

MODERN LOVE

The New Nanny Diaries Are Online

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OUR former nanny, a 26-year-old former teacher with excellent references, liked to touch her breasts while reading *The New Yorker* and often woke her lovers in the night by biting them. She took sleeping pills, joked about offbeat erotic fantasies involving Tucker Carlson and determined she'd had more female sexual partners than her boyfriend.

How do I know these things? I read her blog.

She hadn't been with us long when we found out about her online diary. All she'd revealed previously about her private life were the bare-bones details of the occasional date or argument with her landlord and her hopes of attending graduate school in the fall.

Yet within two months of my starting to read her entries our entire relationship unraveled. Not only were there things I didn't want to know about the person who was watching my children, it turned out her online revelations brought feelings of mine to the surface I'd just as soon not have to face as well.

I hadn't exactly been a stranger to the sexual shenanigans of our previous baby sitters. One got pregnant accidentally by her longtime boyfriend and asked me for advice. Another was involved in a mostly off-again relationship with a fidelity-challenged college football player. Yet those were problems I could feel superior to and that made me grateful for the steady routine of marriage and children.

This was something else entirely.

It all began one day late last fall when we were tending to my toddler and she murmured to me: "I've started a blog. I'll give you the link."

I wrote the address in my appointment book but didn't rush off to my computer to look up her site. It wasn't until a month later, after she told me she'd post the Sharon Olds poem "Life With Sick Kids" on a day when both of the boys were ill, that I decided to be polite and take a look.

I read the poem, then I scrolled down to the next entry. And the next. Amid the musings on poetry and fanatical analysis of the "Gilmore Girls" was a sweet scene of sex with a new boyfriend, accounts of semi-promiscuous couplings and tales of too much drinking for my comfort.

My husband thought her writing precociously talented but wanted to fire her nonetheless. "This is inappropriate," he said. "We don't need to know that Jennifer Ehle makes her hot."

I defended her - at first. Didn't she have a right to free expression? It wasn't as though she was quaffing Scotch or bedding guys, or the occasional girl, while on the job. Besides, weren't all recent college graduates keeping Web logs?

But there was more to my advocacy. Suddenly, with her in my employ, I felt I was young and hip by proxy. I might be a boring mother of two, but my nanny, why, she dined in the hippest Williamsburg restaurants and rated the sexual energy of men and women she met. I was amused - and more than a bit envious.

I was about to turn 40. I'd been married almost 15 years. My ability to attend literary readings and art gallery openings was hampered by two children, and my party life was relegated to the toddler birthday circuit. I imagined the snoozefest that would ensue if I were to post:

Spent the morning at the Garfield Temple playroom. Tried to read Paul Krugman while other parents gave me dirty looks as my younger son attempted to filch their kids' dump trucks. I told my friends about the blog, and even my childless acquaintances were riveted. They called, begging for more details. "Did she wear the rose negligee, the pink see-through slip or the purple Empire-waisted gown?" demanded one after perusing a post on the proper outfit for first-time sex. "She didn't say."

But I was not as comfortable with the situation as I pretended. The blog had brought odd similarities to the fore. I don't want to overstate the case: I was not bisexual, and I did not come from a strictly religious background, as my nanny did.

Yet we had enough in common - if I took her statements at face value - to make me uneasy. In my 20's I, too, felt passionately about 19th-century English literature but had long since let it go, barely able to concentrate on The New York Times, let alone Henry James. I, too, had an abortion back then. And trouble with depression? Check. Self-righteousness and inflated self-regard? Affirmative.

When our nanny asked permission to take her laptop to work so she could work on her graduate school applications while the baby napped, I said yes. Then I wondered if she was whiling away time with flirtatious e-mail messages - something she revealed on her blog she sometimes did. And when she came down with a stomach virus twice during a period when the rest of us were sick only once, I wondered about her confessions of boozy nights out followed by coming to work hungover. Paranoia, perhaps, but reading the blog seemed to encourage such thoughts.

Yet I did not confront her. In part I felt empathy and sadness for this younger version of myself. But I also feared she would judge my life and find it wanting.

As I read her words I was transported back to my own youth and those feelings of awkwardness, fear, false bravado and self-importance. I could have told her that I understood her life more than she realized, that I had not always been the boring hausfrau she must see. I could say that I, too, once stayed out late, drank too much and slept with the wrong people. I, too, once found my work obligations a tedious distraction from creative pursuits and thought myself superior to my surroundings, just as she appeared to.

Yet my awareness of this prior life and my knowledge that I'd outgrown it didn't spare me from feelings of intense doubt about my current life, times when I was convinced I'd made the wrong choices, days when my husband and I would spend hours tearing into each other over who should clean the tub after a child mistook it for the potty. On the other hand I also got to revel in days when I loved my life and children so much that it hurt.

But there was another element of her posts that unnerved me. Most parents don't like to think the person watching their children is there for a salary. We often build up a mythology of friendship with our nannies, pretending the nanny admires us and loves our children so much that she would continue to visit even without pay.

When our nanny referred to our house on her blog as work in a seemingly sarcastic fashion, she broke the covenant. The more she posted, the more life in our household deteriorated. It almost seemed that as she created the persona of a do-me feminist with an academic bent, it began to affect her performance. The woman who was loving if a bit strict toward the children became in our view short and impatient, slamming doors and bashing pans when my toddler wouldn't sleep and sighing heavily if asked to run an errand.

Instead of opening a dialogue, I monitored her online life almost obsessively. I would log on upstairs to see if she was simultaneously posting entries below me on her laptop while the baby was napping. Too often she was.

Looking at archived entries one afternoon, I read her reactions to an argument my husband and I had when she was in the house. "I heard a couple fighting within the confines of couples therapy-speak," she wrote. "I wanted to say, smack him, bite her."

It went on like that for three ghastly pages.

"I seethed," she added.

Well so did I. But mostly I felt hurt. My issues, my problems, my compromises, my entire being seemed to be viewed by her as so much waste.

Mortified into silence, I didn't tell my husband about the post. Nor could I tell her how disturbed the situation was becoming. I was beginning to realize either her employment or the blog would have to come to an end.

A few days later her anger boiled over. "I am having the type of workweek that makes me think being an evil corporate lawyer would be O.K.," she wrote. "Seriously. Contemplated sterilizing myself yesterday."

Whatever her reasons, whatever her frustrations, this was unacceptable. She had finally crossed my threshold of tolerance.

MY husband let her go the following Monday while my younger son and I were attending a Music for Aardvarks class. Even though she had posted entries about how discontented she was with our house and children and must have known there was a pretty good chance I'd read them, she appeared shocked. My husband didn't bring up the blog with her and instead cited other factors for her dismissal. He did not, he told me, care to find himself a character online.

She did not write that we had fired her. Instead she posted an entry about her "day of bad news," including a graduate school rejection, adding that her worst fears about other people were confirmed.

As for why she ever told me about her blog in the first place, I suppose I'll never know. Sometimes I suspect she was unhappy in my house and hoped our seemingly bourgeois souls would be so shocked we'd let her go, exactly as we did. Other times I believe she wanted me to assume a more maternal role, and I failed her. But perhaps that is self-aggrandizement.

I still read her blog, though not as frequently. Her life has settled down. She writes of domestic nights with her significant other and posts less often about coitus. (Well, O.K., they did have sex on the floor of his new abode, a Williamsburg loft.) She'll soon be leaving New York to attend graduate school. It's a life of passion and uncertainty, in which chance meetings can lead to the as-yet-unimagined.

In many ways it used to be my life. I miss it still. And I don't.

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