



THE NANNY DIARIES

The agony and the ecstasy of needing (and wanting) a little help.

BY OLIVIA STREN

A few years ago, I was invited to take a Silversea cruise through the Caribbean. Ordinarily, a week on board a cruise ship (the enormous kind, where you find yourself corralled into a Zumba class in the a.m. and sloppily adhered to the back of a conga line in the evening) would not entice. But Silversea, a family-owned Italian company—the Armani of the cruising world—woos with a petite fleet of refined, intimate vessels. There would be no kidney-shaped pools or militaristically peppy staff. But there would be butlers. In fact, each Silversea passenger is assigned a personal butler upon check-in. My butler (a thrilling term that I, by the way, could not stop uttering) was called Sanjay.

During my first few days of island-hopping aboard the *Silver Spirit*, I beheld misty vales, cloud-skimmed

mountains and slender palm trees reaching toward enamelled-blue skies. I journeyed island roads, vertiginous and coiling, past juice stands slinging papaya and tamarind sorbets and schoolchildren bouncing along steep streets, eating mangoes like they were apples. I visited the sorts of waterfalls you see in organic-shampoo commercials, snapped pictures of various bodies of emerald water and witnessed rainbows bright enough to verge on the vulgar. But, through all of this, I found myself longing to get back on board to, say, discuss the evening's canapé selection with my butler—although since my husband and I were cruising together, Sanjay was, technically, *our* butler.

Zsa Zsa Gabor said that you never really know someone until you've divorced them. I discovered that you may

not truly know your spouse until you've cruised with them. Upon meeting Sanjay, I maintained the charade that having a valet was awkward—that I was uncomfortable with the constant pampering and careful attention. When, for example, he rang and inquired as to whether I might need a dress pressed for the evening, I hurriedly declined.

“Are you quite certain, madam?” he asked weakly, casting an eyeball on a breeze-wrinkled frock tossed on the back of a chair. “Yes, yes, I'm fine. Thank you so much, Sanjay.”

He looked devitalized. “Perhaps some tea or champagne, madam?” he asked, his voice livelier with hope. “Oh, no, no. That's all right, thank you, Sanjay.” “I see, madam,” he said, crestfallen.

My husband, evidently, tossed such shows of modesty overboard. Within a couple of hours of check-in, the man had turned into *Downton Abbey's* Lord Grantham. I walked into our room and found him reclining in bed, dressed in a Silversea robe, discussing the pillow menu (yes, there is one) and the afternoon tea service with Sanjay, who stood neatly in his tails responding giddily with things like “Very good, sir” and “Perhaps some champagne with that, sir?” To which I heard my husband—a man I thought I knew—say things like “Yes, wonderful. You can leave the tray on the terrace. Thank you.” What?

By the third day aboard, I was starting to worry that what I fancied as politesse was, in fact, rude and upsetting to my butler. Maybe it was time I took him up on some of his offers. I discussed this pressing issue with a fellow passenger. “You need to get over it. Your discomfort is making him uncomfortable! I called my butler at midnight last night and ordered pizza and champagne,” he said. “I mean, I didn't finish the bottle; I tossed it over the railing so as not to appear wasteful.” Right. Emboldened, I picked up the phone: “Hello, Sanjay? I wonder if you might tell us about the canapés today?” “I will be right there, madam,” he replied brightly.

Sanjay was much like P. G. Wodehouse's Jeeves, the fictional valet (and overall genius) to wealthy wastrel and incompetent bourgeois idiot Bertram Wooster. Like Jeeves, Sanjay had an almost extraterrestrial way of materializing with alarming speed and silence. Jeeves never walked so much as floated, glided, wafted or breezed. Sanjay, too, would appear with the supreme quiet of a cat on a Persian carpet. We discussed the wine menu, I wondered who I had become and Sanjay vaporized from our berth with his usual feline stealth.

On the last day of the cruise, Sanjay wondered if he might help me pack my suitcase. I generously agreed. He conscientiously parcelled every article of clothing in tissue. Within a week, I had been delivered of all competence and

agency and was unable to press clothing, pack my things, unfold a napkin, et cetera, without Sanjay's assistance. If travelling is supposed to broaden one's perspective and challenge behaviour and even identity, this cruise managed to change my identity too. It turned me into an idiot.

When we returned home, I unpacked my own luggage, made my own coffee and missed the sunshine and salt air—and Sanjay. All that seemed to be materializing, as if out of mid-air, were dustballs and Visa bills. My cats watched me as I puttered around and then looked at their empty food dishes, their whiskers twitching in spasms of irritation. Oh, to have staff. Then, as Penguin meowed in protest, I realized: I *am* staff.

Today I'm staff to more than my feline children. I'm also in the (exhausting, heart-filling, often amusing, often anxiety-causing, demanding, overwhelming—did I mention mind-blurringly exhausting?) employ of my (human) baby, Leo. I recently heard about a fellow journalist who used her time “off” on maternity leave to write a novel. I barely managed to read a novel that first year, let alone pen one. “I just try to floss,” another new-mother friend told me apropos of goal setting, “and usually I forget.” This seemed sensible yet mildly disconcerting as I would now have to add flossing to the list of things I should feel guilty about forgetting to do. I considered raising this subject with my therapist, but I couldn't remember when my next appointment was. I called her office. “Your appointment was this morning,” a receptionist chirped. “Unfortunately, the fee for missed appointments is very steep,” she said merrily. What I really needed—or at least longed for—was some help (and not strictly of the psychiatric variety).

Almost a year ago, my husband and I decided we would look for a nanny to take care of Leo (who was then eight months old) three days a week, the idea being that it would afford me time to work (so that I might pay the nanny). We called Judy, a nanny agent, who had all the brassiness of a Hollywood agent. Judy (whose business is to broker arrangements for her stable of nannies, pairing nanny with family) seemed to be the Sue Mengers of the nanny world: connected, opinionated, a deal closer. “I have someone for you. She is FAAAbulous,” said Judy, as if she were helping me cast a Broadway production of *A Chorus Line*. “But you will have to move fast or she'll get booked. She's FAAAbulous.” We met with Bernadette the next day—she was sunny, energetic, affectionate, sweet with Leo and so competent as to make me feel totally incompetent. Perfect. We hired her immediately.

Some friends of mine, also mothers of babies, warned me that the transition could be a difficult one for all of us. “It was so hard for Camilla,” one said. “She cried and cried when I left the house. For weeks, I would stand ▷

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outside our front door and listen to her sobbing.” What was difficult (on my ego) was that the transition did not seem remotely difficult for Leo—he didn’t seem to care whether I was there or not. Yes, I should be happy and relieved (I was, of course) that my leaving Leo with a stranger did not induce violent sobbing—but just the tiniest bit of koala-like clinginess would have been nice. What proved thrilling was occasionally coming home to find Leo flapping his arms and squealing like a seal pup in crazed delight. This was a first; I’m not used to any creature reacting with such joy at the sight of me. (I have cats.) (I should add that he also reacts this way at the sight of himself in the mirror.)

This is not to say that the arrangement hasn’t had its challenges. Having a nanny is problematically expensive. And then there are the emotional costs. On days when Leo was struggling with a cold or an ear infection or sprouting a new tooth, it was near impossible to leave him, cartoon tears mottling his pillow cheeks, and concentrate on work. And there have been more unforeseen difficulties. I once came home to Bernadette announcing proudly, “He said ‘Mama!’” This would ordinarily be an exciting milestone moment. I called my husband at work. “Baby Leo said ‘Mama,’” I told him gravely. “Really? Awww,” he said. I added: “He said it to Bernadette! Maybe he thinks she’s his mama?” “That’s absurd,” my husband attempted to reassure me. “He knows you’re his mama. He’s just practising sounds.” I tried to reassure myself, remembering that he had long been saying “Dada” to his dada—but also to me, to our cat Penguin and to a floor lamp in our living room.

All told, it has been a giant adjustment but a generally great one. About a month into our new life with Nanny Bernadette, my husband looked around at our spotless house and slumbering baby and said, “Our lives are so much better thanks to baby Leo—because now we have Bernadette!”

Before her arrival, there were days when I felt confronted by what seemed like the insurmountable: laundry that needed doing, groceries that needed buying, “urgent” emails that needed replying, fruit that needed puréeing, floors that needed vacuuming, teeth that needed flossing, anxiety attacks that needed having, et cetera. I’m sorry to admit that I encountered similar moments before I had a baby—I just didn’t have an excuse (motherhood) that other (organized, efficient) people recognized as valid.

The other day, I came home to what might have been the most bourgeois moment of my life. “What is that delicious smell?” I asked Bernadette. “Oh, I made kale chips,” she chimed. *My nanny made me kale chips.* I looked around me: The house was immaculate, the cats and the washing machine were purring in the background and Leo and Bernadette were laughing at some new game they’d hatched. But then she went home. Leo looked at me and then looked quizzically over at a bowl of fruit—as if to say “Mommy, that pear isn’t going to purée itself.” He tossed his board book onto the floor and looked at me again, as if to say “My bunny book isn’t going to read itself either. So hard to find good help these days.” “Oh, yes, of course! Mama will prepare your lunch right away!” I said, leaping to my feet, trying for Sanjay-esque stealth, and almost adding “Would you like champagne with that, sir?” □