

THE GREAT DEBATE

YOU RISE IN the early morning half-light and move stealthily from your bed so as not to wake your husband. You go past the hushed rooms in which the children lie sprawled in sleep, watched over by a hundred pairs of impassive button eyes. Then it's on to the shower, where you'll wash away the cozy aroma, the smelly warmth of home.

Ready for phase two in your terry-cloth turban, you stare into the mirror and start applying color, drawing lines around your eyes—in effect putting on your day mask: a more sharply articulated, expressive, aggressive you. The children are awake and drifting around now, quietly bleating their breakfast wish list and foggily regarding your busy, curiously transforming rituals that involve mean little tools like metal files and tweezers. The hair dryer screams as your little girl, crowding you about the hips, reaches for a tube of lotion you're about to use—a tantalizing artifact of that cluttered, purpose-driven foreign land of adulthood. You tell her to leave it alone, but

she can't—knowing negative attention beats no attention at all. So she knocks the cap down the drain and squirts out a full third of the overpriced contents. And suddenly you understand that expression about blood boiling—you know what that feels like, to be so trapped in emotions that all you can do is bark something hurtful, laced with sarcasm your daughter doesn't even understand, something you'll instantly regret. Ashamed but pressed for time, you retreat to your room and don the workplace gear: the skirt, the belt, the hard, shiny shoes that will punctuate your every move with a *clack*.

Around this time the doorbell rings, signaling the changing of the guard. And there she is, carrying a takeout cup of tea—the tag on a string draped over the side—and a couple of warm muffins in a sack for the kids. Fragrant, ample of bosom, put together. Awake now for two hours at least, time enough to get here from a distant and very different neighborhood, she's in step with the day, in control, ready for anything. The children streak toward her and grab her legs, crowding her about the hips. And as she moves through the house, the kids trailing behind, asking for Cheerios/raisins/juice (for they know there's a very good chance that she can actually meet their needs; that's why she's here), she glances left and right, assessing all that must be done. Not just the beds to make and the littered, gummy surfaces to wipe down, but the jazzed toddlers who need settling and focusing, and the irritable mother who must be transitioned out of the scene intact so that the day can officially get under way. It is time now

for you to move on, feeling good about the arrangement you have made and confident that the woman you have chosen to care for your children is as perfect as she seems. And is in no way a threat to your role as Mom.

Then you head for the door with newspaper and keys, a study in shades of black and gray. At which point, as if on cue, your son races toward you with butter-smearred paws and a board book about a duck family that he'd like you to read to him. What could be better? What could be more delicious than taking a little time out for that? But the skirt is expensive and the meeting is in an hour—what choice have you got but to turn him away?

At the door you make one final, flailing play for control before relinquishing it entirely, launching a fusillade of trivial instructions about playdates and snacks and no TV (some chance). And as you go out with a pasting of kisses that effectively seals off this part of the day, the nanny settles in, slipping off her street shoes and into the soft-soled ones she keeps here, up on a shelf, in a discreet corner of the closet in the hall.

She takes over. You're out the door, and she's in control.

Hiring a stranger to help you raise your kids—funny how an act designed to simplify your life can wind up being the trickiest, most controversial thing you'll ever do. And plenty of us are doing it. A onetime luxury enjoyed by the idle rich—conjuring images of a cosseted baby Churchill in an unimaginable day when kids were seen and not heard, brought round

to their folks for a glimpse and a peck after the bath by a servant in a starched uniform—nannies have become commonplace in households powered by two incomes. Rife as the profession is with undocumented workers—illegal aliens, in other words—it is impossible to know exactly how commonplace, although informed estimates have it that as many as a million women are currently working as nannies in the United States.

For most of us who suddenly find ourselves in the curious position of household employer, there's nothing fancy about this arrangement in the least. On the contrary, it's something sweaty and cobbled together, a solution not even remotely thought through, born of a naked need for another set of hands—someone to bail the boat while we row.

But okay, let's be honest. If it were merely a question of making the rent—were money that tight and options that few—many of us would have our children in day care, shuttling them to a place where they'd share the caregiver with several other children at a fraction of the cost. No, the new nanny class, though in the broadest sense middle class (by no means vixenish and pampered in the *Nanny Diaries* sense), is largely comprised of mothers with that crippling affliction: a modicum of choice. Many of us have chosen, for instance, to live in one of America's first or second cities, from Los Angeles to Atlanta, if not an equally appealing amenities-rich suburb; to some, it's simply a more stimulating life. But its knee-buckling cost might well require both you and your

husband to hold down jobs. How convenient, considering you always wanted a career in the first place—to do your own thing, to make your own money. You are, in your bones, a working person.

As the phenomenon of working mothers grows widespread, so does our ambivalence about it—requiring, as it does, that we leave our kids in the care of a proxy. For all the intimacy and in-home comforts that one-on-one arrangement can provide, the essential fraudulence of installing someone momlike in your home so that you can go off and do something else isn't in any way easy to reconcile. And the leap of faith it requires can make you crazy.

How could it not? You spend nine months physically enmeshed with this new life; you are its keeper in the most literal sense, and you've never cared more about anything. Catch a belch of bus exhaust and you're on the phone to the obstetrician—*Did I just endanger my baby?* Visit your sister the cat lover and suffer a string of sleepless nights about the toxoplasmosis you surely contracted when Mr. Boots curled up on your lap with imperceptible traces of feces between the pads of his paws. And what of all that roll-on deodorant and sunblock you've been applying with abandon (none of which has been proven to produce three-headed babies, by the way). *Why not just inject the fetus with poison?*

Underscoring the fragility, the preciousness of it all, those high-risk nine months might well have been preceded by years of planning and trying, during which one's desire for a

THE PERFECT STRANGER

child is forged into something excruciatingly acute. *I'd dump it all for a kid*, you vow on those desperate nights when the hugely complicating prospect of parenthood masquerades as some sort of solution. Suddenly sex is no longer sex—it's a mad grab for purchase on the sheerest cliff, the balance of your life, that perilous thing you've somehow got to master.

So the baby arrives and it's all true: still awed by the fact that you survived the delivery, you have never felt more alive. You're an animal—even better, a mighty machine (as your son's insufferable video series about earth movers and the like would have it)—capable of miracles, and more efficient in its purpose than anything the corporate world could ever dream up. Nothing—not your apartment, your cat, your vintage hat collection, your diary—has ever been more fundamentally, more mystically yours, resembling you in appearance and affect. This is your spawn, your project, your life, in thoroughly mind-blowing fashion. And then in about a week or two, as real life pulls back into view, you begin to make plans for handing him off.