks down but we
65 wanted to anyway. So we went. All the railings are covered in them. From all over the world. It was sunny – remember, darling? – and the padlocks were glittering. Like diamonds. Like stars. He took Gaynor's hand in his. And you chose a wee blank patch on the fence. I had the padlock in my pocket, and I gave it to you. Turn it over, I said. On the other side I'd had the engraver put four more words. Will you marry me?, it said. And I got down onto this old man's knee, and you said yes, and I said
70 well, if you want a kiss you'll need to help me back to my feet. And that was that.
Gaynor looked to the ceiling and shook her head.
The salesgirl was beaming. That's some story, she said.
It's one of my best, he said.
They stayed in Laings for an hour, drinking champagne, giggling on the couch, and looking at rings.
75 Gaynor slipped emeralds and big diamonds and deep blue sapphires over the joints of her old finger. Finally she stood up. Thank you for all your help, she said to the salesgirl. We'll be back. So many nice rings, I need to mull it over. She turned to Bill. Let's go. I don't think we should rush it, honey.
The salesgirl gave the man a business card. Ask for me when you come back in, she said. And
80 congratulations again.
The couple left Laings arm in arm. A little drunk.
Do you date many men? he wanted to know.
Gaynor untangled Bill's arm from hers. Some. Not many.
You're very good at it. I feel comfortable around you.
85 Thank you, Bill. I feel at ease with you too. How about you, are you taking lots of women out?
Only you so far.
So far?
Bill paused and Gaynor started to laugh. When he saw she wasn't upset, he laughed too.
They stopped outside Ernest Jones⁴. What do you fancy trying on this time, he asked.
90 Earrings, she said.
Budget?
Twenty grand.

³ a UK retailer

⁴ *Ernest Jones*: a shop selling jewellery and watches

Another good-looking salesgirl with thick, immaculate eyebrows took them inside.
We're celebrating our silver wedding anniversary, explained Bill. And my wife wants a pair of
95 earrings.
Wonderful, said the girl. Do you know what style you want?
I like all of them, said the woman.
Do you have an idea of how much you'd like to spend? Roughly?
Twenty thousand pounds, said the woman. Roughly.
100 And the man threw his head back and laughed.
They split another bottle of fizz while the girl brought the earrings. Sitting opposite one another at
a low table. Bill leaned forward, cradling his chin in his hands. Gaynor had taken off her scarf and
had her silver hair swept back from her face. He could see the wrinkles framing her eyes. She held up
the earrings to her lobes, rotating her head, making the pendants dangle and move. An illuminated
105 mirror picked up the sparkle from the jewellery, the colours in her eyes, the texture of her skin.
The old man watched and sipped slowly from his glass. Those are beautiful, he might say.
Gorgeous, he called another pair. When the bottle was finished Gaynor looked at him. Well, she said,
what do you think? Shall we take these ones? She held a pair of pearl-drop earrings.
You like those ones, darling?
110 No, honey. I love these ones.
He scratched his nose. We'll need to have a think about it. We'll come back in.
Of course, the salesgirl smiled. No rush. I'll be here all afternoon.
When they left the shop, the rain outside had grown heavier. The polished Arcade floor was wet
from people dragging their umbrellas through.
115 How did your wife die? she asked. The fingertips of the rain tapped on the Arcade's glass roof.
It was lots of things, in the end, said Bill. He cleared his throat, fist to his chest.
You don't want to talk about it.
I can talk about it. She was sick for a long time. I looked after her. Then she needed more help, so
she went into a care home. She got much better, then she got much worse. By the end she had lots
120 of problems. Every day there was something new, some part of her body shutting down.
You must have been a great comfort to her.
I wish she had died in her own home. Why do you ask?
I wanted to know you more.
Are you doing okay? he smiled.
125 I'm great.
Having a good time?
I am.
Shall we try another one?
She lifted her head, cheeks pink from the drink. Over here, she said, and tugged him across to
130 Chisholm Hunter⁵ at the other side of the Arcade. The window had a lot of men's watches, silver
links and black leather. There were pocket-watches made of gold and ceremonial tie pins. Come on,
she said, and they went straight into the shop.
They sat on high stools at a polished countertop. A skinny boy wearing a tight white shirt came to
see to them. Gaynor accepted some sparkling water and then told the boy that they were here to
135 try on some watches for her husband.
Very good, said the boy. He poured them a glass of prosecco but did not leave the bottle.
Bill took off his coat and rolled his right sleeve up to the elbow, turning the cuff over twice. His
skin was pale but the arm was thick, with veins mapped out across his wrist and the back of his hand.
There was still muscle. Gaynor touched him there and felt the warmth coming through the thin old
140 skin.
How long were you married for? he whispered.
Five years.

⁵ *Chisholm Hunter*: a jeweller and diamond merchant

That doesn't seem like long enough.

145 It was long enough for us to know we were wasting our time, living like that. Never happy, never enough. We used to have these terrible fights. Tearing into each other. Neither of us could remember how they'd started or what the problem was. Then we worked it out that the problem was just us.

And you never thought about marrying again.

I thought about it. Never met anyone else who did though.

150 You're still young enough. There's still time for that again.

So are you. So there is.

The boy came from through the back with a selection of watches for Bill to try on. The link chains felt heavy on his arm but Gaynor thought they suited him.

155 Too much like a bracelet, he said. I've always preferred a leather strap. He picked at a spot of dry skin on his arm.

It's good to try something new, honey.

He looked at the boy. Such a wise woman, he said.

Is there a special occasion, asked the boy, hands in his pockets.

My husband, said Gaynor, he's finally retiring.

160 Good for you, said the boy. What line of work were you in?

Piracy, she said. First it was tape cassettes. He punted them around all the pubs. Then video tapes. You won't remember those. Then came the CDs, and the DVDs. PlayStation games. Blu-ray. He was the best pirate in Scotland.

Bill laughed quietly at this.

165 But you can't pirate an iPhone, can you? she said.

No, darling, agreed Bill. You cannot.

The boy was stuck. Have you known each other for long? he asked.

170 We met at school, said Gaynor. Didn't we, honey. Remember we used to sit next to each other in art class. You used to always flick your paintbrush at me. I'd be covered in little specks of pink and black and white, all the way up my wrist and arm, all over my shirt.

Did I? I don't remember that, said Bill. We used to hold hands under the desk. Didn't we, darling?

Gaynor smiled. Sometimes you would reach for my legs and feel me up, she said. The teacher caught you doing it and told your mother.

Bill turned to the boy. She's lying, obviously. I married a complete fantasist.

175 Gaynor leaned across to Bill and touched the tip of her nose against his. I think we should leave this young man to his afternoon.

I do, too.

Let me give you my card, said the boy. In case you want to come back in and have another look.

I won't, said Bill. No offence, son. I'm just not bothered about keeping track of time anymore.

180 They left the shop, hand in hand. Walked slowly past Fraser Hart and Bernstones⁶. Going slower, admiring the window displays. Until they got to the old security guard at the other end of the Arcade. Gaynor dropped Bill's hand from hers.

Thank you, Bill. This was fun.

It's been a long time since I spent such a good afternoon with such a good woman.

185 My bus is this way. She was stepping slowly backwards out of the Arcade.

We could go into Sloans⁷ for one more?

I'm getting a headache. All that champagne.

Well, okay. Thank you for meeting me today.

Thank you for asking me.

190 I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

I did too. I should go. I'm worried I might miss my bus.

⁶ *Fraser Hart and Bernstones*: jewellers

⁷ a beer garden

Would you like to do this again? Not this, not the same thing, but something different. With me.
I don't know. I'm not used to this.

But neither am I.

195 I have your phone number.

You do.

I'll have to think about it.

So you might call. Or you might not. That's okay, Gaynor. Either way.

If I don't call, she said, please don't be upset.

200 I can't promise that.

If I don't call, she said, it doesn't mean I didn't have a nice time. This was a good date. I'll tell people about it. I think this will make a nice story one day.

She wrapped her scarf tightly around her neck and stepped out of the Arcade onto Argyll Street. She paused until there was a gap in the shoppers and then turned into the crowd, joining them and their flow.

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The noise of a drumming band bounced around the street. Bill fastened each button on his coat and the cold wind wandered past him into the Arcade, where all the jewellery still sparkled even though the weather was turning.

(2020)