

Birds that sing

A white cat prowled along the top step in front of a glossy black door. Hanna tilted her head back to gaze at the place where the tall beige building merged with the sky. It was identical to the line of apartment blocks beside it; fronted with delicate railings and a row of calmly waving trees. Reaching out a hand, she clicked her tongue but the cat paused only briefly to give her a haughty stare. Even you know I don't belong here, she thought.

Was this the type of place she thought she'd be living? Somewhere with thick white carpets, lifts that worked and Georgian windows between her and the city. Naiwny, naïve, was the word her mother used the day Hanna got up the courage to confess her plans.

Hanna turned to walk away and nearly collided with a mass of black business suit and briefcase. The man barely seemed to notice as he careered around her, a slender phone pressed to his ear.

The paper bag rustled in her hand as she gripped it more tightly and left the cat and its perfect flat behind.

She took a left at the end of the street and walked deeper into the labyrinth of houses, where the buildings began to shrink and darken. Shards of green glass sparkled like emeralds at the side of the path and a handful of cigarette ends lay abandoned. Skirting them, she let herself into a charcoal-grey block of flats on the corner, walking straight past an 'Out of Order' sign on the lifts and beginning her ascent.

Seven flights later, her calf muscles were tingling. Heat inched up her face and something heavy settled in her stomach when she saw the white piece of paper stuck to her door, only partially covering yellow paint smears she had tried to scrub off last week.

In two strides she crossed the hall and tore off the note, crushing it into a ball. Warm pearls edged over the rims of her eyelids and spilled down her face, blurring the sparse interior of her flat. A sofa the colour of elephant skins enveloped her as she sank down and threaded her fingers through her hair, pulling until it hurt.

When she closed her eyes she journeyed the miles home, inhaling the pungent scent of the animals – warm fur, straw, manure – and from the kitchen, the sweet smell of plum jam and powdered sugar for making *Pączki*. The living room fire warmed her skin and behind her eyes, father, tati, reclined in an armchair while still managing to look straight-backed. She could see their faces, but the lines and flaws that made them real were fading, like her language. Mama's disapproval had travelled down the phone line when they last spoke, because she couldn't remember the Polish word for interview, though it had come to her only a moment after she hung up.

"Przepraszam, mama, tati," she whispered, gazing at their carelessly happy faces in the photo on her coffee table. "I'm sorry".

A corner of her keyring pressed painfully into her clenched fist, leaving a red groove in her palm. She loosened her grip and traced the colours of the little plastic flag; ruby red, pure white, royal blue.

A knock rattled the door, making her jump. It opened only a second later and Lucy walked in, holding up a bottle of clear liquid.

"I'm ready for my lesson and I've brought some kind of Polish vodka to supplement my learning,"

she said, squinting at the bottle. "Zu-brow-ka Bison Grass..."

"Shit, what's wrong?" she added, catching sight of Hanna's face. "You haven't had another note have you?"

Hanna held out the ball of paper.

"I will kill those racist bastards at No.3, I'm sure it's them". Prising the note apart, Lucy paused for a second to digest its contents, swore incoherently under her breath and began shredding it with her fingers, letting the pieces fall to the carpet like confetti.

"It's not just that," Hanna said quietly, passing her the paper bag.

"What's this, are you ill or something?" Lucy took the bag and pulled out a long thin box. "Oh shit Hanna, really?"

Hanna shrugged and pulled her knees up to her chest, resting her chin against the roughness of her jeans.

"Have you told Dan?"

She shook her head almost imperceptibly, eyes fixed on the dark patch where she'd spilt her tea on the carpet the week before.

"Well go on then, go take the test," Lucy put a hand under her armpit and began pulling her up, pushing the box into her hands.

"Go and stand by the window, I can't go with you listening." Hanna swatted her away with one hand, edging into the bathroom.

With the door closed, the cool cramped room felt like a familiar sanctuary, as though something more resilient than the walls separated her from the outside, Lucy, and the truth that was coming. Sitting down she touched her hands to her forehead and a pressing feeling in her bladder reminded her of why she was there, but she just couldn't.

"Are you finished yet?" Lucy called from the other side of the door. "Do you want me to make whooshing noises?"

"Shut up," Hanna laughed, relaxing, then quickly had to position the test.

Emerging from the bathroom a minute later, she put it on the table and flicked her wet hands at Lucy.

"Ugh! That better be water".

They sat down side-by-side and Lucy reached over to weave her fingers into Hanna's. As they waited, the clock on the wall ticked heavily, patiently, out of sync with the music that throbbed steadily through the walls like a heartbeat. The smell of roast chicken and thyme drifted under the door, making Hanna's mouth fill with saliva.

"Would it be so bad?" Lucy asked quietly.

Hanna paused, momentarily unsure what she meant. “A baby? Of course. Nie należymy, we don't belong. You've seen the notes, the graffiti, no one wants me here and they won't want her either. Or him. What sort of future is that?”

She pulled the keyring to her again, following the lines with a finger and trying to recall her feelings at the airport so long ago.

“You do belong,” Lucy said fiercely. “Don't let them make you feel like this, they're the minority, not you. Besides have you seen them? Beer swigging, dribbling Neanderthals. \Who wants to fit in with that?”

She leaned back into the sofa. “Imagine if those are the only people reproducing, what will happen to the world then? I think you need to have a baby to help readjust the balance.”

A laugh caught in Hanna's throat unexpectedly and came out sounding like a sob.

Silence fell for a moment, then Lucy sat up abruptly. “You know, a watched pot never boils. We should think about something else.”

She leaned over and picked up a small Camden Town plaque that rested against a vase of dying flowers. “I remember when you bought this. Such a great day.”

Hanna snorted. “Yeah until the evening”

“What do you mean, we had a great time!”

“You were sick on my shoes!”

“Oh yeah. Well apart from that it was fun, right?”

Catching each other's eye, they collapsed into laughter, clutching their sides.

“You know, it's probably time by now,” Lucy said, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. “Want to look together?”

Hanna nodded, a frown creasing the space between her brows.

Seconds, minutes or hours passed as they looked down at the seven letters, elbows just touching. Hanna sensed rather than saw her friend turn to face her, but they remained silent.

She felt her two lives unthread and split apart, one floating away like driftwood on the ocean. Perhaps it had begun the moment she decided to leave home, but now it felt as though the pieces could never come together again, held apart as they were by the letters that claimed her future.

And yet... a new life beat within her body. She flexed her fingers experimentally over her stomach and imagined five tiny fingers pressing on the other side.

“Han,” Lucy said finally. “You know I meant what I said. Everything will be okay.”

After another minute or two, she broke the silence again. “Maybe I could move in here and help you. Babies always like me.”

Hanna let out a long slow breath, realising she had been holding it in. “Well. It's not like I'm short of space or anything,” she gestured around the tiny room. “Why not.”

“Good. That's settled then. Can I have my lesson now?”

“First things first,” she smiled finally. “Herbata”

“Hah. Tea, right? Got it.”

Lucy rose and began noisily searching the cupboards for mugs and tea bags.

Hanna walked slowly over to the window, where a low sun was threading the sky with rose pink and gold. Resting her elbows on the sill she watched a blackbird pecking at crumbs on the other side, his beak bobbing in and out of sight. She pressed a finger to the glass and saw him flick his head up and stare inquisitively, each dark eye ringed with yellow.

As if distracted by something, he turned his head to face the sun, and with a fluttering of black he spread his glossy wings and soared into the air. She watched his silhouette get smaller and smaller, until he was just a speck of black folded into the sky.

Moving her hand from one hip to the other, she sang quietly, “*One of these mornings, you're gonna rise up singin'.*”