

D E N V E R Q U A R T E R L Y

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ERICA STERN

The Nanny

*I*n shade, not sound, my friend's jacket blares. I have to shield my eyes. She's sensitive, this friend, self-conscious; I regret my reaction. She's the sort of woman who offers too many apologies for things that have nothing to do with her, things no one can control: weather, illness, traffic. At the shock of her jacket, the brightness, my eyes water. Everything ok? my friend asks. To avoid an insult I tell her about the Nanny—not what I'm upset by, not at this moment, though it could be. Like subtitles that can't be turned off, the Nanny dilemma runs always across my mind. I don't know that I can find her, I say. I don't know that she's within reach. There are things we all want, my friend says, that we can't have. This friend has experienced a life of heartbreak, so I trust her. Trust, though, doesn't make the truth, the possibility of the not getting, easier. While my friend boils water for tea I choose a flavor from a tin set she keeps above the sink. The package is purple, emblazoned with a golden crown on the top—somehow significant.

They execute a man on a gurney and he doesn't die right away—the potion not strong enough, or it clogs in the tubes as it winds from machine to body. This man's name is something eminently ordinary as is his last meal request: steak and potatoes and cherry pie. Reporters speak of twitches, grimaces, whispers not understood. A code that lingers, to decipher afterwards. I read article after article about his death; one leads to another to another; I can't stop. On the same day I get a needle inserted into my arm to test various levels of chemicals, the names of which I can't remember, to determine if my body is neglecting its obligations. The nurse ties an elastic band up top to pool the blood in one spot. This will only take a second, she says, removing the needle's cap. You can look away.

Turns out I can create a whole list of things I've wanted but not gotten. Later, at home, by myself in the bathtub, I remember the list. The house so quiet I think I hear kicks and jabs inside of me striking

something solid—glass or metal—instead of soft tissue and skin. My list includes a childhood best friend who makes up affectionate nicknames for me; an older brother with a cowlick; a rare artifact from a prehistoric dig; naming rights to a large, important building. I recreate the list, write everything out on another napkin with my red pen, remind myself that up until this point in my life I have gotten along without these things. The list prepares me for the inevitable deluge of disappointments—inoculates in case the Nanny does not materialize.

Fear is a brake not an accelerator, my mother tells me, or I think tells me. The line bristles with static. Mom? I say, Mom? I hang up and call back. No answer. What did she mean: brake versus accelerator? Which should I strive for? While thawing chicken for dinner a gap forms where the conversation once lived, filling now with this single line, echoing, devoid of meaning.

Good news, the doctor says, is that we can manage with the cards we've been dealt. Bad news, it turns out, is that my body has indeed been neglecting its obligations. Certain levels are not high enough, others too high. These aren't shared cards, I want to tell him, they are my cards alone. The whole joint venture posture a demeaning farce. While he talks about options I imagine technicians in white coats spinning my blood through a machine until it is long and thin—the consistency of string, something to be woven, tied, wound, unwound. Pull the strings out, hold them up under bright lights, squint, examine the fibers.

What do you think he said before he died? I ask my husband. I mean, not while they were killing him, but before. Like his last conversation. You think too much about this man, he tells me. What does it matter to you? He turns the dishwasher on. The rumble takes over the room. Maybe he got to make a final call from one of those phones in a booth with glass panels, ankles shackled. Maybe he watched the other person's lips move across from him while sound staggered over the wire, delayed. I would rather hear nothing than sound at odds with action. The disconnect would jar. A jetlag of the senses. Maybe that's what dying's like—deceleration out of sync with the world.

Ten different times on ten different napkins I recalculate the cost of the Nanny to see if I have made a mistake. Again and again, I come

up with the same amount. It would cost X dollars and we have only Y to spend. Because the napkins are precious but overwhelming I store them in the drawer with my grandmother's silver, which I inherited because my grandmother loved me more than my mother. The lawyer, after reading the will, told us that skipping a generation was unusual though not unheard of. My mother did not outwardly mind the slight. I'd also inherited my grandmother's condo in Florida but upon investigation, we discovered she had fallen behind on her mortgage payments and the bank, in fact, owned the property.

My grandmother had a caretaker—I forget her name—something rusty and with a slight smell of tuna salad and camphor, like Peggy or Gail or Phyllis—who slipped pills into my grandmother's mouth and helped her wash them down with water, sometimes stroking her throat with a thumb to coax them through. The caretaker had no wrinkles. Only a fluff of white hair made her appear close to her clients' age. After my grandmother died, did Peggy/Gail/Phyllis mourn the death or simply go ahead with her life, move on to the next client on the list? Another client, another item at a grocery store plucked from a shelf, stashed in a cart, in a bag, checked out.

In the middle of the night I can't breathe. Or I can breathe but the breathing isn't fast enough or deep enough or flowing into the right parts of my body. Breathing itself has ceased to be sufficient for my body's demands. I push my limbs out of bed, down the stairs. In the kitchen I lean against the counter and heave. My husband must have heard my thuds. He walks over and puts a hand to my forehead. What's wrong? he asks. Cramps? A headache? Nausea? I don't know, I say. You need to tell me what's wrong, he says, so I can help. I don't know what's wrong, I explain, but I know something isn't right. He looks helpless. I want him to feel helpful, so I point to the bottle of Tylenol in the corner. He spills a couple of pills into his palm and gives them to me and says, there, that will help, that's it—like it was his idea in the first place. On the way back to bed I spit the Tylenol into the toilet, flush.

My friend tells me she wants to believe in a cause to give her life a solid foundation. She tells me Yeats inspires her, his commitment to Irish nationalism, the way fervor burrows into his words. Obviously, she says, that's not my cause. But I'm looking for something like it. A modern American version of what he had. She approaches conviction

like something that can be chosen out of a catalog. I always loved the Yeats poem about the widening gyre—its avoidance of political fervor in favor of something more ambiguous, a fever dream of lyrics, the way it ends with a question. I've always felt everything honest should end that way.

On the bed I arrange calculations around me, study the numbers until they cease to be numbers, until they are symbols without any meaning. Stare for long enough at one point, maybe a leaf on the ground or a crack in the ceiling or a scar on your shin, it blurs into its surroundings.

They used electric chairs before injections, and before that hangings and firing squads and beheadings and stakes. Each, apparently, more humane than the last. But if $a = \text{death}$ and $b = \text{death}$ and $c = \text{death}$, doesn't it follow that $a = b = c$? A formal theorem describes these relationships. They can be proven. I don't remember the name of the theorem. I have never been much good at math.

Henry VIII spared his wife from the stake because she was queen, I tell my husband while I hunch over the tub's ledge to clip my toenails. According to my research, he imported an expert executioner all the way from France. The next wife died in childbirth. I collect the clippings, examine the crescents in my palm. I guess that's better than a beheading, he asks—or states. I try to decipher if his voice goes up at the end or remains level. One is brutal and swift but imposed, the other agonizing and long but natural, I say. I decide to ask him: which would you prefer?

Fear is fad, my mother says. I have the phone on speaker to retain use of my hands while we talk, though they are, currently, idle. Her voice crackles. Like the cold war, she says. We feared the KGB. Those thick Russian accents, ermine hats, hammers and sickles. She laughs but the laugh doesn't translate as a full laugh through the phone. It halts and jerks and scratches. It's so quaint now, she says, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Contra Affair, the whole USSR. And there we were, fearing our own extinction!

The talking head needs a haircut. A bang dangles in his eye. The cost of the appeals process is enormous, he says. And let's not forget the strain on the system, the difficulty of acquiring the right drugs, of

finding qualified and willing medical personnel. Talking Head Number Two cuts off Talking Head Number One with a comment about deterrence rates and the daily expense of incarceration. The camera zooms out to encompass both talking heads in the shot, their voices overlapping until nothing can be understood. Talking head is a strange term, conjuring perfectly round faces, mouths open, floating in a greenish jelly like flecks of suspicious meat in some 1950s casserole.

I scratch a spot on my back and when I examine my hand, blood flecks the fingertip. Not a lot, but enough. There is both satisfaction and disgust in the sight. As a child my mother claimed that blood, like pain, was a sign that things were ok, that the body was working. It's nothing to fret over, she would say, when I cried about a skinned knee or busted lip. I didn't believe her. Or maybe I believed her but my body defied her orders, felt the pain and fear regardless. The Nanny, I think, would know how to swoop in, bandage the abrasion before the blood became noticeable, before fear set in. And, later, would know how to pull off the bandage in one painless tug.

We can do a or b, the doctor says, wiping his hands, but not c or d. What if x occurs? I ask. Then we do e. That doesn't sound good, I say. I wouldn't like that. In fact, I would like to avoid that. Repetition, I think, makes my views clearer, though perhaps only muddles my conviction. In that situation it's our only option, he pronounces, there is no other choice. He walks over to the counter, shuts the folder with my chart. The other doctors have transitioned to the computer. Not him. He is old fashioned. He tucks a pen behind his ear and somehow this soothes me.

I look up the cost of Nannies by neighborhood and age and days of the week and then I look up the levels of things in my blood (optimal, minimum, maximum) and each page leads to another page that contradicts the information from before. I go back and forth between these searches—Nanny/blood, Nanny/blood—until I confuse which numbers go with what.

Maybe the Nanny is Russian. Maybe she has thick black curls and when she speaks she sounds like a noble summering on the Black Sea in the time before Lenin, drinking from a samovar, rearranging the china cupboard. This would soothe my child—the smoky tealeaf scent on her breath, the patronymic lilt of her name, her unquestioning acceptance of the difference between aristocrat and peasant, evident

in the way she runs her hands down the fabric of her skirt and rises, slowly, slowly, from her chair.

Then it strikes me that if this is our Nanny, the search must end in tragedy, her kind wiped out years ago in the October Revolution, replaced with hulking apartment buildings and smuggled cans of beets or turnips. The world has changed too much to provide me with the Nanny I envision. Pastures overrun by military training camps and country doctors replaced by cinderblock hospitals with stained linoleum floors and even the intimacy of a beheading overtaken by a sterile needle inserted in a vein.

Outside an off-track betting parlor people's faces look like masks and the horses so real they might jump from the screens and run alongside me. Laundromat steam pours from a vent, covering me with its sticky smell—organic matter digested too long in pipes. A cab almost hits me, slams its horn. Apparently I am standing still in the middle of the street. I find it difficult to move. The sound surrounds me so completely that when it lifts I miss it, feel alone and unprotected. People go in and out of doors. Stoplights flash at the corners. An old woman waiting for a bus mutters something about flies and ham. The ground beneath us could shift at any moment—the transition unnoticed. We are here. Gone.

Do you think our child will need soothing? I ask my husband, though he is sound asleep, face down on his pillow. Do you think our baby will come out pale and sickly and in need of great care, like one of those children in a Victorian novel, born into pain and suffering? The kind of child requiring fresh air and long walks outside and camphor and gelatinous broths? Do you think? His chest rises up, lowers down, rises up again. Do you think?