

*Waking*

Even in sleep, Polly is conscious of guilt. Like a splinter forcing its way to the surface of her skin, it throbs just below the level of consciousness until she wakes. Drowsily, she listens to the occasional rattle of the sash window in its frame and the creak of floorboards, until the pressure in her bladder forces her up.

Walking with the cautious, shuffling tread of one who knows the floor is mined with Warhammer figurines, she gropes her way to the bathroom. The central heating is off and the blind up, showing her the upper half of a wide, tree-lined street in the dim orange street-light. Two rows of seemingly identical, flat-fronted, white-stuccoed early-Victorian houses face each other, each subtly different, like Darwin's finches on the Galapagos Islands. Polly, with her potted olive tree, Farrow & Ball paintwork and Smeg fridge, is a relatively recent arrival, for half the street is gentrified and half still owned by the council. She feels at ease here, on the scruffy edge of Islington and Camden Town: something she had never felt during her marriage in Fulham. She chose it because it is close to where she grew up, and also to where she now works as a solicitor in a firm specialising in human-rights cases. Although the house (bought following her

divorce) is comfortable and pretty, and her children go to private schools, she earns a modest salary, having taken almost a decade out of full-time employment when her children were young.

Theo, her ex-husband, is a very different kind of lawyer. He works in the City, and hates London.

‘This town has had it good for a decade, but now the party’s over,’ he likes to say. ‘Its infrastructure, transport system, education, policing and security all suck. I’m telling you, Polly, people are talking seriously about relocating to Geneva.’

By ‘people’, Theo always means those like himself, who earn a minimum of a million pounds a year; the rest do not exist. Polly, though, is obdurate. Vague presentiments of danger have been a part of every Londoner’s life for the past five years, but Theo’s alarmism is ludicrous. He sees threats everywhere, and couldn’t understand why nobody else had even bothered to buy duct tape after 9/11.

‘Dad’s weird about people, isn’t he?’ Robbie had remarked after a weekend away with his father. ‘He thinks people wear towels on their heads to blow up planes.’

‘The thing about Daddy’s country is, they didn’t live through two world wars and the IRA bombs,’ Polly told him. ‘They’re paranoid about the rest of the world.’

Theo had been amazed to discover just how deeply Americans were now hated by the British. He returns this hatred with interest. He wants to take Tania and Robbie back to the States, to whisk them into the kind of sprawling suburban New England home which his colleagues live in, complete with Mexican maids and a swimming pool.

‘Theo, that simply isn’t the way British people live,’ Polly had said.

She has window locks and a London bar on her doors, but refuses to have a burglar alarm, though Theo has insisted she have a panic button installed.

‘You’re a woman living with my children, and I have the right to insist that they have some protection,’ he’d said.

‘Burglars can’t break in,’ Polly had told him. ‘We’re very safe here,

the windows are all toughened glass, and besides, this is a friendly house – can't you feel?"

Theo had looked at her as if she was an idiot, and perhaps it is silly of her to believe this, but Polly doesn't care. She's free, and this house belongs to her.

There is a distant *whoosh* from the timed boiler, and the underfloor pipes begin to creak and tap, as if the house is stretching its body. Polly returns to bed, luxuriating in her solitude. Christmas in California without the children had been amazing; the house in Pacific Palisades, with its swimming pool and landscaped gardens, had given her a glimpse of a different world. Her lover, Bill Shade, is a scriptwriter in Hollywood, and wants her to move in with him, but Polly is resistant. She has just got her career back; she can read detective novels until late at night instead of having someone moaning about the light; she can spend the weekend without a scrap of make-up on her face; she can spread out to enjoy the cool expanses of her mattress.

Polly thinks gratefully of Iryna overhead. Bill has teased her about the way her life is dependent on cheap foreign labour, and she is conscious of the irony that, while her professional life often consists of helping refugees and illegal immigrants, her ability to do so depends upon exploiting them.

'Is it for this that Shakespeare penned his immortal plays, Smith developed his economic theories and Berners-Lee invented the internet: so that your strawberries can be picked by Eastern Europeans, your streets swept by Serbs, your laundry ironed by Pakistanis, and your garden manicured by an Italian?' Bill says. Yes: but by far the most important is Iryna, who works twenty-five hours per week for seventy pounds, not counting babysitting or the school holidays. Iryna does the housework, collects Robbie from school, cooks the children their tea, makes sure they do their homework and, in short, performs all the boring chores of being a housewife and mother that Polly has dropped because of her job. She loves her children, and yet she can't deny that when she goes back to work on a

Monday morning she is always relieved to leave them behind until eight p.m.

‘This is my rock, Iryna,’ is how Polly introduces her; or else, ‘This is Iryna, my right hand.’

It isn’t as if Polly hasn’t done this work herself. She knows how to vacuum, iron shirts and wash dishes; will still sew on name-tapes, cook children’s teas, and trudge around museums; she has felt her well-trained legal brain click gears like a rusty bicycle while singing ‘Here We Go Looby-Loo’ for the thousandth time. Being able to battle with the Home Office is like child’s play compared with real child’s play, but without Iryna she simply couldn’t manage. With Iryna, life is good. Polly had taken her without a reference, in response to an ad, and she feels a warm glow to think of how nicely she has accommodated her. The British are not good at welcoming foreigners into their homes, but Iryna not only has a large, light room with a TV, fridge and microwave, she has her own bathroom – whereas Polly shares hers with the children.

Placid, pleasant and pretty, Iryna reminds Polly of a Russian doll. Polly sometimes wonders whether she has ever had a boyfriend, because she never brings anyone home. She certainly has an active social life, going out in the morning and evening, but it never interferes with her work. Polly is relieved to see her looking well and rested again following a two-week break of house-sitting while they were all away on holiday, because just before Christmas she had been pale and listless, and Polly worried that she was homesick. Now, however, she is back to normal, and no cobweb or dust-ball is safe from the probing nozzle of the vacuum cleaner. The washing machine whirls with its almost silent, high-pitched giggle, tossing its contents one way then the other, the children’s supper sizzles golden-brown under the grill, and Polly herself eats their leftovers for her own supper. Iryna is like Adam Smith’s invisible hand: she does it all, then disappears.

It is only a minor worry that, being Russian, she happens to be illegal.

Polly falls back into a sleep so profound that it is like falling into black water. Down, down, and then the radio alarm hooks her back up, panicked. The *Today* programme splutters on about the Iraq War and the failings of the Prime Minister, while Polly stomps up the stairs, trying not to remember that dazzling May morning over a decade ago when Labour had won and the country seemed so full of passionate hope.

‘Wake up!’ she calls, going into each child’s room and switching on their lights.

Now the hour-long struggle begins. Tania slumbers on in the languor of adolescence, her skin covered with a pearly sheen of sweat as Polly kisses her, but Robbie stirs and burrows deeper into his duvet. Polly notices with annoyance that Iryna has not put out his school clothes for him.

‘Time to get up, my angel.’

‘I hate school,’ says Robbie, lashing out as his mother pulls the duvet off him.

‘I hate Mondays,’ says Tania, in turn. ‘And I hate you.’

‘Tough,’ says Polly. ‘Get dressed, or you’ll be going to school in pyjamas.’

Each weekday morning, she has to make sure the children are dressed, fed, clean, have done their homework and get to school on time before going to her office. It does not sound like much, but there are days when she feels like she can’t stand another minute of it.

‘Robbie, you *still* haven’t got your shoes on! Put them on, or you’re going to school in your socks.’

‘Why do I have to go to school? Why can’t I stay with you?’

Polly sighs. She is trying to cram a full working day into eight hours, and she keeps her watch five minutes fast in order to get to any appointment, tricking herself into tiny panic attacks that are like the miniature muffled explosions in a combustion engine.

‘Outside this country, and also in it, are millions and millions of people who would kill to have what you do here,’ she says. ‘They are

clever, fantastically hard-working and they are all learning English. When you grow up, you're going to be competing with them for places at university, and for jobs.'

'Yeah, yeah,' says Tania, rudely.

'You *have* to do this stuff,' said Polly, slapping Weetabix on the table. 'If you don't get good marks, you'll never go to university, and if you don't go to university you'll end up flipping burgers and—'

'You mean if I don't read, I could have all the burgers I could eat, every day?'

'Then you'd get fat, Robbie,' says Tania, with horror.

'Who gives? But why must I learn *French*? Or *any* language when everyone in the world wants to learn English?' says Robbie, who won't even drink orange juice if it has bits.

'Because otherwise you won't know what they're saying about you in secret,' says Tania.

Polly smiles, for this is a far better answer than she could have given. Then her heart jumps with the clock, for they have just forty-eight seconds left to get out of the door. Where are their coats?

'How should I know?' Robbie answers, calmly.

'You *must* have them! It's freezing, it's January, you can't go out today without a coat. Look, I'm wearing my heaviest one again.'

'I don't see why you make such a fuss,' Robbie complains. 'It's not *that* cold outside.'

'I am a Jewish mother,' says Polly. 'My dying words will be, "Put a jumper on."''

'Mum, all mothers are Jewish mothers, only they don't make such a fuss as you,' says Tania.

'I can't find my school tie,' Polly's son complains. 'Iryna's hidden it.'

'Iryna!' Polly calls up the stairs. The girl is supposed to be down by now. No answer, and Robbie will be punished if he turns up without a school tie. She races upstairs to fish one out of the laundry basket, already nauseous with stress.

'I hate you!' Tania screams. 'I'm going to miss the school bus, and it's *all your fault!*'

Outside, Polly takes off like a rocket. They have only three minutes as a margin of error, never enough.

‘Oh, damn and blast!’ she says, trying to text Iryna at a traffic light. ‘I wonder where she is?’

The car surges forward. It is only a momentary release of frustration because a second later her undercarriage hits a speed cushion with a bang. Polly dreams long tedious dreams in which she does the school run, endlessly grinding up Highgate Hill to the bus stop for Tania’s school. But now, at last, she is passing Highgate Cemetery and Karl Marx’s tomb, racing past the ornate iron gates of Waterlow Park, out of Pond Square and then, just in time, she stops in front of the school bus.

‘Love you,’ Polly says, drawing up.

‘Huh!’ says Tania, slipping off to join the gaggle of other girls in uniform. Every day, when she goes back into the heart of London, Polly thinks how glad she is that her children will be out in the suburbs, where it is leafy and safe.

Onwards for her second chore. The tree-lined street in West Hampstead where Robbie’s prep school is situated heaves and throbs with huge cars disgorging tiny uniformed children bowed antlike beneath the weight of their rucksacks, sports kits and musical instruments. Polly sits behind the wheel, squashed between giant gleaming chrome fenders and exhaust pipes pumping out a continual shimmer of pollutants, while Robbie chants out French verbs with the hopelessness of a novice monk. There! With a spurt of adrenalin, she darts her little car forward, lights flashing, and reverses.

‘Out! I have to get to work.’

‘Wait, Mummy, wait!’ Robbie cries. ‘I haven’t got my shoe on properly.’

‘I can’t wait, darling. I have a court case.’

‘Why do you care about bloody foreigners more than about your own children?’ he says.

‘They aren’t bloody foreigners. They are people like us, who are

just less lucky,' Polly says. He doesn't understand: how can he? Like all these sweet innocents, he will only ever visit the Third World as a tourist. But Polly had taken in compassion and fear with her mother's milk. She has nightmares about running away from torture and death with her children, just like some of her clients. In this dream she is always running to escape the Nazis, while the children drag on her arms like twin stones.

Back along Hampstead Lane, and already the ringtone of her mobile is drilling through her skull. It must be Iryna. One-handed, Polly fishes for her phone, but finds its screen blank. For a moment, she wonders if the jarring, persistent wail building up and up and up is the noise of her own stress, made audible.

It is only as it becomes louder, and the cars ahead of her pull over like the waters of the Red Sea dividing, that she realises it is a police car, lurching past in the opposite direction, blue lights flashing, and vanishing towards Hampstead Heath.