

The Real Nanny Diaries

ALEXA BERNABO

Une bonne d'enfant des Philippines pleure la perte de ses enfants qu'elle a dû laisser chez elle pour travailler aux Etats-Unis afin de leur procurer le nécessaire Elle remarque le contraste entre sa vie et celle de la femme dont elle garde les enfants et qu'elle est arrivée à aimer.

My name is Diwata Navarro. I am 29 years old and I am from the town of Abaga in the Philippines. Since I was a child, I have learned that there is one marker that has set out my entire path in life. This thing that I carry around with me is often seen as an uncontrollable curse that places me at the bottom of the pyramid in all aspects of life. It makes me a target of discrimination, of inequality and of subordination. I am a woman, a description that tends to make the harsh realities of my situation acceptable to the world around me.

When I was twenty, I was married to a man who I thought loved me very much. He was sneaky; at least going into it he was. Helping me clean dishes, cooking every now and then, my husband even told me once that I should find a hobby and set aside a little time for myself every day. I thought I was lucky, but after our

first child came I realized he was just like the other men in my town and my hopes for a marriage where both partners were equal quickly left my mind. I cared for both the children and home while my husband spent all of his paycheques on booze and cigarettes. About eight months into my fourth pregnancy, the constant debt we were in caused my husband to move on and leave my children and myself with nothing. I was pregnant and alone with three other mouths to feed. I felt ashamed. What kind of parent was I? We had no money and I couldn't work; I was lost and afraid. My sister who lived in a village a few miles from my home in Abaga sent us the little money she could spare, but we were both aware that it would not be enough to keep my family alive. Two months after my fourth child was born, I looked at my babies, kissed their foreheads, and left on a boat to the United States. I can still remember the tears in the eyes of my eldest, who was only five years old at the time, and the sickening pain I felt in my stomach as I left them with my neighbour who was my only option until I could make enough money to send them to my sister's home. Once

I arrived in the States I stayed with my sister's brother-in-law who had a home in Chicago. It took me two months to secure a position as a full-time nanny at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Tayard. That was six years ago and I have not seen my children since.

My sister likes to comfort me by saying I did what I needed to do for my family, but the truth is I no longer feel like I deserve the title of being a mother. I abandoned my babies in a time where they needed me most and I will never be able to forget it. Aside from the guilt that weighs on my shoulders, my life in the States has seen few pleasures. When I was hired by Mrs. Tayard to be a nanny to her twin daughters, I could tell what kind of woman she was and the kind of life I was going to have in her home. Just as the word "woman" is my descriptor, Mrs. Tayard's word would be "clean." Yes, she always has her makeup done, and her hair up in curls, but that is not why I would use the word. Mrs. Tayard dismisses her children and acts like they are just dirty dishes that I need to wash and put away. She does not touch them, she does not look and them; she has cleaned herself of any trace of motherhood. I

know this seems a tad hypocritical of me, especially considering my track record of motherhood shows striking similarities to hers. Yet, although I do not touch or look at my children, I would give anything to be with them, unlike Mrs. Tayard.

In the Philippines I was subjected to the daily abuse of my husband, but in the States I have felt abuse on an entirely different level. In Chicago, I have noticed a hierarchy of women who have no compassion or sympathy for their sisters who are suffering. Women in my country are united by the common experiences we have shared, but on this side of the world it is not the men I am afraid of, it is the women. While Mr. Tayard is

tolerable, partly because he is always working and I never see him, his wife is the exact opposite. Mrs. Tayard does not see me as a woman like herself and she certainly does not consider me as an equal. She takes in how I dress and how I speak and judges me for it, never considering what I have been through. I do not even think she knows I have children of my own and why would she? I am her subordinate.

I work 80 hours a week with no days off. I clean, I cook, and I take care of the house and do everything for Mrs. Tayard's children. Her twins are six years old and I have grown to love them very much. I hold them and care for them like they were my own but that often makes my situa-

tion worse. What kind of person am I that gives so much love to another woman's children when her own go through life alone?

Being a nanny breaks my heart as it has replaced the one job I cannot live without. Perhaps one day my children will understand why I left and forgive me, but I will never understand how I could sacrifice my life with them for the life I have now and I will never be able to forgive myself for it.

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MARY LOU SOUTAR-HYNES

The way light falls

reveals a darker side
to landscape's pastoral symmetry
behind the scenic veil

A trail of severed
marigolds across the field, river's shrewd
insistence — the slivered
face of rock

Yet today is summer
unmistakably — only the kayak's silvered silence
a single breath of cloud
sky powder-blue

Our journey
worn by weight of moist air, fabric's slight texture
on skin —
light falling between image
and knowing

Note: Line 4, source of image "scenic veil" see: *Recovering Landscapes: Essays in Contemporary Architecture*, James Corner, Ed., Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, p. 12.

Mary Lou Soutar-Hynes's poetry appears earlier in this volume.