

**"An insightful, funny, cynical look at London life
through the eyes of a young migrant"**

POLES Apart



Polly Courtney

Polly Courtney, 28, lives in London where she divides her time between writing and sports-related projects. Her first novel, *Golden Handcuffs*, exposes the truth about living and working as a 'high flyer' in the square mile. In stark contrast but yet with some surprising parallels, *Poles Apart* is a eye-opening depiction of what it's really like to be a young migrant in London today.

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Thanks to the real Marta, whose story inspired me to write
Poles Apart, and to everyone else who helped make it
happen.

Prologue

“Hah! Drink up - you’re using the wrong hand!” squawked Rosie, quick to point out Holly’s error. “It’s European Drinking Regulations here, you know. In the first half of the hour, you drink with your left! Don’t you know anything?” She gleefully filled Holly’s glass and sat back in her chair to watch, pouting.

Obligingly, Holly downed her red wine. She was good at drinking games, but this evening, new rules kept creeping in that everybody else seemed to know about except her. *European Drinking Regulations*, for God’s sake. They were so cliquey, the South Kensington lot. She had never warmed to them. If Tash hadn’t begged her to come over tonight she would have made up an excuse and come round to see the place another time.

They were playing an intellectual version of twenty-ones, which involved turning your number into a roman numeral, then converting I, V and X into ‘ooh’, ‘yeah’ and ‘not there’ respectively. You could tell they were bloody Oxbridge, thought Holly.

“Ooh, not there!” Tom moaned loudly.

“Not there!” shrieked Plum. Holly watched as the girl flicked her hair in the direction of Jack, Tash’s boyfriend. Plum (real name Victoria) had no morals - but then, as far as Holly could tell, neither did Jack. She wondered if they’d ever actually done anything behind Tash’s - “Oh, not there,

ooh, yeah!" she said, just in time.

"Hesitation!" chimed Rosie and Plum triumphantly. "You can't say 'oh'! See it away!"

Holly knocked back more wine, white this time. Jeremy, sitting opposite, was looking down his long, unattractive nose at her, swilling what looked like Port in his glass. Some house-warming, thought Holly.

"Not there, not there, oooooh!" cried Tash hysterically, before realising that the joke was on her. She sulkily polished off her wine. Emerging from the bowl-sized glass, she waved her hand. "Ooh - I forgot to tell you! I have some news! *Bad* news," she said dramatically. "As of next week, this lovely, beautiful house that mummy and daddy have given me will not be mine any more!"

The others around the table acted suitably shocked and surprised. This was Tash's style: melodramatic. Holly had got wise to it, having lived with Tash during their second year at university. She had famously reported an intruder to the police when the electrician she'd booked came round to change the light bulbs.

"No! I've been told that I am to share it..." A long pause...
"With a Polish girl!"

Again, astonishment all round.

"She's from a small village just outside Warsaw - called Loopoopski or something - and mummy is allowing her to stay for as long as she wants! Oh - and listen to this. They're charging her fifty pounds a week. For a place in South Kensington!"

There were gasps and shaking heads. "Fifty pounds!"

"Who is she?" asked Plum, as though referring to a nasty disease.

"Mummy used to help organise foreign exchange trips, *ages* ago," Tash explained, "and she stayed in touch with one of the teachers. So this is the teacher's daughter."

"Does she have a name, this teacher's daughter?" asked Holly, fed up with the undertones of this conversation: the implication that this girl wasn't good enough for South Kensington.

"Marta," Tash replied. "Oh and don't ask me to pronounce her surname—"

"Polovski?"

"Smithovski?"

"Powchowska?" came the helpful suggestions from round the table.

"Oh - it is something like that. Dabrowska! That's it!"

"We've got a Polish bagel shop just opened near us," Jeremy announced, as though this was interesting.

"They're everywhere, Poles, these days," declared Jack disdainfully. "The government's letting them in to do all the jobs we Brits don't want to do." He snorted. "Still... she'd better be bloody attractive." He yelped as Tash presumably pinched him under the table. "Sorry." He flashed a cheeky smile at Plum.

"Actually, I have a photo," said Tash, pushing back her chair and stretching out to the antique dresser. "She looks... well..." she screwed up her face, squinting. "Polish."

Holly leaned forward to get a glimpse of the photo, which Jack was eyeing up approvingly. The image was of a tall, leggy girl in tight jeans and a sweatshirt not dissimilar to the type Holly had worn as a teenager. It may even have *been* from the early nineties, she thought, cringing at the lurid colours. The girl had long brown hair cut in no particular style and a pale complexion. Despite the amateurishly taken photo – snapped outside what looked like a concrete bunker – it was impossible not to be drawn by the girl’s eyes: icy blue, turning up at the edges in a momentary smile.

“Well, I think it’d be nice to have a housemate,” declared Holly. “It’s a massive place – you’d rattle around in it on your own.”

“I’m sure I’d find things to do,” replied Tash, talking more to her boyfriend than anyone else.

“I can’t believe your parents are letting an Eastern European immigrant be their first tenant!” squealed Rosie.

Tash shook her head, rolling her eyes. “Frankly, neither can I.”

1.

“Look, it’s not as if I’m going into space,” joked Marta, trying to lighten the mood. “It’s only a short flight away.”

Her parents smiled and glanced at one another. The smiles didn’t reach their eyes. What Marta had neglected to mention, and what they were all thinking, was that short flights cost money. She wouldn’t be popping back for a weekend any time soon.

Her best friend, Anka, was avoiding eye contact. Marta could tell she was about to cry. Marta’s brother and sister were just staring at her.

“God, stop being so morbid, all of you!” cried Marta. “We all have phones, don’t we? And email? Well, sort of,” she added, remembering the last time she’d tried connecting to the internet in Łomianki library.

Marta glanced up at the departures board and the others did the same. Her flight was boarding. “I’d better go through,” she said, suddenly feeling worms in her stomach. This was it. She was about to leave her country. This was the last time she’d see mama and tata, Anka, her brother and sister – for at least a year.

They were so close, their family – sometimes too close, in their little townhouse. She couldn’t imagine them not being around her. Mama running up the stairs to chase her brother out of bed in the mornings, tata chiding her sister for not taking long enough over her homework, the five of

them sitting down to dinner together every night – pierogi or gołąbki – and her brother whinging that he wanted to watch TV... this was life, for Marta. It had been for the last twenty-two years.

Anka stepped forwards and finally dared to look Marta in the eye. There were tears in hers. “Będę za Tobą tęsknić, Marta.” I’ll miss you. Then she pulled away and delved in her bag. She’d dressed up for the occasion, Marta noted. Anka always looked stylish, but today she had on long drainpipe jeans and a tight sparkly black top beneath the old brown coat she always wore. The glittery eye shadow had gone to waste, thought Marta, watching it stream down her cheeks.

“Open this when you get there, OK?” Anka instructed, chewing on her bottom lip to stop her jaw wobbling. It was a sizeable parcel, wrapped in what looked like magazines and brown tape. “Sorry about the paper.”

Marta hugged her. She could feel Anka’s body heaving with every sob. She was determined not to cry, not to falter; she wanted to leave them with an image of strength and resolve. But to Marta’s dismay, she felt her eyes welling up.

They had been best friends ever since Marta had rescued Anka from a group of girls in the playground who’d been calling her ‘fatty’. Fifteen years later, Anka was now one of the skinniest girls in the town, and perfectly capable of fending for herself – but looking back, that first encounter had been a strangely accurate reflection of their relationship over time.

They were both vivacious girls, and intelligent too – one of them always coming top of the class at school – but Marta had always been the brave one. When it came to trying new things, taking risks, letting go, it was always Marta. When they left school, Marta applied to universities and got a place to study marketing at the prestigious Szkoła Główna Handlowa in Warsaw – one of the best in the country. Anka wasn't sure about leaving Łomianki, so she stayed and got a job at the bakery. She was still working there three years later.

It was fair to say that Marta was braver than most people in Łomianki. With a population of only nine thousand, it was one of those places where people reacted badly to change. When Poland had joined the EU in 2004, national newspapers had been bursting with stories of young men and women starting new lives in new countries – of couples fleeing the drab, grey streets in search of adventures abroad – but not the local papers. In Łomianki, deserters were frowned upon. In Łomianki, doing anything different was seen as a sin. The old folk – of which there were many – looked badly on those whose son or daughter had moved away. It was that, as much as anything else, that had made Marta desperate to leave. She had to get out of this place. There was so much of the world she hadn't seen – so much that she was finally being *allowed* to see – and she wanted to explore.

“You'll miss your flight,” mama warned, with a note of what sounded like hope in her voice.

Marta turned to her parents. The churning in her stomach was getting worse. She couldn't believe she was actually leaving them. What if things changed, in her absence? What if tata lost his job at Polkomtel, and mama had to teach more classes at the university? What if they had to move house? The routine would change, and she wouldn't be there to know. All her life, they'd been there, strong and reliable, there to support her. But now, their faces pale with concern and lack of sleep, they looked fragile. They looked *old*, thought Marta. She had never considered the possibility that her parents weren't immortal.

She braced herself and switched on a smile through the tears. "What's this?"

Tata was holding out a parcel - this one smaller than Anka's and more neatly wrapped.

"And this," mama added, producing what looked like a sack of potatoes bound in reams of plastic tape.

"That's not going to fit in my hand luggage!" exclaimed Marta, already guessing the contents. It weighed several kilograms.

"It fits. I tried it this morning. You just have to leave half of it sticking out-" mama demonstrated, stuffing the end of the enormous package into Marta's rucksack. "There!"

Marta pocketed the small package from tata, and went to hug her brother and sister. Even Tomek had a forlorn expression on top of his moody teenager look. Ewa was frowning. Poor girl - she was only twelve. She'd miss her big sister.

“Right, I’m off to London!” Marta announced purposefully. She balanced the precarious load on her back, and hugging Anka’s parcel, set off towards the departures lounge.

“Don’t forget the magazines!” yelled Anka. “Remember – lots of pictures and not too many words! I want to practise my English style!”

Anka loved fashion. It was a pity she never had any money to buy or create her own. Marta had tried to persuade her to get into dress-making, or to do a course at university, but Anka hadn’t had the confidence. Marta turned, smiling through the tears. “I’ll send you some for your birthday!”

2.

Marta followed the line of passengers across the damp tarmac and up the steps onto the plane. The wind ripped through her flimsy jacket, driving the sleet at her raw flesh. It was cold, even for Warsaw. She paused as she entered the aircraft and breathed her last breath of Polish air.

“Welcome aboard,” chirped the air hostess.

Marta smiled nervously, holding out her boarding pass, which the woman ignored. It was her first time on an aeroplane. In fact, it was the first time anyone in her family had flown. Before 2004, travelling out of Poland had been impossible, and until recently, flights had been so expensive that the only option for getting across Europe had been a twenty-hour coach trip through Germany and Holland. Now there were at least a dozen flights from Warsaw to London every day.

The butterflies were getting worse, and now her hands were shaking too. She couldn't tell what was making her nervous. Was it the safety instructions that informed her that 'in the unlikely event of an emergency, oxygen masks would drop from above'? Was it the fact that the wings of the plane seemed to be made from flaps of metal that didn't look very securely fastened? Was it the fact that mama and tata weren't here? Or was it just a fear of the unknown?

Marta had prepared herself as well as she could for her new life, reading books and magazines about London that

mama had borrowed from the university. There was a book called 'A-Z' that had maps of every street in London, including the one she was going to live on, and there were some old copies of a magazine called 'Time Out' that listed all the concerts and shows happening around the city. There was so much going on – not just organised fun that you got in Warsaw – the opera and theatre – but real, spontaneous entertainment. Rock concerts, comedy nights, festivals – even live music events put on by ordinary Londoners... there was a sense of freedom about the place that Marta longed to experience.

The excitement mingled with her nerves. Marta was determined not to be daunted. She wasn't the first Pole to move to England, and she had a better chance than many who came over – as her parents kept reminding her. The thought of her parents brought on a fresh wave of homesickness. "Stop your worrying," mama would scold in her no-nonsense way, whenever she voiced her doubts, as tata hit her playfully on the back of the head. God, she'd miss them.

An air stewardess came strutting down the plane, clicking a tiny machine with her thumb – once for every passenger. There was a general rustling as people squirmed in the confines of their seatbelts and crew busied themselves behind a yellow curtain at the front. Marta didn't want to think about the 'unlikely event of an emergency'. She had once read that the chance of survival in a plane crash was zero; they just put in safety procedures to make passengers

feel at ease. She didn't feel at ease.

Marta wondered how many of the people on this plane were travelling on a one-way ticket. The price of a flight to London was nearly double that of the return to Warsaw, which suggested that most people were going one way: out of Poland. Word had it that nearly a million Poles had fled to England in the last three years – although the authorities would claim that the figure was less than half of that. If the passengers on this plane were a representative sample, there were a hell of a lot of twenty-something-year old Poles in London.

It made her angry that the government was trying to stop the young people leaving. What did Poland have to offer them? No well-paid jobs, that was for sure. Marta thought back to her home town – the grey buildings, the old faces with their blank, disparaging eyes. She loved its familiarity, but at the same time she loathed it. The place was depressing. Most of the people her age had moved away, either to other parts of Poland or, more commonly, to Europe. The only ones left were the old folk and those with no sense of adventure.

It was a risk; she knew that. A girl from her class had moved to London with her boyfriend after graduating. They couldn't even afford to pay for a room in a hostel, so she'd taken a job as an escort. She'd run off with one of her clients who had turned violent, tried to kill her then stolen her passport so she couldn't go back to Poland. Nobody knew what happened to Beatrycze after that.

Marta was determined that she wouldn't fall into any of the traps. She knew that the streets of London weren't paved with gold, that she'd have to work for her money. She didn't expect it to be easy, and she was grateful for the generosity of Penelope and Henry, mama's friends, who were letting her stay in their house with their daughter. She was prepared for the worst, but she was confident she could make a good go of it.

The plane wheeled around on the runway and quickly started picking up speed. Marta watched the metal panels on the wing, wondering whether they were supposed to flap up and down like that. There was a tremendous roar, and suddenly the whole aircraft seemed to be shaking itself to pieces. Just as the noise became disconcertingly loud, Marta felt herself tipping backwards. She twisted round in time to see the ground tilt and then drop away, very quickly. They were airborne.

She watched the drab buildings shrink beneath her until they looked like a sprawling mass of concrete. The nerves were just flying nerves, she told herself. Once she landed, she'd be fine. The guide books had taught her everything she needed to know about London: how to use the buses, where to live, how to ask for a second helping. She didn't know how long she'd stay. Maybe a year, maybe more - maybe forever - she didn't need to decide yet. Her plan was to make money, send some back to her parents each month, and keep a little aside for herself.

Marta sunk into her seat and shoved her cold hands into

her pockets. Her fingers curled around something soft and papery. Tata's gift. She turned it around in her pocket, poking at the flimsy wrapping. In the end, her curiosity won over her self restraint and she pulled it out, scratching away at the paper.

She could hardly believe it. Marta put the notes back in their little pouch, then brought them out again and counted a second time, discreetly. Tata had given her *one hundred English pounds*. That was nearly six hundred złoty! How could he possibly afford that? What would he use to feed Tomek and Ewa this month? Marta felt a lump in her throat. There he was, confidently assuring her that she could make a good living in England, and all the while he was sacrificing a week's wages to help her out. Dear tata. He was still looking after her, even now.

The little seatbelt light above her head went off, and passengers all over the plane sprung into action, standing up, wandering around and colliding in aisles. Marta thought about the parcels stowed away above her head. The air hostess had laughed at Anka's attempts at packaging as she'd stowed the patchwork lump in the overhead locker. Marta smiled, picturing Anka amidst a roomful of fashion magazines, wrangling over which pages she would least mind turning into wrapping paper. She unfastened her seatbelt and reached upwards.

It wasn't even necessary to open mama's present. Marta knew what it was. She peered through the tear she'd made in the paper and caught a glimpse of the Drożdżówka label.

Her favourite cake. This wasn't the first food parcel mama had made for her, but it was certainly the largest. Mama had a knack of cramming more food per cubic inch than any food manufacturer had ever achieved.

"Anything to drink for you madam? Anything to drink?" asked the perfectly proportioned air hostess, whose makeup appeared to have been applied with a spatula and a felt-tip pen.

Marta carefully noted other passengers' reactions. Was it free? Someone behind her was noisily rifling through change in his pocket. No, it wasn't. "I'm fine thanks." She smiled sweetly.

Anka's present sat in her lap, a picture of catwalk perfection and brown sticky tape. She was supposed to wait until she arrived, but she didn't see what difference it made opening it now or later. Marta hesitated, and then tore at the glossy paper.

She nearly screamed. It was a Malina Q jacket! A gorgeous, turquoise puffy jacket with a faux fur hood lining - the type she and Anka had been drooling over for months! *All* the rich girls in Warsaw had these. Neither Anka nor Marta had ever been serious about owning one. They cost nearly three hundred zloty! Marta hugged it against her face, discarding the sticky magazine pages on her lap. The English woman in the next seat was looking at her strangely, but Marta didn't care. She had a Malina Q jacket. Dear Anka, she thought, as a tear rolled down her cheek and onto the bright blue fabric, sinking into the fur

lining. She was really going to miss her best friend.

3.

“I sit?” said a voice above Marta’s head.

She glanced up to find a young man about her own age looking at the seat next to her and pointing at her luggage.

Marta smiled at his improvised sign-language and moved her bags, counting herself lucky for ending up with such an attractive travelling companion. The coach was filling up, and there were some very dubious passengers squeezing down the aisle. This guy, though, he was intriguing. Through the dusky complexion and stubble, there was something about him that caught Marta’s eye: a wariness that seemed to match her own.

“Did you just fly in?” she asked, in her own language.

He looked at her, startled, and then his features melted into a smile. “Yes.” He removed his grubby baseball cap and ran a hand through his hair. “How did you know I was Polish?”

Marta shrugged. She wasn’t going to tell him she’d spotted his insecurity. Having spent the last hour watching passengers rush around Luton airport, Marta reckoned she could spot Poles from Brits without hearing them speak, with near one hundred per cent accuracy. It wasn’t just the way they dressed, which, she was beginning to realise, was very different; it was the way they moved, the way they expressed themselves. There was something furtive about this guy, as though he didn’t belong.

"I'm Marta," she said, smiling.

"Lukasz." He half-heartedly offered his hand and then turned the gesture into a scratching of his knee. The coach pulled away from its bay, manoeuvring through the sluggish airport traffic.

"You're here for good?" she asked.

"Maybe. Who knows." It was Lukasz's turn to shrug. "I've never been to England before."

"Me neither. It's weird, finally being here."

Lukasz nodded, looking past her and through the coach window. Marta did the same. They were on a main road now, rolling steadily through flat English countryside sliced up by grey motorways. It felt strange to be on this side of the road. In fact, everything felt strange. The tarmac was the wrong colour, the lamp posts were different, there were neat green hedges between all the fields... this was it. This was England, at last.

"Do you speak any English?" asked Lukasz.

"Yes, although not perfectly," Marta replied, the worms returning to her stomach. Her teacher at school had believed in the phrase: 'Understand what they say; you'll pick up the rest.' This meant that Marta could translate almost anything from English to Polish and almost nothing the other way round. She could read signs, take instructions, understand conversations, but she couldn't join in – not confidently, anyway.

"I don't," Lukasz confessed. "But it doesn't matter, apparently. I'm staying with a friend who's been here two

years. He says that the language is no problem. He's promised to find me a job."

"You don't know *any* English?" she asked, shocked. Surely he couldn't consider migrating without speaking a word of the language?

He shook his head. "It's fine. Gabrjel says he got work the first week he arrived. He didn't know any English then - still doesn't."

Marta frowned. "What sort of work? Something involving not speaking, presumably?"

"Construction, mainly. Some odd jobs - maintenance, gardening..."

Marta nodded. She wasn't sure she'd fit in too well on a construction site. Nor was she sure that Lukasz and she were working towards the same goals. He had his sights set on menial jobs that earned good money but required no intellect; she wanted to use her brain, her marketing degree. Perhaps Lukasz and his friend hadn't been to university.

"Gabrjel was a qualified doctor," he told her, as though reading her mind. "He had a job lined up at the hospital in Wrocław for three thousand złoty a month. Here, he gets nearly two thousand *pounds* a month - that's twelve thousand złoty! For lugging bricks around."

Marta nodded. The story didn't surprise her; it just depressed her. Back home, she was always hearing about qualified graduates moving to England to do unskilled work for five times the salary. The problem she had was that she didn't *want* to do unskilled work. She had skills.

She wanted to use them.

“What are you planning to do?” asked Lukasz.

Marta hesitated. She didn't want to aggravate the guy. “Not sure yet. I'll find something.”

Lukasz nodded. “You're lucky, being a girl. You can always get au pair work. The money's OK and they give you a place to live.”

“Yeah.” Marta nodded. The chances of her becoming an au pair were lower than the chances of her getting work on a construction site. There was no *way* she'd stoop to becoming an English family's slave.

“Or you could work in a Polish bakery – apparently they're springing up all over London.”

Marta gritted her teeth and nodded again. She would rather move back to Łomianki than spend her days smearing cream cheese on bagels.

Marta felt more anxious than ever about her prospects of finding good work, despite the fact that her companion was someone who hadn't even bothered to learn English. She brought the conversation to a halt and delved into her bag, extracting the scratched old CD player she'd had since she was twelve. Inside was the disk her mother had cobbled together from snippets of English radio four years ago. She nearly knew it off by heart, but that didn't matter. She needed to hear the language – needed to remind herself that she still understood, still had the skills, still had the ability to make something of her time in England. Marta pulled the earphones over her head and leant against the

juddering window.

It must have been forty-five minutes later – half of the CD – when the coach finally pulled up. They were inside a massive, fume-filled bus depot. People towing suitcases and screaming children filled the concrete walkways, colliding like atoms under a microscope. Deafening announcements echoed off every surface. Around her, people rose in their seats, hitting others in the face as they hoisted rucksacks onto their backs.

“Well, good luck,” said Lukasz, with none of the confidence he’d had before. His eyes were jumping all over the place. “Maybe keep in touch?”

Marta smiled. Beneath the macho, stubbly exterior was a very anxious young man. “Maybe.”

“Here’s Gabrjel’s number – that’s where I’ll be staying,” he said, ripping off part of his cigarette packet and scrawling on it in biro.

“Thanks,” said Marta, doubting that she’d ever call the number. “Good luck, Lukasz.”

He smiled. “Enjoy England.”

4.

The question was, *which exit?* If you wanted to visit a science museum, or in fact any number of museums, there were signs saying where to go. But Marta wanted to go to Egerton Square. All she had was an address. She was beginning to wish she'd kept hold of that book, 'A-Z'.

"Are you OK?" asked a soft female voice that came straight from an English listening test. A well-dressed young lady - probably not much older than Marta - was peering down at her and exuding an expensive-smelling perfume. "You look *lorst*."

It occurred to Marta that she probably did appear rather pathetic, standing in the station concourse staring at signs and clutching a giant food parcel. She found herself offering up the scrap of paper with the scribbled address.

"Ah, OK," she uttered, nodding, while Marta studied her flawless exterior: glossy, chestnut hair, a natural tan, leggings sprayed onto exceedingly skinny thighs with a pair of high-heeled boots like the ones Julia Roberts wore in *Pretty Woman*. Marta glanced down at her beloved Malina Q jacket. It shone back at her, brilliant and turquoise. Maybe Warsaw was nothing like London.

"You need Exit 1," the woman explained, brushing a lock of hair off her face with utmost elegance. "With your back to South Ken, head east along Brompton Road until you reach Egerton Terrace. Your road should be just off there."

Marta expressed her gratitude and watched as the figure sashayed sexily up the steps of the station. Now *that* was how she would look in a few weeks. Marta reached down for her leather suitcase, still clutching the parcel, and headed for Exit 1.

Her disbelief reached new heights as she turned the corner into Egerton Square. The whole area was like nothing she'd ever come across. She knew South Kensington was an up-market part of London, but this – this was incredible. Every house on the road had its own set of pillared steps leading up to a double front door, like the White House or some place of worship. Each one was unique, too: one covered in ivy, the next clad in stone, another... Oh my God, thought Marta. That was number fourteen.

It had flames outside the front door. Two enormous, flickering torches either side of the Grecian columns, lighting up the front of the house in the twilight. *She was going to live in a place with flames outside the door.* Marta nearly laughed out loud. She couldn't wait to tell Anka.

As she approached, the worms suddenly returned to her stomach. Was it an embassy building or something? Would she be expected to behave like English royalty? Or worse still – oh no. Was she being invited to live here on the premise that she would look after the place? Would she be expected to cook and clean for the girl, Penelope and Henry's daughter? She rang the bell.

Within seconds, Marta found herself inside a vast, marble-floored atrium, playing an elaborate game of kissing,

shrieking and arm-throwing.

“Hi, hiiiiiii!” wailed the tall blonde who had opened the door. “You must be Marta! I’m Tash!”

“Here! Let me take your jacket,” offered a smaller girl with a face like a horse, removing the Malina Q coat gingerly as though it might have been contaminated. “My name’s Plum, by the way. A school nickname that stuck.” She let out a deafening hoot of laughter and kissed Marta on each cheek with great panache.

“Come in! Come *in!*” urged a young man as he slipped a hand around her waist and guided her away from the door. Marta stole a closer look at the guy. He was gorgeous. Lean but toned, with the most incredible jaw line she’d ever seen.

Marta stood, trying to take it all in. The blonde, she ascertained, was the daughter of Penelope and Henry: her new housemate. It took a lot of restraint not to just stare at Tash. She was striking. Not beautiful, but striking. Her face was pale like a china doll’s, and her eyes were heavy with well-applied makeup, set off by a pair of pearl earrings. She wore a soft, blue cashmere V-neck with a matching scarf, even though they were inside. And of course, she had the obligatory knee-high boots.

“Let’s go through to the kitchen!” suggested the horsy-faced girl. Marta made a mental note to look up the word ‘plum’ in her dictionary; she was sure it was a type of fruit.

“I think a drink is in order,” suggested the good-looking guy. He caught her eye and smiled, cheekily.

“Sorry – how rude of me! This is Jack,” announced Tash as

she led the way through the echoing hallway. "My boyfriend."

A little cloud went in front of Marta's sun.

"And that's Jeremy," she added, motioning towards the back of the group.

Marta's hopes rose momentarily, and then plummeted. Jeremy's head was too large for his willowy body, and his nose too large for his face. He nodded in her direction, all the time looking down his huge snout as though finding the whole situation rather distasteful. "Ve'y nice to meet you," he said.

Marta smiled uncertainly. They entered an airy room with high ceilings, vast, polished surfaces and lots of matching sets of kitchen implements in chrome and black.

"So! What will you drink?" asked Jack. "Vodka?"

There were screams and whoops of laughter. Marta opted for a gin and tonic, like everybody else. It came in a frosty iced glass with a perfect slice of lime. On Tash's suggestion, they retired to the 'drawing room': a room with no drawings in it - only one very expensive-looking oil painting of an old man looking constipated. They were allocated seats by Tash around a table on upright, red cushioned chairs.

"So, what's it like, being Polish?" asked Plum, excitably.

"What an absurd question!" Jack exclaimed, before Marta could open her mouth.

"Well, I just meant -"

"How is she supposed to answer that? She's been Polish

all her life! It's not as though she suddenly found herself liking dumplings and wearing furry coats and adding 'aski' onto the end of all her words one day, is it?"

"Don't be racist!" cried Tash, looking outraged.

"I wasn't," Jack replied in a clipped tone. "It's fair to say that those are characteristics of life in the ex-Soviet block. And besides, Polish is not a race. It's a nationality."

Marta felt like a child, with everyone talking about her as though she wasn't there.

Tash pulled a nasty face at her boyfriend, then switched on a smile. "So Marta, whereabouts in Poland are you from?"

Marta opened her mouth, but nothing came out. They were all staring at her, waiting for an answer, and for some reason, she couldn't remember a single word of English. "Łomianki," she said, finally, knowing she should follow it with something, but not sure what.

"Is that near Warsaw?" asked Tash after an awkward pause, speaking slower and louder now.

"Yes."

She wanted to elaborate, but her mind was blank, and even in Polish she couldn't think of anything to say.

"It's nice," she added, finally. They all smiled and nodded understandingly. This was not going well.

"So, where, are, you, planning, to, work, in, London?"

Marta hesitated. She wanted to explain that she'd graduated from one of the top Polish universities and wanted to join the marketing department of a large UK

firm, but for some reason, all her vocabulary was missing.

“I... So...”

“Will you get an au pair job?” asked Tash brightly, unable to hide the sympathy from her voice.

Marta’s anger started to burn. Firstly, she resented the assumption that she, as a Polish girl, could only hope to get work as a nanny for English children. And secondly, Tash was implying that Marta should find somewhere else to live – after only five minutes in the house. She was getting the distinct impression her host didn’t like her.

“No,” replied Marta, determinedly. “I have a degree in marketing from Poland, and I hope for using that. I will get a job in an office.”

She was surprised by the eloquence with which she delivered her answer – but not as surprised as the others. There was a short silence while they all took in the facts: Marta *could* speak English, and Marta did have a personality.

“Wow, marketing!” gushed Plum, clearly feeling the need to say something.

“It’s a novel idea, actually *using* your degree in your job,” mused Jeremy, speaking for the first time. He was swilling his gin and tonic around in ever-increasing circles, watching the vortex deepen.

“I don’t know – I may not have done any philosophising or economising since I graduated, but I’ve experienced plenty of office politics,” offered Jack.

“Jack did PPE at Oxford,” explained Tash. “That’s politics,

philosophy and economics,” she said, expressing each syllable slowly as though Marta were lip-reading. “He works at Goldman Sachs now. He’s an investment banker.”

Marta nodded. There was something about these people that made her feel silly. They were the same age as her, but somehow they seemed... superior. It was as though they felt sorry for her – and not just because she was new to this city. Marta found herself thinking of Anka, her trusty, humble best friend. Why couldn’t they be more like her?

The conversation remained stilted.

“So, d’you know anyone here? D’you have any contacts to get you into marketing?” asked Jack, raising an eyebrow. He was gorgeous, but he knew it.

“I...” She trailed off. She had planned to do all the usual things that people did when looking for a job: trawl the newspaper advertisements, call up companies, maybe look on the internet. That was how it worked back home, at least. But somehow she felt reluctant to disclose her intentions to her companions in case this wasn’t how things were done over here. “I have some friends who have come to England,” she told them, smiling confidently.

It was only a white lie; she *did* know some people who had come over to England, it was just that she either hadn’t kept in touch with them or they’d returned to Poland. The fact was, Marta had nobody to help her over here. She’d manage, though. She always did. A week was what she’d set herself as job-hunting time, and that was all it would take.

“I’m sure you do,” said Jack, looking at her quite intensely. “And if you need any more...” He winked at Marta and smiled.

5.

Marta leant against the cold stone wall, listening to the rhythmic slosh of the Thames beneath her. The speedboat zipped off into the distance, heading towards the huge tower with the pointy roof. Canary Woof. It was an office block, according to Tash. The mirrored sides were giving a warped reflection of the near-perfect sky.

To her left was another incredible sight: the big wheel. It had a proper name, but Marta couldn't remember it. If you watched really carefully, and aligned one of the bubble-like carriages with a fixed spot in the distance, you could just about make out its movement: twenty degrees every minute, she calculated.

Marta was in the shade of Tower Bridge and the stone wall was making her cold, but she didn't care. She was in London, and she'd never felt happier. There was something about this city, a vibe, that made her feel free. The place had history, but it wasn't oppressive history. And people didn't cling to it. They got on with life, started afresh, went about their business. Maybe it was because they'd never had communism, thought Marta. Whatever it was, she was ready to make her mark.

Just one day, she'd allowed herself. One day for exploring, seeing London. She had taken ten pounds from tata's stash, although so far she hadn't spent anything. The tourist exhibits were out of the question, and she was avoiding

public transport. It wasn't just because of the money; it was because Marta wanted to see London properly. She wanted to go at her own pace, see the streets from ground level, discover back alleys that not even Londoners knew about.

Marta could only guess how many miles she had walked today. Setting off at eight this morning, she'd cut through Hyde Park and walked amongst grey suited commuters, battled through crowds on Oxford Street, slipped through the ghost town of Holborn, got involved in a Japanese tour around St Paul's Cathedral and wandered through a bleak part of town where every shop sold expensive suits or sandwiches. Eventually, she had crossed the river and followed it along to the cobbled streets of Tower Bridge.

It was nice to have time to think. The last few days had flown by in a mad, stressful blur, with no time to mull over what was happening. Despite her elation at finally being here, Marta found herself missing her home town. She hadn't expected to. There wasn't much there to miss, but strangely her mind kept bringing up images of fur coats, cold wind and brusque shop keepers. Crumbling roads, signs in Polish. Soup. Sleet. Most of all, though, she was thinking about the people.

Tash had done her best to welcome Marta into her home – if you could call it that. It was an incredible place, and Marta knew how lucky she was, being allowed to live in it. But she felt uneasy. It wasn't just because of the risk of breaking a crystal ornament or knocking a chandelier – it was because of Tash. Tash was very different to Marta. She

was different to every girl Marta had ever met. She was rich, of course, but that wasn't the only thing. She was... hmm. Marta couldn't think of the word. She seemed to need constant reassurance, not just in terms of how she looked and whether her clothes looked good, but in conversation, too. She had to be the centre of attention - everyone's attention, but especially her boyfriend's. Not that Jack seemed particularly enamoured with her. Perhaps Tash sensed that. Perhaps she knew, too, that her friends weren't real friends - they were just a group of similarly elevated people, one of whom fancied her boyfriend. Poor Tash. She was insecure. That was the word. Insecure.

The water was lapping more gently now, and Marta became aware of a presence behind her. She turned round. A young man in a fluorescent yellow jacket was parking a dirt cart up against the wall. She watched out of the corner of her eye as he set about sweeping the area and emptying his load into the cart.

A pleasure boat chugged along the river, blasting out unintelligible commentary to a group of six windswept passengers. She smiled. The street cleaner crept into her field of vision, hoisting himself onto the wall further down and bending over something in his lap. Sandwiches. It was lunchtime. Marta half-watched as he unwrapped the tin foil and wolfed it down in record time. He screwed the tin foil into a ball and lobbed it into his cart, where it made a satisfying thud against the bottom.

Marta prised herself away from the wall, contemplating

getting some food for herself. As she did, something caught her eye. A blur of red and white. She took a proper look in the workman's direction. He was reading a magazine. And sure enough: across the top of the cover page was the distinctive Polish flag. *Polski Express*, read the title.

"Cześć!" she said, impulsively. It was still a novelty meeting fellow Poles, even though there were over a million of them over here.

The guy met her eye, expressing no surprise at hearing his own language. "Cześć," he replied, checking out Marta's legs.

"Er, are you done with that?" Marta asked, at exactly the moment he hopped off the wall and tossed the magazine into his cart.

He chuckled, taking another look at Marta's legs. "Looks like it, doesn't it?" He bent down and fished out the supplement, wiping some mayonnaise from the cover with his sleeve. "Want it?"

Deciding it would be rude to decline, Marta nodded. "Thanks."

"You new around here?" asked the man, addressing her breasts this time. Marta was beginning to wish she hadn't started this conversation.

"I arrived yesterday. I'm not... not based here. I'm staying, er, somewhere else," she stammered. Admitting she lived in South Kensington would be like saying 'I'm very rich'.

"Huh. Aren't we all?" The guy rolled his eyes. "Anyway, I'd better get off. Enjoy," he said, nodding at the soggy

magazine in her hands and taking one last look at her legs.

Marta forced her mouth into a smile. "Bye."

There was only one reason Marta had asked for the magazine. It was something she'd seen on the back cover. An advert. Spreading the supplement out on the wall, Marta carefully extracted the staples and pulled off the cover, reading the text as she did so. She folded it into eight, shoved the page in her pocket, and set off in search of food. Today wasn't going to be entirely unproductive after all.