

## Troubled Nights

With no time to react, the front door slammed to a close behind her.

'Damn,' said Polly Brown, finding herself locked out in the middle of a chilly autumn night, all because old Megan Smith from next door was banging on the wall again.

Standing in the recessed front porch of the Victorian terraced dwelling, Polly shivered as much in surprise at her sudden predicament as in the cold. A full moon provided the only illumination, casting everything black or grey, the dull contrasts replacing the daylight reds and blues of tiles laid in herringbone pattern in the porch and along the short garden path which led into the street. Feint shadows of ornate lampposts imposed their exaggerated shapes on the street pavement and on the now greyed redbrick facades of the dwellings opposite.

Bleary-eyed, no make-up, hair in a mess and skimpily dressed in only a short cotton nightie and flip-flops, the young woman was at least thankful for the partial darkness. She wouldn't want gorgeous new neighbour Lionel from across the way to see her in such a state. She had got off to a good start when by chance they had met at the corner shop, he reaching to a top shelf and handing her down a bacon brunch. It was important to be looking her best. Lionel was tall, slim, and always immaculately dressed in the latest fashion. He smelt nice too. With wavy short black hair, an alluring face and gentlemanly demeanour, he was the new subject of Polly's vivid dreams; quite a change from the lustful rake of her last liaison, a middle-aged Peter Pan who wore garish open chested shirts, ripped jeans, jewellery, and had more hands than a ship's crew.

Stepping over the stub blue-brick wall which separated the two dwellings, Polly found herself on Megan's front doorstep. Batty old woman, she thought, waking me up in the middle of the night. She ought to be in a home.

Megan Smith never slept well at night. Too many daytime naps, Polly reckoned. The old woman blamed it on the house. It had been different when Herbert was alive, even though he had been more

married to his job at the bank than he ever was to her. She had found him dead on the landing, kneeling forward, slumped against the closed bathroom door, with both hands still gripping the handle.

Polly rapped the large eagle-headed brass knocker on Megan's door, the impact opening it as though an invisible hand had invited entry.

'Megan. Are you there?' Polly said, straining her head round the gaping door.

'Is that you, Polly? Do come in,' came the distant reply.

Polly stepped inside and pushed the door to a close behind her. She flicked a shiny brass switch on the wall, and somewhere down the narrow, musty hallway, a dismal orange lamp hanging from a twisted flex started to glow, barely relieving the darkness.

The constant banging which had broken Polly's sleep had left her disorientated, with a residue of wishful dreams still lingering. Alone in the chilly, dark hallway, the anger which had emboldened her to venture out and tear a strip off the old woman had gone. Now she felt frightened. Perhaps Megan is right, she thought. This place is spooky. Maybe it is the house.

'In here, Polly,' Megan's voice called out from the front parlour. Polly took a few hesitant steps down the hall. Grasping the small brass-ball handle of the partially open parlour door, she entered the room. In the semi-darkness sat what appeared to be a large, pitch-black lion, proudly sitting at rest. Catching her breath before fully recognising the familiar object, Polly stepped round it. It was the large chaise-longue, its front facing the fireplace on the other side of the room. Supine on its long leather seat lay the tiny form of Megan Smith, wrapped tightly in a fleecy blanket and resting her night-capped head on a folded white bolster. On the tiled hearth, a small gas fire stood issuing the barest of heat and sole source of illumination from its cracked ceramic radiant.

Polly knew the old lady preferred the dark, not wishing to be reminded of the years she had sat in silence staring at the heavily embossed patterned paper decaying on the walls, while Herbert, sitting opposite, would have his head constantly buried in a large workbook, fascinated by its content.

'Oh, Polly, thank goodness you have come. I'm half out my wits,' the old lady said.

'What is it this time, Megan?' Polly asked. 'Why do you keep banging on the wall?'

'No, Polly, that wasn't me,' Megan replied. 'It was the doors, lots of slamming doors. '

'Which doors? Where?' Polly said.

'Through there,' Megan replied, pointing at the living room door.

'But there's only the French doors through there,' Polly said. 'And they step out on to the garden patio.'

'No, no, Polly, there are more rooms than that. Empty rooms, rooms without windows, doors with big brass handles. I can never find my way out.'

The woman's a proper basket case, Polly thought.

'Now listen to me, Megan,' Polly said. 'I will sit right here in this chair until it gets light.

Alright?'

'You are so good to me coming round like this, Polly dear,' Megan replied,

Polly wanted to say, 'I've got no choice if I want to get a bit of peace and quiet.' But she said nothing, feeling sorry for the old woman.

Megan turned her back to the fire and, with a deep sigh, settled down to sleep.

Polly picked up the old lady's redundant nightgown from the end of the chaise-longue and wrapped it around her own shoulders. She slumped into the leather armchair close by Megan's makeshift bed, too distant from the paltry fire to gain any sensation of warmth.

On the floor by the chair where Polly sat, a large, black, hardback book entitled Bank Vaulting Systems lay open. A compulsive reader, the young woman picked it up and began to flip the pages. In the darkness it was difficult to see the words, but she could make out the exploded pictures on each page, revealing the inner workings of the strongest bank vaults. Good grief, she thought. Some of those doors are a foot thick. And those enormous handles must take some turning. She wondered why Megan could find nothing better to read than one of Herbert's old workbooks. No wonder she was going off her trolley.

In the dim light, Polly managed to turn just a few pages before her tired eyes started to close. She drifted towards sleep, thinking of her next chance meeting with Lionel.

In that mental mangle of transition between reality and dreams, Polly felt something unexpected. It was Megan's hand gripping her arm. The old lady was standing by the side of the chair, at first silent as a ghost, then quietly urging, 'Come, Polly dear. We must get away from this place.'

Please go back to sleep, Megan,' Polly said with instant irritability at being torn from slipping into a lovely dream.

No, we must not sleep,' the old lady urged.

'But why not?' Polly asked.

'The doors. The slamming doors,' Megan said. 'And that hideous presence. We must go now.'

'Go where?' Polly asked. 'And what hideous presence?'

'I don't know, but we must get away.'

Please get back on the Chaise-longue and go to sleep,' Polly said in a manner not inviting refusal.

'But there is no time,' Megan said. 'We must go before it is too late.' She gripped her guardian's arm even tighter and began to pull, her action so desperate that Polly became alarmed. Without further protest she rose from her chair. She knew the shortest way out of the house and, with the old woman still clinging fast, made towards the living room door.

No! Not that way Polly. Not that way.' Megan called out, letting go of her would be helper.

'Don't distress yourself, Megan. You must follow me closely,' Polly said. She felt the trembling touch of the old lady's cold hand on her back, seeking closeness and re-assurance. Polly faltered for a moment when she thought of the words she had uttered in her last command. She now realised that when attempting to leave Megan's house by the living room, it would be the first time she had ventured beyond the slabbed limestone patio, that spread out like an apron in front of the French doors. There remained unexplored the long-forgotten garden of shrubs and small trees that Herbert used to so carefully tend, which had now run wild. Was there a gated opening somewhere in the wall? Polly

wondered. She wouldn't ask Megan, for the old woman, not wishing to take another step in the direction they were going, was bound to say no.

It was the first time Polly had noticed the big brass doorknob on the living room door. Surely it wasn't there on her previous visit. She found it difficult to turn but managed to open the door. As she stepped into semi-darkness, the door slammed to a close behind her. She could no longer feel Megan's hand and knew without looking back that the old lady had not made it into the room, only her muted cries seeping through the dense oak of the door. As Polly turned, trying in vain to open the slammed door, Megan's cries finally subsided.

I must get out of this damned house, Polly thought. Megan will just have to look after herself.

'This is not the living room,' Polly uttered to herself as she peered into the gloom of a long, narrow, windowless space. She groped the wall for a light switch which did not exist. At the far end of the room, in a vague glimmer of light with no apparent source, she could just see the outline of a door. She decided to make haste towards it.

'I knew it. This must be it,' she said with instant relief, coming up to the door and expecting at any moment to step out on to the patio. First there was another big brass knob to turn. Reluctant to touch it but convinced it would be her means of escape, Polly grasped it with both hands, hoping to turn it rapidly. It was even more difficult to turn than the last one. In the intolerable delay, panic set in. She became aware of a presence behind her but was too frightened to look back.

With waning strength, the young woman finally turned the knob and stepped into another dim room. Again, the door behind her slammed shut, and there far ahead stood the figure of a man in silhouette, standing by yet another door. He was beckoning Polly to come over. She recognised immediately the outline of Lionel; that tall, upright stature and welcoming wave. Desperate and besotted, she ran towards her would-be rescuer and lover. As she got nearer, the soupy blackness of the room began to clear, revealing Lionel's features. He was leering, with evil intent in his eyes.

Uncertain and repelled by what she saw, Polly halted. The rest of Lionel then lit up like a rabbit caught in headlights, exposing every feature. His greasy, matted, long grey hair, and ripped black jeans

held up with a spike-studded white belt which cradled a tattooed medicine-ball paunch proudly bursting through his sweat-drenched open grey shirt. And around his neck a gold medallion swung pendulously across the grey hairs of his fake tan chest. He said not a word. Between the thumb and forefinger of his raised right hand he held a familiar front door key, silently beckoning Polly to take it. She tried to speak, but could only mouth, 'So that's your game. And I thought you were different.'

On much weakened legs she turned to flee, trying desperately to return from this journey into hell. The presence which had followed her was still there, somehow always behind her, the unseen impetus of her flight. It would be beyond fright to turn and look. She struggled as though wading through treacle, taking an eternity to return to the door through which she had just entered. This time the handle turned, but the door would not open. She became consumed in screaming, her brain exploding into mental fragments that searched out horror in every crevice of the nightmare world around her. She began to wander, half seeing, listening to her own terrible scream until it finally began turning into the sobs of aftermath. Now she was unaware of closed doors or dark rooms. Just a slow, painless retracing of steps back to the parlour. Back to the oblivion of sleep.

In her half-naked state, Polly began to feel cold. The icy leather of the armchair was stinging her bare legs at the slightest movement. Aroused by the sensation, she opened her eyes. She noticed Megan's nightgown lying at the foot of the living room door, but was not inclined to return it to her own shoulders, as though denying that any struggle had occurred to explain its changed position. Face down and askew, the big book lay on the floor by the side of her chair.

Eventually alert enough to bother, Polly looked up to see whether Megan was awake. A shaft of daylight coming through a slit in the closed curtains illuminated the pallid grey of the old woman's face. She was staring fixedly at Polly.

'Good morning, Megan,' Polly said quietly.

The old woman continued to stare.

'Megan. Are you alright? Megan!' Polly sprang from her chair in horror. She grabbed the old woman's cold, stiff arm and began to shake it, frantic at the lack of response.

'Megan! Wake up! Please wake up!' Polly demanded, guessing that to do so, the old lady must first return from the rigour of recent death.

'Oh God, it wasn't a dream. Or am I dreaming still?' Polly said out loud.

In despair, not knowing which world she was in, Polly released her grip on the old woman's arm and stood fixedly, her eyes hypnotically attracted to the lifeless limb as it swung to and fro like a slowing pendulum, brushing against the smooth, frictionless leather of the Chaise-longue until coming to rest with a momentary life-mimicking jerk.

Polly waited, resigned to be transported by reality or dream to an unknown fate. She did not have long to wait. With the predictability of a nightmare in which one event is followed by another of even greater terror, she heard footsteps in the hall. And they were getting closer. A voice called out:

'Anyone there? I'm coming in?'

'Oh, God, it is a dream after all,' Polly muttered. She would recognise that hideous Lionel's voice anywhere. 'That dodgy latch has let in the devil.'

With nowhere to hide, she ran screaming at the half open parlour door, hoping to shut out her tormentor. Before she could reach it, the door opened wide and, Lionel, perfectly dressed in a dark blue silk dressing gown and tan leather slippers, appeared in the opening. His only concession to a state of dishevelment was the growth of a few hours of stubble on his handsome face.

Unseeing, Polly slammed into her tormentor. As she did so, Lionel flung his arms around her to keep his balance. Pressed together, they stood fast, hearts thumping, waiting for the shock of collision to subside and winded lungs to re-fill.

Polly! What on earth's the matter?' Lionel gasped.

'Please tell me I'm dreaming,' Polly pleaded.

'No Polly, you are not dreaming, but holding you like this I think I could be.'

The familiar scent of Old Spice filled Polly's nostrils. She began to feel safe in Lionel's embrace.

Lionel said, 'The old lady's front door was ajar, so I thought I'd better come and see if everything was all right.'

Polly sobbed, 'If only my front door had a dodgy latch. I could have got back in.'

She tried to explain about the constant banging on the wall and how she had rushed out in the middle of the night to give old Megan a piece of her mind. 'I thought I might as well stay the night after locking myself out,' Polly said, adding, 'Oh, Lionel. If only you knew what I have been through.'

'Polly darling, there's nothing to worry about now,' Lionel replied. 'I'll ring for a locksmith later. He can kill two birds with one stone.'

With Polly not wanting Lionel to release his passionate hold, it was some moments before she cried out, 'Please don't say there is nothing to worry about. Look. Megan is dead.'

In the semi-darkness and facing the high back of the Chaise-long, Lionel had been unaware of the resting body, which was still mostly hidden under the blanket.

At Polly's mention of the old lady's name, the blanket moved.

Did someone say I'm dead? Megan asked, raising her cold, dangling arm and tucking it under the blanket. 'I do hope not,' she added. 'I did have an awful time dropping off to sleep, but then I slept like a log. Herbert used to say he could wake the dead easier than he could wake me. I trust you had a good night, Polly my dear?'

Out of sight, and with her hands round Lionel's waist and her eyes looking longingly into his, Polly replied, 'Oh yes, Megan. It turned out to be quite beyond my wildest dreams.'