

## Peace on Earth

Running hot water in the kitchen, Molly could hear the party going on in the living room, a white noise of chatter and music.

She ran through a mental inventory of the tasks ahead of her – gathering, stacking, washing, storing, drying and wiping. If she began now she might finish most of the chores before 2am. This would allow time for a few hours sleep, then up in time to make the salmon and cream cheese bagels, prep the turkey, peel the potatoes and chill the wine and dessert. The grandchildren would be up early with all the excitement, so she would need to wash and dress them, find a TV show to distract them, feed them cereal, brew coffee and whisk eggs before their parents came downstairs.

Later, while the adults were mixing Buck's Fizz, she would slide the heavy bird into the oven, then drive thirty miles to collect her own mother, her mother's carer, and old Mr Jarvis from next door, pack them into her small car and drive them all the way back in time for Christmas dinner. Her son-in-law would carve the turkey, graciously accepting the thanks and praise which accrued naturally to men who demonstrated any domestic skill, while she was in the kitchen dragging baking trays in and out of the oven, stirring sauces and piling food onto serving dishes for the older grandchildren to carry triumphantly to the table.

Her hands in the sink, Molly finally heard the goodnights and merry Christmases, followed by the creak of the staircase as her children and their partners made their way upstairs, forgetting she was even there in the kitchen.

Molly stacked the dishwasher and hand dried the wine glasses. Then, from within the tumble dryer, she withdrew a small backpack containing sturdy shoes and woollen hat, a change of clothes, two maps, a bundle of twenty-pound notes, and a key, shiny and new. She switched off her phone and placed it with her keys and bank cards in the drawer used for pens and takeaway menus.

It was time.

Thirty-eight years of unacknowledged devotion to husband, children, home, and pets. The huge additional burden of ageing parents, sick in-laws, grandchildren and soaring bills. The relentless cycle of school pick-ups, mealtimes and laundry, and the endless drain of emotional labour, comforting, encouraging and praising everyone else.

Quietly, Molly zipped her coat, pulled on the shoes and hat and wriggled her arms through the backpack's straps. Without pausing she switched off the lights and opened the front door. It was early on Christmas morning, cold and dark with a mist of rain forming haloes around the gaudy wireframe reindeer next door.

It would be at least eight hours before anyone realised she was gone. They would come after her, but they would not find her. They would cry and rant, blame her, blame themselves, it hardly mattered. They would recover, and they would survive.

And, for the rest of her peaceful, solitary life, so would she.