

# What the Nanny Saw

FIONA NEILL



PENGUIN BOOKS



## PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3  
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia  
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand  
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,  
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com)

First published 2011

1

Copyright © Fiona Neill, 2011

All rights reserved

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in 12.5/14.75 pt Garamond MT Std.

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire  
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-0-241-19325-9

[www.greenpenguin.co.uk](http://www.greenpenguin.co.uk)



Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from paper certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.



July 2008

‘When did you first notice something was wrong?’

Ali Sparrow sighed. Everyone asked her the same question. And she was always careful to give the same answer. But somehow she had expected greater originality from Foy Chesterton, a man who had recently sung every verse of ‘American Pie’ at his seventieth birthday party and organized a signed copy of his self-published autobiography for the 300 guests as a going-home present. Although of course now the happy ending looked a little premature.

Ali had come into the room hoping for solitude and an excuse to examine the objects on the circular mahogany dining table in her own time before the antiques dealer arrived. As had Foy, actually. But by the time she noticed the familiar tussle of wiry grey hair emerging from an armchair by the fireplace it was too late for either of them to retreat without it looking as though they were trying to avoid each other.

‘You must have seen things, overheard conversations . . .’ his voice trailed off as he peered around the side of the chair to fix her with his blue eyes. ‘Nannies always have the bird’s-eye view, Ali. People forget you’re in the room. You melt into the scenery. Like wallpaper. *N’est-ce-pas?*’ The tone of his voice was molten, as though every word contained hidden intent. He smoothed down the front of his mustard-coloured corduroy trousers with one hand and patted the seat of a stiff upright dining chair with the other, indicating that she should come and sit down beside him.

‘You can help us. Help Bryony. She’s been good to you, hasn’t she? We’re all trying to understand what has happened. Nick’s act of folly . . .’

‘Acts of folly,’ Ali wanted to correct him. Instead she stared at the chair until its red and green silk stripes started to dance before her eyes. This room had always intimidated her. It was less the imposing furniture, the hard bronze statues by Caffieri that straddled the fireplace, or the armchairs in ghostly colours with feathery fringes around their edges. After more than two years, she was accustomed to its bi-tonal formality. It was more what went on here. This was the room where everyone was called to account and she was no exception. She walked towards Foy, aware that her role had imperceptibly altered over the past month and she no longer needed to humour him, but unsure how little she could indulge him.

Ali was vaguely aware of him looking down at her bare feet. Apart from Foy, no one wore shoes in the drawing room unless there was a party. It was one of

Bryony's rules. Ali enjoyed the way the pile was so thick that you could feel it like grass between your toes and trace your tracks back across the room. But there was something vulnerable about bare feet, especially when the rest of your body was covered and you were standing before someone who had an innate ability to make you feel exposed. Instinctively, she curled her toes into the pile but it was too late. He had already absorbed the gold ring on her index toe and the small tattoo across the instep.

'It's just decorative,' said Ali, anticipating his next question. 'Like wallpaper.' She remained standing, knowing that if she sat down she might never get up. The urge to unburden herself might prove irresistible and then she would write herself out of her role in this drama. Besides, she was due to meet Felix Naylor in less than two hours for what he described as a 'preliminary chat' and he had given her firm instructions to talk to no one but him because no one else could be trusted.

'Stellar trajectory. PPE at Oxford, Harvard MBA, analyst, associate, vice-president, director, MD by thirty-five. Visionary investment banker,' muttered Foy, picking out phrases from the newspaper and arguing with himself. 'Well, he didn't see this one coming, did he?'

Ali ignored him.

'So when did you?' Foy persisted. He started to close the newspaper in his lap. It was the *Guardian*. He folded it in half, smoothed the surface so many times that the palm of his hand blackened, and then into quarters, as though engaged in an origami project. Until the scandal broke two weeks ago, Ali had never seen Foy read a paper that wasn't the *Telegraph* and she tried to think of an appropriate witticism to highlight this unlikely change of political allegiance. Even now, shattered as he was by events of the past couple of weeks, Foy was still someone people liked to please. Then Ali saw he was reading another story about Bryony and Nick and decided to change tack.

'Nothing ever feels quite right when you move in with someone else's family,' Ali responded, pleased to note that the nervousness she betrayed the first time someone had posed the question had been replaced by something approaching quiet confidence.

It was her first line of defence and as close to the truth as she dared go for the moment. She half turned towards Foy and began rattling off a few carefully inconsequential examples that best illustrated her outsider status at 94 Holland Park Crescent, hoping it would distract him from what was surely another blistering piece about his daughter and son-in-law. What was the point in reading everything that was written about them? Ali wondered. It didn't change anything. It just made

everyone feel even gloomier.

'The dog still growls at me when I come into the room; I'm the only one without a nickname; and people sound disappointed when I answer the phone,' she said, muddling up her list of responses so they sounded less rehearsed. Over the past couple of weeks she had discovered that the most persistent inquisitor, even Bryony's younger sister Hester, was generally satisfied by a variation on this response.

'Come on, Ali, you can do better than that,' said Foy wearily. It was one of his stock phrases. One of the few he used in English – '*alia jacta est*' and '*carpe diem*' being his firm favourites. Although it struck Ali that the idea that the die was cast was totally at odds with the concept of seizing the day. Especially now. This brought to mind an even more appropriate and as yet untapped example of Ali's outsider status: the expressions invented by Foy and adopted by his extended family when they wanted to pass comment on people without anyone else understanding what they mean. Chesteranto, he called it.

Nick, for example, was currently assumed to be 'at forties and fifties.' This was code for depression, although 'depressed' seemed an understatement for what Nick must be going through. It didn't sound monumental enough; Bryony was constantly 'in the breakers', snapping at anyone who crossed her path at the wrong moment; and seventeen-year-old Izzy described a journalist who buttonholed Ali at the end of the road the other day as 'menacing', which meant he was dangerously attractive. Ali had never used any of these expressions. Neither had Nick, which seemed significant now. Although through the prism of the scandal, everything seemed imbued with significance.

'I know you feel more at home here than anywhere you have ever lived,' said Foy, noisily folding the newspaper into an even smaller shape as though this might somehow diminish the contents of the story on the inside page. He was trying to ensnare her in conversation. Still Ali winced at the incontrovertible truth of this statement. She hadn't wanted to become one of those employees who live their lives through someone else's family. She'd seen enough examples of that in the time she had worked here. They attracted that kind. But moving in with the Skinners was like relocating to an exotic country and finding the prospect of going back to live in your own impossible. Life was simply more exciting with them than without them. Especially now.

Mostly Ali winced because Foy's comment was a guilty reminder that she hadn't returned any calls from her parents for over a week. There were six saved messages on her mobile phone that needed dealing with. Four from them. One

from Felix Naylor and one from Mira, a Ukrainian nanny friend.

For the first time since she had moved in, her parents had left a couple on the Skinners' answering machine. Bryony dutifully played both to her yesterday. They were sandwiched between a bland message from one of Bryony's colleagues hoping she was weathering the storm and wondering what to tell her clients and a more urgent request to call Sophia Wilbraham, a parent at the children's school, who lived just down the road. The same Sophia Wilbraham, Ali recalled, who came home after her travel plans were cancelled to find her husband in bed with their nanny of five years. At the time, it seemed there could be no greater scandal than that.

Ali's messages were banal by comparison. The first and most embarrassing was from her mother, asking whether she was all right and suggesting she might like to come home for a while until things had blown over. It wasn't the note of anxiety in her mother's voice that annoyed Ali, it was the treachery implicit in the idea that she would leave the Skinners just when they needed her most. The second, from her father, said calmly that they didn't believe everything they read in the papers and it would be nice to hear Ali's version of events. As he said goodbye, her mother interrupted to say that the neighbours were asking questions that she couldn't answer.

\*\*\*\*\*

Felix Naylor was waiting at a table in the corner of the café. He was early, which Ali saw as a sign of aggression rather than politeness. He wanted to get the upper hand. He looked up as Ali approached and gave a quick smile, putting down his newspaper on the floor and pulling out the seat beside him. There was music playing. Noah and the Whale.

The café was full of students. It was a good choice, thought Ali. She knew from experience that there was no more self-absorbed group than a bunch of undergraduates. No one would have any interest in them. And with his t-shirt, jeans and artfully scruffy hair, Felix blended in with everyone else in a way that would have been impossible for someone like Nick.

Ali sat down and glanced around her. The person opposite was examining a text message asking his friend whether the fact the girl had signed off with a couple of kisses meant more than if she had just used one. And was it significant that the kisses were in upper case. The friend was indifferent. He didn't want to get involved in a plot line that had obviously been discussed too many times before.

On the next-door table a couple were earnestly discussing whether Robinson Crusoe was a symbol of individualism that led to the rise of capitalism. 'Did you know that in his book of travels around Britain Daniel Defoe wrote about how 200 ships sailing from Great Yarmouth sank in the Devil's Mouth?' she wanted to ask. 'And that Robinson Crusoe was wrecked off the coast of East Anglia on his first voyage? It could have been his inspiration.'

A couple of years earlier she would have unselfconsciously joined in this discussion. Now it felt incredible that she could ever have been part of it. She put out a hand on the table to steady herself, grateful for the heavy oak surface that spoke of steadiness and longevity, both attributes missing in her own life at the moment.

It was difficult leaving the house because as long as she was inside Ali felt there were incontrovertible truths about her life. She was both loved and in love. She was indispensable. She was witness to an event of historic importance or at least she was unwittingly immersed in a news story that had captured the national mood. And yet as soon as she set foot outside the front door this was replaced by a sense of vertiginous uncertainty because she could just walk away from it all and no one would follow her or even notice her absence.

'Did anyone tail you?' Felix asked, sensing her agitation but mistaking its cause.

'I'm just the loyal nanny,' shrugged Ali. 'They're not really interested in me.' Then as an afterthought she added, 'thankfully', in case it sounded as though she was resentful about the lack of attention. In fact an enterprising tabloid reporter had walked down the street with her pressing her for information about what was going on behind the closed doors of Holland Park Crescent. But she had followed Bryony's instructions and kept her head down and her mouth shut and eventually he had given up.

Felix hadn't said anything on the phone about why he wanted to see her. Ali assumed his agenda was self-serving. He was a journalist. She was a source. She even suspected that he might have been responsible for removing the photograph that had appeared in today's paper. She had read enough tabloids over the past month to know that anyone associated with the Skinners was potentially corruptible.

The personal trainer who had come to the house every day for the past two years had sold a story about Bryony's beauty and health rituals including quarterly coffee enemas and chemical peels. Malea had been interviewed in a piece about the life and style of bankers' wives that failed to mention that Bryony had a successful career of her own. Instead, it focused on the weekly deliveries from Net-a-Porter,

the decorator who arrived each month to paint over finger marks on the walls coated in un-child-friendly shades of off-white, and the fact that Bryony had spent more than a thousand pounds in the Portland Hospital on a photograph album of the twins just after they were born. Thankfully the unnamed live-in nanny who acted as the children's tutor warranted just a sentence at the end.

Then there was a feature in a weekend magazine that quoted 'a family friend' describing the Skinners as 'an accident waiting to happen'. All families were an accident waiting to happen, Ali had thought, as she skim read the piece. There were insinuating anecdotes about parties attended by Jake and Izzy where there was under-age sex and conspicuous drug consumption. There was a photo of Izzy at her thinnest and yet again the one of Jake smoking dope in the garden of his Oxford college. The alleged 'family friend' also suggested that Nick had an eye for younger women. In the next sentence it mentioned how one of his closest friends had an affair with the twenty-seven-year-old nanny who looked after his children. Foy was described as a 'party animal', which was a euphemism for a multitude of sins.

'How's Bryony?' Felix enquired.

'She's OK.'

'And the children?'

'It's obviously difficult but they are fine.'

'You know that Bryony is an old friend of mine?'

'I know that you went out with her before she met Nick.' A waitress came over and brought Ali a cup of tea.

'I introduced her to Nick.'

'I think I knew that.'

'I want to talk with you openly, Ali,' said Felix, looking serious.

'I'm not for sale.'

'What do you think I want from you?'

'I think you want to pump me for information that you can use to sell more copies of your newspaper,' said Ali. 'I think you want to use your relationship with the Skinners to further your own interests and make a fast buck along the way. Or you're going to try to persuade me to sell my side of the story to the highest bidder.'

'I'm not Max Clifford,' Felix protested, stirring his own tea so vigorously that it slopped over the side into the saucer and splattered the front of his t-shirt. He didn't seem to notice. 'I don't do those kind of stories. I cover financial news, the economy, business, the stock market. I work for a broadsheet, not a tabloid.'

‘It was your newspaper that had the photograph of them dressed up in Greek costumes that I took in Corfu,’ said Ali accusingly. ‘You’re all the same.’

‘I didn’t steal that photograph,’ said Felix. ‘Lots of newspapers had it.’

‘Then how do you know it’s missing?’ Ali asked him.

‘Because Bryony told me,’ he said. ‘Look, I know it’s difficult to know who to trust at the moment and I’m not asking you to trust me. What I want to know is if I can trust you.’

Ali looked up and frowned at him. He had one of those perennially youthful faces where it looked as though a toddler had etched in the wrinkles as a joky afterthought. His cheeks were ruddy, alcohol rather than fresh air, Ali thought, and he had an almost girlish bow mouth the same shade as his cheeks. His face was embarrassingly open, as though he retained a childlike innocence that made it impossible to conceive of him doing anything duplicitous. It was as if he had been designed to be as unthreatening as possible. As someone used to being the keeper of other people’s secrets, Ali recognized a kindred spirit.

‘This isn’t a ploy. I’m not that complicated. If I was more Machiavellian I might have ended up marrying Bryony,’ he said, reading her mind. ‘It’s because I still care about her that I’ve asked you to meet me.’

‘I’m not sure how I can help.’

October 2006

‘Are you the Skinners’ new nanny?’

‘I’m Mira,’ said the woman, holding out one hand to shake Ali’s hand while the other held the baby in place on her shoulder. The baby’s cries became less plaintive and it shut its eyes. Mira rhythmically jiggled from side to side, the beat increasing whenever the mewling noise threatened to intensify.

‘We were wondering if you wanted to have coffee with us?’ she asked. Ali flinched. No one she had met seemed to have any interest in her life before she began working in London. Maybe that’s what happened in a city of migrants. Life was lived in the present tense. She thought of the occasions when she had tried to engage Malea in conversation about the Philippines. Where exactly are you from? Do you still have family there? Will you go back one day? Malea sidestepped every question with an enigmatic laugh as though Ali was making a joke.

Then yesterday as Jake passed her on the top flight of stairs he had stopped to explain how Malea had three children of her own who lived with their grandmother in a village five hours by bus from Manila. The youngest was the same age as the twins and she hadn’t seen him for almost two years.

‘That’s so awful,’ said Ali. But Jake had already disappeared up to his room.

‘I’m meant to go straight home and do half an hour of maths with each of them,’ Ali told Mira. ‘We have quite a strict timetable.’

‘Please, Ali, can we go to Starbucks,’ pleaded Hector, pulling on her hand.

‘I beg you,’ said Alfie melodramatically.

Ali laughed.

‘We won’t tell Mummy,’ said Hector.

Ali did a quick calculation. Bryony was working late. By tomorrow, today would be a distant memory for the twins. ‘That would be really nice.’

‘We couldn’t decide whether you were lonely or aloof,’ said Mira.

Ali was uncomfortable with the way she had been the subject of their conversation. Neither lonely nor aloof were adjectives anyone would want to attach to herself. But she did like the way Mira said aloof, emphasizing the final consonant so that it hung in the air like smoke rings. It was obviously a word she had learnt recently because during this first encounter she used it several times. It reminded Ali of the way Hector and Alfie experimented with new words.

‘Lonely,’ Ali said. ‘But not terminally.’ She wondered whether Mira would understand but didn’t want to patronize her by searching for another word.

‘Benignly lonely,’ said the woman with approval. ‘You must have a Ukrainian soul.’

They went into the café and Mira adroitly weaved the pushchair between tables. There was a small group of women, whom Ali recognized from outside school. They were all sitting beside identical multi-storey pushchairs with babies tucked in the bottom and the occasional toddler sipping organic juice in the seat above.

She sat down, grateful for the company, and managed with surprising proficiency to order a skinny latte with an extra shot of coffee. Hector and Alfie sat on a table beside Ali with another boy that she recognized from their class.

She was intrigued to find these nannies speaking English to each other. Except because of the mispronunciation, the heavy accents and the hesitant cadence, it sounded like a different form of English. They all mispronounced words in the same way. A rolling ‘r’ that came from the front of the tongue rather than the glottis had been introduced. Maybe this is how everyone will speak in fifty years’ time, thought Ali, as she sipped at her coffee. At the very least it might become a dialect or a kind of *patois*.

Mira introduced them to Ali. They all had exotic-sounding names: the one with the toddler was Raisa, the older woman with the perpetually worried expression was Ileana, then there was Katya. They all smiled warmly and shook her hand. Ali recognized Katya as the nanny standing beside the woman in the circular skirt at the beginning of term. Actually, Ali recalled, Katya had stood unobtrusively three paces behind Sophia Wilbraham and one pace to the side, a technique she noticed other nannies adopt when they were with their bosses. The etiquette between nanny and employer was as byzantine as the court of Louis Quinze.

Katya was tall and pale. Her hair was harshly scraped back off her face into a ponytail. She wore no make-up and a shapeless white shirt over a pair of jeans but even in this minimalist attire, Ali could see she was beautiful. After acknowledging Ali with a quick smile, she continued with the story she was telling.

Ali sipped her coffee, grateful for an excuse to stare at her. She was wasted spending her days looking after someone else’s children, thought Ali. She should be on MTV or modelling for Stella McCartney or presenting a cookery programme on East European cuisine.

‘So what’s it like?’ Katya asked suddenly, turning to Ali.

‘What’s what like?’ replied Ali.

‘What’s it like working for the Skinners?’

‘It’s fine,’ said Ali, checking to see whether Alfie and Hector were listening, but they were too involved scooping froth off the top of their babyccino to

make milk moustaches. She could see the disappointment on Katya's face.

'Early days. All a bit strange. They look after me well.'

She fell silent, aware that she hadn't delivered. If they became friends she might tell them that after almost two months living with the Skinners, this was what she knew: Bryony didn't eat; Izzy ate a lot but then threw up, mostly Cumberland sausages that cost £11 a pound from the butcher in Holland Park Avenue; the twins' friends all had strange names (Star, Ocean, Canteloupe); Nick didn't need much sleep; and the under-floor heating was perpetually switched on in the kitchen, even when it got so hot that Malea had to open the sliding doors into the garden. She might have told them how music could be piped through the ten rooms on the bottom two floors from a centrally controlled panel in the kitchen and that as recently as this week she had discovered a new room in the basement: a home cinema with seats wide enough to fit two adults. Or she could have mentioned the bags of clothes that arrived from Net-a-Porter every other week. Some of the dresses cost thousands of pounds. Ali knew because she had seen the receipts in the top drawer of the desk in Bryony's office. Many of the bags sat in Bryony's dressing room, the clothes wrapped in tissue paper, never to be used, because she didn't have time to try them on.

She thought of the £100 spending money that Bryony left on the kitchen table every morning and the irritation on her face if Ali tried to return the change in the evening; the way the larder was stacked with food and drink from floor to ceiling, like a supermarket, because Bryony made exactly the same Internet order every week, even when the huge American fridge was already full; she recalled waking up a couple of nights earlier hearing raised voices arguing somewhere in the house and assuming it was Nick and Bryony, only to discover the next morning that Nick was still in Asia: and she thought about the apologetic expression on Jake's face when he told her about Malea's children. Although she was sure that he lied to her more than any of the other children, Jake occasionally demonstrated random acts of kindness that made Ali feel less alone at Holland Park Crescent.

'Nick and Bryony aren't around very much. They seem to work very hard,' she explained. 'Nick travels a lot. I've only seen him four or five times since I started the job.'

'That's good,' said Katya. 'It can get a bit confusing for the children if there are too many people telling them what to do.'

How could it be good that the twins hardly ever spent any time with their dad? Ali wondered. She'd spent long hours with her father as a child. But would it have mattered if she hadn't? She wouldn't have known that if the wind was blowing

off the land then it was safe to fish. More significantly, she wouldn't have known that if the wind was blowing from the northeast round to easterly, then it was best to stay on land. When it was like this her father described it as 'blowing up a hooligan'. She smiled at the memory. Nor would she have known that the seabed in Cromer is made of sand, chalk and flint and that it was this combination that made the crabs smaller and sweeter.

'Is that what you find?' asked Ali, wondering what it would be like to work for someone like Sophia Wilbraham.

'No,' smiled Katya, 'there is a very clear chain of command and room for only one person at the top. We call Sophia the dominatrix.' She laughed loudly. Mira looked at Katya disapprovingly, as though Ali wasn't quite yet worthy of such confidence.

'She is someone who is not afraid of her own tongue,' said Mira, muddling metaphors in a way that made Ali smile. 'But she has a big heart.'

'And a big arse,' said Katya.

'Katya doesn't like her any more because she thinks Sophia wants rid of her,' explained Mira.

'Sophia's husband told me that she thought I was too good looking to live in a family home and that I cooked too many meals with him in mind,' said Katya, rocking Thomas in her arms. 'As though I was trying to seduce him with my Kapusniak.'

'Kapusniak is a Polish dish,' Raisa interjected.

'Actually it is also Ukrainian,' said Mira. The conversation descended into a discussion about the origins of various East European dishes.

'So what did you do?' interrupted Ali, who was intrigued by this dynamic.

'I found out her favourite dishes and started to cook them,' shrugged Katya.

'So will you be going to Corfu with the family like the other nannies?' asked Mira.

'Of course,' said Ali, although Bryony had mentioned nothing.

Why did she lie to Mira? She decided later that it was because she didn't want to acknowledge how dislocated she still felt from Bryony. Although they spoke two or three times a day and it was rare that Bryony didn't send an email every couple of hours, their relationship was functional and devoid of any context. This week she had received an email outlining the problems of under-brushing the twins' teeth, followed a couple of days later by an email warning her of the perils of over-brushing. This had rapidly been followed by a magazine article about how to encourage intellectual curiosity in small children, suggesting that

Ali cut out a piece from the newspaper each day to discuss with the twins in between their maths homework and piano practice.

She thought of the most recent email, sent at 5.53am, when Bryony was probably warming up in the basement gym. Subject matter ‘Snagging’, a hybrid of snogging and nagging, Ali assumed, until she read the attachment instructing her to go through every room in the house looking for problems the builders might have overlooked at the end of their recent refurbishment. Light fittings missing from wardrobes and bathroom cupboards, un-stable toilet basins, missing curtain hooks, loose wires, defunct light bulbs, sloppy paintwork, grouting issues, leaking radiators. Bryony’s list was exhaustive.

Then she remembered their first meeting after she had been given the job. On reflection, it was little more than an elaborate list of dos and don’ts. The dos included reading to the twins each night for at least twenty minutes, but no more than thirty, alternating between fiction and non-fiction on a ratio of roughly sixty–forty. At this point Bryony had suggested Ali might want to take notes and had pushed a pen and notebook towards her across the dining room table.

Then there was an extensive discussion on healthy snacks and a list of forbidden foods including most sweets. This was particularly important for Izzy, Bryony said, because she was ill disciplined and putting on weight. Ali could, however, ask Malea to make sugar-free blueberry muffins using honey instead of sugar and on Fridays everyone was allowed an organic chocolate bar (as long as it contained at least sixty per cent cocoa solids). She then talked about carbohydrates in terms that reminded Ali of the war on terrorism. They hid in foods. They needed to be routed and exposed and made accountable for their actions.

‘Definitely on the axis of evil,’ Ali had joked but Bryony hadn’t responded because she had moved on to screen time. She accepted Ali’s assertion that it would be difficult to monitor how much time Jake and Izzy spent on their computers because they were in their bedrooms. The twins were allowed to watch no more than half an hour of television each day. Computer games were completely off limits. At the end Bryony casually suggested that Ali might want to avoid ‘getting embroiled’ in the nanny mafia that spent too much time gossiping in cafés.

‘How long have you been with Thomas?’ Ali asked Katya, in the same way she might ask a friend about a new boyfriend.

‘Since he was born. Almost.’ Katya smiled. ‘They had a maternity nurse at the beginning. But they discovered that she was giving Thomas medicine to make him sleep through the night. I’d been working as their cleaning lady for six years and so they fired the maternity nurse and I got the job.’

‘That’s awful,’ said Ali. She paused for a moment. ‘What’s a maternity nurse?’

‘It’s someone who gets paid to look after newborn babies,’ Katya explained. ‘Really good money but you change jobs every three weeks. The mothers can be really neurotic and you have to get up in the night all the time.’

‘Unless you drug the baby,’ said Ali. Everyone laughed. Hector and Alfie came over to see what was going on.

‘I love it here,’ said Hector, leaning in towards Ali. She put out her knee and pulled him into her lap. This was the first time she could remember him spontaneously seeking her affections. She gave him a piece of half-eaten cake and his body relaxed into her own until he was almost supine. He began humming the same song again. Ali gently wound one of his curls around her finger and it slipped through like threads of silk.

‘You need a haircut, Hector,’ she said, remembering Bryony’s latest email.

‘No,’ responded Hector adamantly.

‘If you join the army they cut off all your hair,’ she teased him. He frowned as if unsure whether to believe her. Alfie came over and stood beside them. ‘In the army they shave it down to your scalp.’ She made a noise like an electric razor and pretended to cut their hair with her fingers, tickling the backs of their necks until they crumpled into a giggling heap.

‘I have something for you boys for being so good,’ said Katya. She searched in her handbag until she had found a lollipop for each of them.

‘Thank you, Katya,’ they trilled in unison, ripping off the wrappers. This afternoon’s sugar intake represented the biggest lapse in rules since Ali had started work. On balance she would get away with it. They would probably be in bed before Bryony was home. And tomorrow night she was unlikely to ask about whether they had eaten any sweets the previous day. If they ate the lollipops now it would buy her another twenty minutes of company with Mira and her friends. She had enjoyed sitting with this group of women in the warm café even if her contribution to the conversation was sporadic. She liked the way they gently chided and teased and gave each other advice about how to deal with tantrums or cook custard without burning the bottom of the saucepan. Katya was indiscreet and entertaining. Mira’s employers were seeing a marriage guidance counsellor. Sophia’s oldest daughter was sleeping with her English tutor. Bryony had turned down an offer to appear in *Vogue* as one of Britain’s top businesswomen. Mira admonished Katya without conviction.

‘Don’t tell Mummy,’ Ali told Hector and Alfie, ‘otherwise we won’t be able to do this again.’ They nodded seriously.

*November 2006*

By the time Nick and Bryony were settling in to early evening drinks at Dick Fuld's ranch in Idaho after a strenuous day hiking up and down Bald Mountain, their daughter Izzy had drunk rather more than half a bottle of vodka and was inexpertly smoking her first joint with a boy from Jake's school at a party in Notting Hill. As her mother gratefully accepted a glass of Clos du Mesnil 1995 from a Salvadorean maid in full uniform, Izzy followed the boy into a room with a view across London and a large double bed that wouldn't be occupied that night by the owner of the house or his new girlfriend because they were in Marrakesh for the weekend.

At more or less the same time, Ali found herself wandering into Nick and Bryony's bedroom to keep vigil for the taxi that was due to bring Izzy home from the party. It was already ten minutes late. Of course she could have observed the street from the drawing room but the same impulse that led Izzy to allow a boy she didn't know to guide her hand inside his trousers compelled Ali into the forbidden territory of the second floor of Holland Park Crescent. Like Izzy, she was marginally surprised to find she felt less like an intruder and more like an explorer mapping new territory.

Ali closed the door behind her and stood for a moment to admire the daring gold and black wallpaper, the crystal light fitting and gold mirror above the original fireplace. Bryony and Nick's bed was enormous and the duvet as smooth as glacé icing. There was no trace of the couple that slept there. No wrinkles in the sheets. No tissues on the bedside table. No stray hairs on the pillow. She tried to imagine them in a state of abandoned entanglement and found she couldn't.

She went into the bathroom. There were matching grey towels as thick and smooth as Leicester's coat; reconditioned silver art deco bath taps shaped like fish; and a roll top bath that matched the bed for scale. Room for three, thought Ali. The room made her think of Miami – haughty pink flamingos on a pale grey background – even though she had never been there. Not surprising because the interior decorator was American. Ali had met her the other day. All smiles and sunny Californian bonhomie until she realized she was speaking to the nanny, not Bryony's daughter.

The bathroom cabinet exceeded expectations: Seconal, Restoril and Ambien for insomnia (prescription in Nick's name); Vicodin and Percocet to relieve pain (also in Nick's name); and Xanax and Ativan to treat anxiety. There were also two

full packets of Fluoxetine. But no Citralopram or Sertraline, which was a good sign. Bryony was on the Pill.

Ali undid the zip of her jeans and pulled down her knickers to pee in the minimalist Philippe Starck toilet. The contrast with the over-embellished basin and bath was too obvious to be accidental. It seemed to suggest a kind of shyness with bodily functions that was totally at odds with the vast floor-to-ceiling mirror that covered the wall opposite. She wondered if Nick and Bryony ever had sex in front of it. There was a hint of narcissism in their worked-out bodies and she could imagine Nick admiring the way his buttock muscles clenched as Bryony wrapped her legs around his thighs. Ali watched her reflection and used the loo roll with particular flourish, trying not to imagine Nick and Bryony doing the same. Then she flushed the loo twice, in case they noticed that someone had used it.

Izzy was meant to be home by midnight. Ali didn't need to consult the two pages of typed instructions that she found when she went back down into the kitchen to know she should have been collected in a cab at eleven-thirty. She stood by the kitchen island staring at her crumpled tube map, trying to make sense of how long it might take a taxi to drive from a party in Notting Hill to Holland Park. She now understood that the scale of the underground system bore little relation to the actual topography of London. But when she saw the two were adjacent on the Central Line, her stomach knotted because it certainly shouldn't take an hour.

She called Izzy and left another message, this one more frantic than the last.

'Izzy, you are now more than half an hour late and we're all worrying about you,' she said into the phone, making a swift decision to suggest others were now involved in the drama. 'Please call us as soon as you get this message.'

She checked there were no messages on the answering machine and then called the taxi company that was meant to bring Izzy home. Ali had learnt from her mother that action was nearly always the best antidote to anxiety over children who had missed their curfew. Sensing he wasn't the object of her attention, Leicester came and sat on her foot. Ali tried to shake him off but he growled so grumpily that she relented.

The woman who answered the phone told her that Izzy's friend had been dropped in Warwick Gardens at around eleven forty-five but that the journey to Holland Park Crescent had been cancelled. Izzy must still be at the party, concluded Ali, because there was no way that she could walk far in the high-heeled ankle boots she had pilfered from Bryony's wardrobe.

'You were meant to drop her home,' Ali rounded on the cab operator.

‘We’re a taxi company, not a child-minding service,’ said the woman. ‘The driver says she refused to come. Imagine the aggro if he’d forced a drunken teenage girl into the car.’

‘You could have let me know,’ said Ali truculently. ‘Can you please send a cab to come and collect me and take me to the same address right away?’

‘Not for another hour,’ the woman said. ‘It’s Saturday night.’

‘This is an emergency,’ insisted Ali.

‘Then dial 999.’

Ali turned to the last page of Bryony’s instructions. There was a comprehensive list of people she might want to contact in an emergency, even though she was unsure whether Izzy’s failure to come home yet constituted an emergency because she was still only three quarters of an hour late. The ill-defined parameters of the crisis preoccupied her. Ali lurched from benign explanations – Izzy waiting for a cab that hadn’t turned up, Holland Park Avenue closed because of an accident, a drunken friend who required assistance – to malevolent images inspired by incidents in the past involving her own sister. Her father finding Jo in a park being held down by a group of teenage boys (the details were never talked about), Jo found by the police in a pool of her own blood in Norwich (she was sleeping on the street and had her period), Jo taken to hospital from a party with chest pains (incompatible drug experience involving cocaine and ecstasy).

Images of Jo and Izzy became entangled in Ali’s mind and she felt a familiar pressure in her stomach, as though someone was squeezing her very tight. It was a sensation she associated with living at home. She suddenly remembered a weekend almost three years earlier, just before her A levels, when Jo had arrived home unannounced after another long period ‘away’ and told her parents she wanted to clean up.

By this time Ali’s parents were fluent in the language of rehabilitation. Experience, however, had made them wary and they huddled together at the table in worried silence as Jo outlined her plan. She stood in the middle of the floor niggling a piece of loose linoleum with her toe, unable to look them in the eye. Ali had melted into the background, both repulsed and compelled by her sister’s appearance: the pale doughy skin, the dead brown eyes, the scabby arms, the bony legs encased in a pair of sticky jeans. She reminded Ali of an insect. There was no attempt to hide what was going on, which meant that either she had reached rock bottom, and wanted to find a way out of the nightmare she

had created for herself, or she no longer cared what people thought.

‘What can we do to help, Jo?’ her mother had asked. Her tone was guarded, as though she wanted to believe Jo might go through with her plan, but didn’t want to fully embrace it in case she was disappointed.

‘I’ll need lots of bottled water, Gatorade, Night Nurse and peanut butter sandwiches,’ Jo began earnestly.

‘Peanut butter?’ Ali questioned, knowing that her interest signalled involvement.

‘It’s what they feed prisoners who are detoxing in American jails,’ Jo explained. ‘It’s easy to eat and it raises endorphin levels. And if they’ve got any valerian root that would help with the anxiety. I’ll need lots of clean sheets because I’ll get the sweats and hot baths to stay warm so can you leave the hot water on all the time please?’

The whole process would take no longer than ten days, a period that coincided almost exactly with Ali’s exams.

‘What about me?’ Ali wanted to ask. ‘How am I going to revise? How am I going to get enough sleep? Who is going to make sure that I’m fine?’ But she didn’t because she knew that if she had, no one would have responded. Jo hadn’t done it on purpose, Ali kept telling herself. Heroin was worse than the most jealous lover: it didn’t allow for anyone else in her life.

Her mother had diligently made a list. Ali was instructed to take Jo for a walk to the end of the pier and back, nothing strenuous, while her parents went shopping. It was cold and windy and the sea was angrily foaming around the steel girders of the pier. Jo and Ali walked as far as they could. Ali could tell that Jo was getting twitchy for her next fix.

‘If I jump in over the edge, will you promise to give up drugs forever?’ Ali asked her sister. Jo had nodded and Ali had climbed onto the railing, stood there for a moment and then jumped fully clothed into the sea. It was a reckless act. Her long coat weighed her down. She held her breath underwater for as long as she could. She wanted Jo to know what it was like to worry that someone might die. When she came up Jo had disappeared.

She had already gone into town and scored again. When her parents came home, Ali told them what had happened. Ali watched her mother’s face and felt anger and pity for the concertina of lines across her forehead. It occurred to her as she remembered this incident that her mother was probably younger than Bryony, but looked at least fifteen years older.

Ali ran her finger down the list, pressing the paper hard to stop her fingers shaking. It stopped beside Nick and Bryony and tapped their names. There were details of where they were staying: Short Hill Ranch, Bald Mountain, Sun Valley, Idaho, read the address. Bryony had left four mobile phone numbers and a landline number of the country retreat that belonged to Nick's boss. Where the fuck is Idaho? thought Ali in panic, as she tried to work out what the time might be there. Were they seven hours ahead or seven hours behind GMT? She needed a map. One that stretched from Notting Hill to the Rockies. She searched for an atlas in the bookshelf, Leicester trailing behind, viewing her presence without the master and mistress of the house with snuffling disapproval.

Malea's name didn't appear. She rarely left the house of her own volition except to take Leicester for a short walk to the end of Holland Park Crescent once a day. She famously once got lost going to Sainsbury's. Ali could now at least trace the route to school from the back of the cab that picked them up every morning at eight o'clock. She could negotiate her way round Holland Park. And she had discovered a cut through to the butcher, where Bryony frequently sent her to pick up the sausages that Izzy favoured during her binges.

But as far as she was aware she had never been as far as Notting Hill central, although she was fairly sure that it was due north. For a moment Ali wished that her father were here. He could negotiate the North Sea in the thickest pea soup, when you couldn't see more than a couple of feet in front of you. As a child she remembered making him close his eyes, spinning him round so fast that his waders creaked in protest and then asking him to point north. He was always right.

Malea might have an appalling sense of direction, but at least she was here and could wait with Hector and Alfie while Ali drove to the party to search for Izzy. Her decision made, Ali got up so abruptly that she sent the heavy oak chair flying. Leicester growled and followed her down into the basement where he sat proprietorially in the middle of a step so that Ali had to negotiate her way around him.

Once downstairs she switched on all the lights and made as much noise as possible in the hope of rousing Malea. She glanced into the huge playroom, wondering if Jake might be there listening to music with friends. Although the television was switched on, nobody seemed to be watching it.

Ali hesitated in front of Malea's door, knocking into thin air a couple of times before allowing her knuckle to make contact with the wood. She reminded herself of Malea's acts of kindness: the way she would put out Hector and Alfie's clothes every night, neatly stacked in the order they preferred to get

dressed; how she offered to bath the twins if Ali was busy helping the other children with their homework; and the Cromer crab waiting on the kitchen table for her one afternoon last week.

Ali gave a couple of quiet taps with her knuckle. When Malea didn't appear she used the flat of her hand to bang against the door. Finally Malea emerged, half asleep, wearing a dressing gown tied in a neat bow in the middle of her waist, like a present waiting to be unwrapped. Her cheeks were shiny with face cream.

'What is it, Miss Ali?' she asked sleepily.

'Just Ali, please,' said Ali, as she always did when Malea addressed her. A small lamp was switched on and Ali could see a couple of pairs of flip-flops neatly stacked in the bottom of a wardrobe containing three pairs of trousers in the same colour and a few striped shirts. On the bedside table was a photograph of three small children smiling cheekily at the camera, gap toothed and tousle haired. The youngest still has his milk teeth, thought Ali with a pang. Beside them was a picture of the Virgin Mary and a Bible. Otherwise, the room was bare.

'Izzy hasn't come home and I'm not sure what to do,' said Ali, trying to sound more controlled than she felt.

'Have you tried Mr Jake?' Malea asked calmly.

'No,' said Ali. 'I think Jake is out.' She said his name emphatically.

'He called me an hour ago to bring a snack to his room,' said Malea, calling him on the internal phone on her bedside table. There was no reply. Malea paused. 'I think he has girl with him.'

'I will go upstairs and watch the twins so you don't have to worry about them,' said Malea, going back into the room to fetch her shoes. 'Then you can wake Mr Jake.' Ali followed her inside.

'Thank you,' she said. 'Has Izzy done anything like this before?'

'I not think so,' said Malea, 'but she always has her troubles. The other nannies found her tricky.'

What other nannies? Ali wondered, suddenly curious about her predecessors. She had never asked any questions about the women who had worked here before her, an oversight that now struck her as both arrogant and ignorant. She should have asked to speak to one of them, to glean their opinion on the Skinners, before she had accepted the job. Now it was too late. She was already involved. She was embedded.

She could tell whether Hector had had a bad day at school simply by observing the angle of his shoulders as he came out of the classroom. Worse, if he emerged with shoulders slumped it affected her mood; she worried about the sweet

wrappings and empty packets of laxatives she found behind the radiator in Izzy's bedroom and the sticky labels with Izzy's thinspiration mantras. ('Eating is conforming.' 'Anorexia is a lifestyle not a disease.') Poor Izzy. She would never be as thin as the tiny girls in skinny jeans who congregated in her bedroom on a Friday afternoon after school to experiment with make-up and each other's clothes. Ali felt another pang of worry and checked her phone to see whether Izzy had sent her a message but she hadn't.

'Are those your children, Malea?' she asked, pointing at the photograph on the bedside table.

'Yes,' said Malea, who was searching in the wardrobe for shoes, her back to Ali so that her face was hidden.

'Where do they live?' asked Ali.

'They live in our village with my mother,' said Malea.

'You must miss them,' said Ali gently.

'Of course,' said Malea, turning round to face her. 'But I am giving them a better life by working here than I would if we all lived together at home. They are well fed. They are going to school. They will go to university.'

'What about their father?' Ali asked.

'He was killed in a bus crash,' said Malea simply.

'I'm sorry,' said Ali, berating herself. Malea shrugged.

'It is the way of the world,' she said quietly.

'Wouldn't you rather be poor and be with your children?' Ali found herself asking.

'I don't think you understand,' said Malea quietly. 'Where I come from people are so poor they have to choose which child to sell to help the others survive.'

'I'm sorry,' stammered Ali, 'I shouldn't have asked.'

'It's OK, Ali,' said Malea, pulling on her shoes, 'no one has asked the question the whole time I have lived in England. Let's go.'

Ali went upstairs, two steps at a time, until she found herself outside Jake's bedroom. She knocked a couple of times but there was no response so she listened outside the door and then gently turned the handle. It was the first time she had been in his room since she moved into the Skinners' house, even though the staircase to the converted attic began right outside her bedroom door. Jake's door opened up into a cavernous space running the entire roof span. A dull light shone from a red and purple lava lamp. She squinted to get her bearings. On the wall was an Arsenal shirt in away colours signed by the victorious 2005 FA Cup

team. There was a photo, presumably of Jake, although it was difficult to tell, skiing in a downhill slalom wearing a bib sponsored by Vodafone. On the mantelpiece above the fireplace were school photos of him playing football. He was in the first team for everything.

Ali went over to the end of his bed and stared at the tangled duvet for a moment. There were definitely two bodies beneath. He had a double bed. For someone who had only slept with a boyfriend in the back of a car or in a single bed, this proved strangely irksome to Ali, a measure of the gulf between them. Jake's attitude to his family's wealth was indifference rather than arrogance but Ali held him more accountable because he was closest to her in age. She recalled the cricket bat Malea had found last month, already lost and replaced with a more expensive model; school ski holiday paid up unquestioningly; stolen BlackBerry substituted with the latest Nokia; latest iMac on his desk; £50 spending money for a night out.

Ali headed towards the left side of the bed where Jake's head was just visible. She noisily pulled out the drawer of the bedside table, hoping to wake him up without touching him. There was a familiar jumble of spare iPod headphones, a small plastic bag containing cigarette papers and tobacco and a small packet of grass. She opened and shut the drawer a couple more times. Jake didn't stir although the body next to him rolled closer.

Ali sat on the bed close to his head. She tentatively touched his hair, gently ruffling the fringe as she did when she woke the twins in the morning. He sighed deeply. She took the edge of the duvet and pulled it back to expose the top of his shoulder. Ali's hands were cold and he tried to push her away as she shook the top of his arm. A naked leg emerged from beneath the duvet. His eyes remained closed.

'Jake, please, it's me,' whispered Ali, prodding his shoulder again. Jake put an arm out of the bed and rested it on Ali's thigh.

'Please open your eyes,' pleaded Ali.

'What do you want?' he mumbled.

'I need your help. Izzy was meant to be home over an hour ago and she's not picking up her phone.'

'Relax,' said Jake, patting her leg. 'She'll come home when she's ready.'

'She's only fourteen,' pleaded Ali.

'A fourteen-year-old London girl is like a twenty-one-year-old girl from Cromer,' he said. The girl beside him stirred. 'Sshh, you're going to wake Lucy.' He closed his eyes again.

'I don't know how to get to Notting Hill,' Ali pleaded.

‘What do you want me to do?’ he mumbled. He tried to pull Ali onto the bed, as she pummelled his shoulder. Unsure how else to respond, Ali picked up a glass of water from the bedside table and threw it over his face.

‘Are you pissed, Ali?’ asked Jake, gripping the side of the front seat of the car half an hour later as they pulled up outside the house in Notting Hill where Izzy’s party was being held. Apart from giving instructions on how to get to the Bassetts’ house, he hadn’t spoken during the journey. Occasionally, he ran his fingers through his hair to see if it was still wet. ‘Or are you just a crap driver?’

‘Crap driver,’ admitted Ali. To her relief there were hardly any cars in the road, which meant she didn’t have to reverse into a space outside the house.

‘I’m just a bit out of practice,’ said Ali, as they parked, although actually she had managed a couple of smooth gear changes. They got out, went to the front door and rang the bell a couple of times. No one answered. The house was ablaze with light and they could hear the dull throb of music emanating from the basement. It’s amazing that the neighbours don’t complain, thought Ali, looking up and down the street.

‘Everyone’s in the country for the weekend,’ said Jake.

They peered through the letterbox, called Izzy’s mobile phone and heard it ringing from a pile of coats carelessly stacked along the hallway. A teenage boy knelt down and started searching through pockets to locate the phone. Jake called to him through the letterbox to let them in. He half opened the door and when he realized he recognized Jake from school, he allowed them both inside.

‘Sorry, mate,’ he mumbled, glancing from Ali to Jake in confusion.

‘Where are Mr and Mrs Bassett?’ Ali asked the boy.

‘Away,’ he shrugged, before heading back downstairs into the basement. Ali and Jake followed him. They walked past a huddle of girls queuing outside a toilet on a landing halfway down the stairs. Even in the dull light Ali could see the pale beige carpet was covered in muddy footprints.

‘Sasha, have you seen Izzy?’ Jake shouted up at one of the girls.

Ali thought she recognized Sasha although perhaps it was because she looked exactly like the girl that Jake had just brought home.

‘Hi, Ali,’ Sasha said, standing up. Even without shoes she towered over Ali. She was wearing a pair of tiny denim shorts that accentuated her improbably long legs and a checked shirt knotted at her stomach to reveal a pierced tummy button. Her hair tumbled in blonde waves around her shoulders and down her back. Her eyes were dark with kohl. Ali realized that she was simply a much older

version of the Sasha who periodically appeared in the kitchen at Holland Park Crescent after school and politely asked for a snack to take upstairs to do her homework with Izzy.

‘Dance, Jake?’ Sasha asked, swaying her hips to the music.

‘I’m looking for Izzy,’ Jake shouted, as Sasha stepped downstairs until she was standing beside him. She was the same height as Jake. She stretched out her arm and let it rest on Jake’s shoulder.

‘Most people bring a bottle of vodka to a party, but you bring your nanny,’ she shrieked with laughter. She leant over to Jake and kissed him on the lips until he relented. ‘Enjoy,’ she said, rewarding his lack of resistance. ‘I think Izzy is upstairs.’ The layout of the house was similar to Holland Park Crescent, but on a smaller scale, which made it easy for Ali to get her bearings. It was funkier too. Although the upstairs sitting room was lit by a single lamp and precariously pitched tea candles, Ali could see that the walls were painted a deep blood red and the sofas were covered in throws in exotic colours. There was a loose oriental theme: the cupboards were painted in gold lacquer; the fireplace was guarded by a four-armed Vishnu.

Ali stood by the mantelpiece to scan the room for Izzy. In the centre of the mantelpiece there was a sculpture of a man’s head, the same colour as the walls, and a couple of photographs, including one of Mick Jagger holding a baby, Jerry Hall draped gracefully across his shoulder. There were tiny trinkets: a pipe from India, a small clay band of animals playing musical instruments, a pencil-box from Iran; and a collection of Gandhara Buddha heads. On the walls were black and white photographs of rock bands, including the Rolling Stones. She could see Jake approaching in the mirror above the fireplace.

‘I can’t see her,’ she said anxiously.

‘Did you see the photos?’ asked Jake, tapping the glass frame. ‘Sasha’s dad works in the music industry. Her mum used to be a model.’

‘Gosh,’ said Ali, impressed. ‘Do you think they’ll be home soon?’ Jake laughed.

‘They split up years ago. Her dad’s new girlfriend is younger than Sasha’s older sister. She’s a younger model of the older model. This is his house. But he’s in Marrakesh for the weekend.’

‘What about Sasha’s mum?’

‘She’s at home with her boyfriend. It’s not her weekend to have Sasha,’ Jake patiently explained.

‘So, Sasha is having a party without any adult supervision?’ Ali asked in

astonishment. 'I'm not sure I approve.'

'Please don't have one of your Mary fucking Poppins moments here,' said Jake.

'What do you mean?' asked Ali.

'What I mean is that in my world life isn't supercala-fucking-fragilistic all the time,' said Jake. 'It's up and it's down.'

Jake took Ali by the arm and led her back towards the staircase. She noticed a couple entwined on the sofa, a half-drunk bottle of wine on its side beside them, its contents seeping into the carpet. Ali couldn't help bending down to right it. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of Sophia Wilbraham's daughter, Martha, glancing across at her, eyes glazed. Ali was taken aback to notice that one of the girl's breasts was exposed and was being inexpertly kneaded by the boy who lay on top of her. He suddenly leant over and took the perfectly shaped nipple into his mouth and chewed it as though he was trying to nudge a stone from a cherry. Poor technique, thought Ali. Martha lazily put a finger up to her mouth, looked at Ali and whispered, 'Sshh.' Ali felt Jake nudge her.

'Did you see that?' asked Ali.

'She's doing a GCSE in Westminster boys,' laughed Jake dismissively. 'Her older sister has even slept with the tutor her mum got to help her get to grips with Thomas Hardy.'

In the master bedroom on the first floor, there were so many bodies draped across the bed that it was difficult to work out how they fitted together. There was a boy in the middle, a girl lying under each arm, except one of the girls was deep in conversation with another boy draped over the legs of the first one. They were all sharing a cigarette. At the foot of the bed were another couple of bodies. One of the girls was curled up in the foetal position, sound asleep.

'She's in a K hole,' said Jake.

'What do you mean?' asked Ali.

'Vitamin K,' said Jake knowingly.

'Ketamine?' confirmed Ali. 'As in horse tranquilizer?' Jake nodded.

In the corner a girl was trying to play a song by the Stereophonics but every time she pressed play someone else changed the music. For a moment Ali envied their careless intimacy. She resolved to call Rosa the following day and arrange a weekend in Norwich. At the dressing table a bare-torsoed boy was busily dividing up lines of white powder. He left a particularly large one for himself.

'Banker's bonus,' he laughed, noticing Ali's expression. She said nothing.

'Line for the road?' he asked Ali.

‘No. Thanks,’ said Jake on her behalf.

‘Izzy won’t be here,’ said Jake, hurriedly urging Ali out of the room.

‘How do you know?’ asked Ali.

‘Don’t you think if she did coke she’d be thinner?’ Jake pointed out.

‘I can’t believe this,’ said Ali, as she closed the door behind her.

‘Don’t say anything to Mum,’ said Jake.

‘About what?’ said Ali.

‘About any of this,’ said Jake. ‘She’ll just get worried.’

‘She should get worried,’ said Ali.

They continued upstairs to another floor. A couple of girls walked past and told them the loo was blocked because someone called Suzi had been sick. It was quieter. Ali could feel the dull throb of music through the floorboards but it was no longer too loud to speak. As they passed the loo, she noticed a pair of legs sticking out the door and the putrid stink of vomit.

‘Must be Suzi,’ said Ali, relieved to hear the girl groaning on the marble floor. ‘At least it’s not carpet.’

There were two doors before them. Ali chose the one furthest away from the landing. They found themselves in a poorly lit bedroom. Then they saw Izzy. She was kneeling on the floor beside the bed. Apple bobbing, thought Ali, in confusion as Izzy’s head moved rhythmically up and down in the lap of a boy sitting on the bed. His eyes were closed but in his hand he held up a mobile phone above his head. Surely he wasn’t making a phone call and having a blowjob at the same time? Could boys multi-task like that? Jake was quicker off the mark.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ he asked. Izzy half turned her head and smiled inanely at Ali and Jake, trying to force herself to focus. She attempted to push herself up from the floor, using the boy’s knees as ballast, but she couldn’t get up. Ali grabbed the phone from the boy’s hand and dropped it into a half-drunk beer that sat beneath the lamp.

‘Nice one,’ said Jake approvingly.

Izzy turned round and squinted up at them. She tried to say something but instead of words a stream of vomit came out of her mouth. The boy stood up and backed into the corner of the room, pulling up his trousers and muttering apologies about how it was all Izzy’s idea.

‘She’s not in any fit state to make decisions,’ said Ali angrily. ‘What should we do about the carpet?’

‘They’ll get industrial cleaners in before her dad comes home,’ Jake shrugged.

They got Izzy on her feet and between them began the slow process of

bringing her downstairs, step by step. It was like carrying a corpse. Her eyes were rolling into the back of her head and Ali was relieved when she was sick again on the front doorstep, in part because it lessened the likelihood that she would need to be taken to hospital to have her stomach pumped, but mostly because it reduced the risk of a vomiting incident inside the car.

'Poor Izzy,' said Ali, stroking her hair as Izzy slumped beside her in the front of the BMW. After a couple of false starts she managed to get the car into gear.

'Poor me,' said Jake from the back. 'I'm meant to be revising.'

'It's just one of those things,' said Ali, repeating a phrase her mother used.

'You're so tolerant,' said Jake.

'I'm paid to be,' said Ali.

\*\*\*\*\*

***What the Nanny Saw* is available  
from 18th August in Penguin paperback.**

Fiona Neill writes for *The Times Magazine* and is author and creator of its hugely popular 'Slummy Mummy' column. After working for six years as a foreign correspondent in Latin America, she returned to the UK to become assistant editor at *Marie Claire*, and later at *The Times Magazine*. Her first novel, *The Secret Life of a Slummy Mummy*, was an international bestseller that sold in twenty-five countries. This was followed by *Friends, Lovers and Other Indiscretions*, which also became a *Sunday Times* bestseller. Brought up in Norfolk, she now lives in London with her husband and three children.



**To hear more from Fiona visit  
[www.fionaneill.co.uk](http://www.fionaneill.co.uk)**