

# The Nanny Diaries

A NOVEL

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*To our parents, for always reading at least one bedtime story  
(with voices) no matter how tuckered out they were.*

*And to all the fabulous kids who have danced, giggled,  
and hiccuped their way into our hearts.*

*We root for you still.*

## A NOTE TO READERS

The authors have worked, at one time or another, for over thirty New York City families, and this story was inspired by what they have learned and experienced. However, *The Nanny Diaries* is a work of fiction, and none of those families is portrayed in this book. Names and characters are the product of the authors' imagination. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is coincidental. Although some real New York City institutions—schools, stores, galleries, and the like—are mentioned, all are used fictitiously.

*"You should hear mama on the chapter of governesses: Mary and I have had, I should think, a dozen at least in our day; half of them detestable and the rest ridiculous, and all incubi—were they not, mama?"*

*"My dearest, don't mention governesses; the word makes me nervous. I have suffered a martyrdom from their incompetency and caprice; I thank Heaven I have now done with them!"*

—JANE EYRE

**T H E   N A N N Y   D I A R I E S**

## PROLOGUE

### The Interview

Every season of my nanny career kicked off with a round of interviews so surreally similar that I'd often wonder if the mothers were slipped a secret manual at the Parents League to guide them through. This initial encounter became as repetitive as religious ritual, tempting me, in the moment before the front door swung open, either to kneel and genuflect or say, "Hit it!"

No other event epitomized the job as perfectly, and it always began and ended in an elevator nicer than most New Yorkers' apartments.



The walnut-paneled car slowly pulls me up, like a bucket in a well, toward potential solvency. As I near the appointed floor I take a deep breath; the door slides open onto a small vestibule which is the portal to, at most, two apartments. I press the doorbell. Nanny Fact: she always waits for me to ring the doorbell, even though she was buzzed by maximum security downstairs to warn of my imminent arrival and is probably standing on the other side of the door. May, in fact, have been standing there since we spoke on the telephone three days ago.

The dark vestibule, wallpapered in some gloomy Colefax and Fowler floral, always contains a brass umbrella stand, a horse print, and a mirror, wherein I do one last swift check of my appearance. I seem to have grown stains on my skirt during the train ride from school, but otherwise I'm pulled together—twin set, floral skirt, and some Gucci-knockoff sandals I bought in the Village.

She is always tiny. Her hair is always straight and thin; she always seems to be inhaling and never exhaling. She is always wearing expensive khaki pants, Chanel ballet flats, a French striped T-shirt, and a white cardigan. Possibly some discreet pearls. In seven years and umpteen interviews the I'm-mom-casual-in-my-khakis-but-intimidating-in-my-\$400-shoes outfit never changes. And it is simply impossible to imagine her doing anything so undignified as what was required to get her pregnant in the first place.

Her eyes go directly to the spot on my skirt. I blush. I haven't even opened my mouth and already I'm behind.

She ushers me into the front hall, an open space with a gleaming marble floor and mushroom-gray walls. In the middle is a round table with a vase of flowers that look as if they might die, but never dare wilt.

This is my first impression of the Apartment and it strikes me like a hotel suite—immaculate, but impersonal. Even the lone finger painting I will later find taped to the fridge looks as if it were ordered from a catalog. (Sub-Zeros with a custom-colored panel aren't magnetized.)

She offers to take my cardigan, stares disdainfully at the hair my cat seems to have rubbed on it for good luck, and offers me a drink.

I'm supposed to say, "Water would be lovely," but am often tempted to ask for a Scotch, just to see what she'd do. I am then invited into the living room, which varies from baronial splendor to Ethan Allen interchangeable, depending on how "old" the money is. She gestures me to the couch, where I promptly sink three feet into the cushions, transformed into a five-year-old dwarfed by mountains of chintz. She looms above me, ramrod straight in a very uncomfortable-looking chair, legs crossed, tight smile.

Now we begin the actual Interview. I awkwardly place my sweating glass of water carefully on a coaster that looks as if it could use a coaster. She is clearly reeling with pleasure at my sheer Caucasianness.



“So,” she begins brightly, “how did you come to the Parents League?”

This is the only part of the Interview that resembles a professional exchange. We will dance around certain words, such as “nanny” and “child care,” because they would be distasteful and we will never, *ever*, actually acknowledge that we are talking about my working for her. This is the Holy Covenant of the Mother/Nanny relationship: this is a pleasure—not a job. We are merely “getting to know each other,” much as how I imagine a John and a call girl must make the deal, while trying not to kill the mood.

The closest we get to the possibility that I might actually be doing this for money is the topic of my baby-sitting experience, which I describe as a passionate hobby, much like raising Seeing Eye dogs for the blind. As the conversation progresses I become a child-development expert—convincing both of us of my desire to fulfill my very soul by raising a child and taking part in all stages of his/her development; a simple trip to the park or museum becoming a precious journey of the heart. I cite amusing anecdotes from past gigs, referring to the children by name—“I still marvel at the cognitive growth of Constance with each hour we spent together in the sandbox.” I feel my eyes twinkle and imagine twirling my umbrella à la Mary Poppins. We both sit in silence for a moment picturing my studio apartment crowded with framed finger paintings and my doctorates from Stanford.

She stares at me expectantly, ready for me to bring it on home. “*I love children!* I love little hands and little shoes and peanut butter sandwiches and peanut butter in my hair and Elmo—I *love Elmo*—and sand in my purse and the “Hokey Pokey”—can’t get enough of it!—and soy milk and blankies and the endless barrage of questions no one knows the answers to, I mean why is the sky blue? And Disney! Disney is my second language!”

We can both hear “A Whole New World” slowly swelling in the

background as I earnestly convey that it would be more than a privilege to take care of her child—it would be an adventure.

She is flushed, but still playing it close to the chest. Now she wants to know *why*, if I'm so fabulous, I would *want* to take care of her child. I mean, she gave birth to it and *she* doesn't want to do it, so why would I? Am I trying to pay off an abortion? Fund a leftist group? How did she get this lucky? She wants to know what I study, what I plan to do in the future, what I think of private schools in Manhattan, what my parents do. I answer with as much filigree and insouciance as I can muster, trying to slightly cock my head like Snow White listening to the animals. She, in turn, is aiming for more of a Diane-Sawyer-pose, looking for answers which will confirm that I am not there to steal her husband, jewelry, friends, or child. In that order.

Nanny Fact: in every one of my interviews, references are never checked. I am white. I speak French. My parents are college educated. I have no visible piercings and have been to Lincoln Center in the last two months. I'm hired.

She stands with newfound hope. "Let me show you around . . ." Although we have already met, it's time for the Apartment to play *its* role to full effect. As we pass through each room it seems to fluff itself and shimmy to add shine to the already blinding surfaces. Touring is what this Apartment was born for. Each enormous room leads to the next with a few minihallways just big enough for a framed original so-and-so.

No matter if she has an infant or a teenager—there is never a trace of a child to be found on the Tour. In fact, there's never a trace of anyone—not a single family picture displayed. I'll find out later that these are all discreetly tucked into sterling Tiffany frames and clustered artfully in a corner of the den.

Somehow the absence of a pair of strewn shoes or an opened envelope makes it hard to believe that the scene I am being led through is three-dimensional; it seems like a Potemkin apartment. I

consequently feel ungainly and unsure of how to demonstrate the appropriate awe that is expected from me, without saying, “Yes’m, it’s awl so awfly luvierly, shore is,” in a thick cockney accent and curtsying.

Luckily she is in perpetual motion and the opportunity does not present itself. She glides silently ahead of me and I am struck by how tiny her frame seems against the dense furnishings. I stare at her back as she moves from room to room, stopping only briefly in each to wave her hand around in a circle and say the room’s name, to which I nod to confirm that this is, in fact, the dining room.

Two pieces of information are meant to be conveyed to me during the Tour: (1) I am out of my league, and (2) I will be policing at maximum security to ensure that her child, who is also out of his or her league, does not scuff, snag, spill, or spoil a single element of this apartment. The coded script for this exchange goes as follows: she turns around to “mention” that there really is no housekeeping involved and that Hutchison really “prefers” to play in his room. If there were any justice in the world this is the point when all nannies should be given roadblocks and a stun gun. These rooms are destined to become the burden of my existence. From this point on, ninety-five percent of this apartment will be nothing more than a blurred background for chasing, enticing, and point-blank pleading with the child to “Put the Delft milkmaid down!!” I am also about to become intimate with more types of cleaning fluid than I knew there were types of dirt. It will be in her pantry—stocked high above the washer-dryer—that I discover people actually import toilet bowl cleanser from Europe.

We arrive in the kitchen. It is enormous. With a few partitions it could easily house a family of four. She stops to rest one manicured hand on the counter, affecting a familiar pose, like a captain at the helm about to address the crew. However, I know if I asked her where she keeps the flour, a half hour of rummaging through unused baking utensils would ensue.

Nanny Fact: she may pour an awful lot of Perrier in this kitchen, but she never actually eats here. In fact, over the course of the job I never see her *eat* anything. While she can't tell me where to find the flour, she can probably locate the laxatives in her medicine cabinet blindfolded.

The refrigerator is always bursting with tons of meticulously chopped fresh fruit separated into Tupperware bowls and at least two packs of fresh cheese tortellini that her child prefers without sauce. (Meaning there is never any in the house for me, either.) There is also the requisite organic milk, a deserted bottle of Lillet, and Sarabeth's jam, and lots of refrigerated ginkgo biloba ("for Daddy's memory"). The freezer is stocked with Mommy's dirty little secret: chicken nuggets and popsicles. As I peer into the fridge I see that food is for the child; condiments are for the grown-ups. One pictures a family meal in which parents meekly stick toothpicks into a jar of Grace's sundried tomatoes while child gorges on a feast of fresh fruit and frozen dinners.

"Brandford's meals are really quite simple," she says, gesturing to the frozen food as she closes the freezer door. Translation: they are able to feed him this crap in good conscience on the weekends because I will be cooking him four-course macrobiotic meals on the weeknights. There will be a day to come when I stare at the colorful packages in the freezer with raw envy as I resteam the wild rice from Costa Rica for the four-year-old's maximum digestive ease.

She swings open the pantry (which is big enough to be a summer home for the family of four who could live in the kitchen) to reveal an Armageddon-ready level of storage, as if the city were in perpetual danger of being looted by a roving band of insanely health-conscious five-year-olds. It is overflowing with every type of juice box, soy milk, rice milk, organic pretzel, organic granola bar, and organic raisin the consulted nutritionist could think up. The only item with additives is a shelf of Goldfish options, including low salt and the not-so-popular onion.

There isn't a single trace of food in the entire kitchen big enough to fill a grown-up hand. Despite the myth of "help yourself," it will take a few starving evenings of raisin dinners before I discover THE TOP SHELF, which appears to be trip wired and covered with dust, but contains the much-coveted gourmet house gifts that have been left for dead by women who see chocolate as a grenade in Pandora's box. Barneys' raisinettes, truffles from Saks, fudge from Martha's Vineyard, all of which I devour like crack-cocaine in the bathroom to avoid the crime being recorded by a possible security camera. I picture the footage being played on *Hard Copy*: "Nanny caught in the act—heady with delusions of entitlement—breaks celophane wrapper on '92 Easter Godivas."

It is at this point that she begins the Rules. This is a very pleasing portion of the event for any mother because it is a chance to demonstrate how much thought and effort has gone into bringing the child this far. She speaks with a rare mixture of animation, confidence, and awesome conviction—she knows this much is true. I, in turn, adopt my most eager, yet compassionate expression as if to say "Yes, please tell me more—I'm fascinated" and "How awful it must be for you to have a child allergic to air." So begins the List:

Allergic to dairy.

Allergic to peanuts.

Allergic to strawberries.

Allergic to propane-based shellac.

Some kind of grain.

Won't eat blueberries.

Will only eat blueberries—sliced.

Sandwiches must be cut horizontally and have crusts.

Sandwiches must be cut in quarters and have NO crusts.

Sandwiches must be made facing east.

She *loves* rice milk!

He won't eat anything starting with the letter M.

All servings are to be pre-measured—NO additional food is permissible.

All juice is to be watered down and drunk out of a sip glass over the sink or in the bathtub (preferably until the child is eighteen).

All food is to be served on a plastic place mat with paper towel beneath bowl, bib on at all times.

Actually, "if you could get Lucien naked before eating and then hose her down afterward, that would be perfect."

NO food or drink within two hours of bedtime.

NO additives.

NO preservatives.

NO pumpkin seeds.

NO skins of any kind.

NO raw food.

NO cooked food.

NO American food.

and . . . (voice drops to a pitch only whales can hear)

*NO FOOD OUTSIDE THE KITCHEN!*

I am nodding gravely in agreement. This makes total sense. "Oh, my God, of course," I find myself saying.

This is Phase I of bringing me into the fold, of creating the illusion of collusion. "We're in this together! Little Elspeth is our joint project! And we're going to feed her nothing but mung beans!" I feel as if I am nine months pregnant and just finding out my husband plans to raise the child in a cult. Yet I am somehow flattered that I am being chosen to participate in this project. Completion Phase II: I am succumbing to the allure of perfection.

The tour proceeds to the farthest possible room. The distance of

the child's room from the parents' room always runs the gamut from far away to really, really far away. In fact, if there is another floor this room will be on it. One has the image of the poor three-year-old awakening from a nightmare and having to don a pith helmet and flashlight to go in search of her parents' room, armed only with a compass and fierce determination.

The other telltale sign that one is moving into the Child Zone is the change in the decor from muted, faux Asian to either a Mondrian scheme of primary colors or Bonpoint, Kennedy pastels. Either way Martha has been here—personally. But the effect is oddly disquieting; it's so obviously an adult's conception of a child's room, as evidenced by the fact that all the signed first edition Babar prints are hung at least three feet above the child's head.

After having received the Rules I am braced to meet the boy in the bubble. I expect to see a full-out intensive care unit complete with a Louis Vuitton IV hookup. Imagine my shock at the ball of motion that comes hurtling across the room at us. If it's a boy the movement is reminiscent of the Tasmanian Devil, while a girl tends toward a full-tilt Mouseketeers sequence, complete with two pirouettes and a grand jeté. The child is sent into this routine by some Pavlovian response to the mother's perfume as she rounds the corner. The encounter proceeds as follows: (1) Child (groomed within an inch of his/her life) makes a beeline directly for mother's leg. (2) At the precise moment the child's hands wrap around her thigh the mother swiftly grabs the child's wrists. (3) And she simultaneously sidesteps out of the embrace, bringing the child's hands into a clapping position in front of the child's face, and bends down to say hello, turning the child's gaze to me. Voilà. And thus the first of many performances of what I like to call the "Spatula Reflex." It has such timing and grace that I feel as if I should applaud, but instead move directly into my Pavlovian response set off by their expectant faces. I drop to my knees.

"Why don't you two get to know each other a little . . ." This is

the cue for the Play-With-Child portion of the audition. Despite the fact that we all know the child's opinion is irrelevant I nevertheless become psychotically animated. I play as if I'm Christmas and then some until the child has been whipped into a foaming frenzy of interaction, with the added stimulant of a rare audience with mother. The child has been trained in the Montessori approach to fun—only one toy is pulled from its walnut cubicle at a time. I over-compensate for the lack of normal childhood chaos by turning into a chorus of voices, dance steps, and an in-depth understanding of Pokémon. Within moments the child is asking me to go to the zoo, sleep over, and move in. This is the mother's cue to break in from where she has been sitting with her mental clipboard and Olympic score cards on the edge of the child's bed to announce that it is "Time to say goodbye to Nanny. Won't it be fun to play with Nanny again?"

The housekeeper, who has been folded into a child-size rocking chair in the corner this entire time, offers up a dejected storybook, making a meek attempt to match my display of fireworks and delay the inevitable crash. Within seconds there is a replay of a slightly more sophisticated version of the Spatula Reflex, this time encompassing a maneuvering of both mother and myself outside the room, punctuated by a slammed door, all in one seamless motion. She runs her hands through her hair as she leads me back into the silence of the apartment with a long, breathy "Well . . ."

She hands me my purse and then I stand with her in the foyer for at least half an hour, waiting to be dismissed.

"So, do you have a boyfriend?" This is the cue for the Play-With-Mother portion of the audition. She is in for the night—there is no mention of a husband's imminent arrival or plans for dinner. I hear about her pregnancy, Lotte Berk, the last Parents' Night meeting, the pain-in-the-ass housekeeper (left for dead in the Child Zone), the wily decorator, the string of nanny disasters before me,



and the nursery school *nightmare*. Completion Phase III: I am actually excited that I am not only getting a delightful child to play with, I'm getting a new best friend!

Not to be outdone, I hear myself talking—trying to establish my status as a person of the world; I name-drop, brand-drop, place-drop. Then self-consciously deprecate myself with humor so as not to intimidate her. I become aware that I am talking way, way too much. I am babbling about why I left Brown, why I left my last relationship—not that I'm a leaver no, no, no! I pick something, I stick with it! Yessiree! Did I tell you about my thesis? I am revealing information that will be dragged up repeatedly for months in awkward attempts to make conversation. Soon I am just bobbing my head and saying "Okay-ay!" while blindly groping for the doorknob. *Finally* she thanks me for coming, opens the door, and lets me press for the elevator.

I am caught mid-sentence as the elevator door starts to close, forcing me to shove my bag in front of the electronic eye so I can finish a meaningful thought on my parents' marriage. We smile and nod at one another like animatrons until the door mercifully slides closed. I collapse against it, exhaling for the first time in an hour.

Minutes later the subway barrels down Lexington, propelling me toward school and back to the grind of my own life. I slump against the plastic seat, images from the pristine apartment swimming in my head. These snapshots are soon interrupted by a man or woman—sometimes both—shuffling through the car begging for change while gripping their worldly possessions in a shredded shopping bag. Pulling my backpack up onto my lap, my postperformance adrenaline leveling out, questions begin to percolate.

Just how does an intelligent, adult woman become someone whose whole sterile kingdom has been reduced to alphabetized lingerie drawers and imported French dairy substitutes? Where is the child in this home? Where is the woman in this mother?

And how, exactly, am I to fit in?