

At 2 months old, Livia was a colicky baby who would only stop crying if at my breast or near the loud, rumbling sound of an 18-wheeler. Twenty hours a day, she would cry. My sister, who lived nearby and who was pregnant with her second child, would not visit, so afraid was she that her baby would be like mine. My husband had a teaching job in another state and lived there most of the week. I suffered chronic mastitis that left me sick and with suspicious lumps in my breast that needed to be aspirated. The apartment was a mess, my daughter's fingernails were long and scratched her, and I was living on brownies.

AND THEN CAME HEATHER

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IN HER ABSENCE I REALIZED UNEQUIVOCALLY THAT SHE WAS THE SYSTEM I HAD CREATED TO MAKE WORKING AND MOTHERING POSSIBLE

SHE WAS PAID for by my mother for one month, as a way to help me over the transition to motherhood. A strong-willed Trinidadian with dreadlocks and an impeccable sense of style—everything ironed and matching—Heather took the crying baby and, in her lilting Caribbean accent, said, “It’s all right to cry.” She washed her, dressed her in pressed frocks, clipped her nails, swaddled her, and strolled her through our Manhattan neighborhood in a pram, showing her off to all her nanny friends. Livia stopped crying. Our lives became peaceful.

When the month came to a crashing end, I went over our finances, calculated that if we gave up on our dream of saving for a down payment on a home and if my husband and I took on a few more assignments, we’d be able to keep Heather. And so she came to work for us, setting our apartment in order; keeping our refrigerator stocked with food and our closets with toilet paper and soap and no-tears shampoo; caring for Livia and then, four years later, for Jasper; making our lives easier so we could work. Before I knew it, we, writers with the corresponding income, had a full-time caregiver—a luxury that, when I was a child, was only affordable to the very wealthy.

Of the Trinidadian nanny clan in our neighborhood, Heather was the queen bee. Before coming to work for us, she had worked for my cousin, also in the neighborhood, for nine years. This was her turf, and she took charge with command and confidence. “We have a staff,” my husband teased in the beginning. Rather, we had a *boss*, I’d correct, and we loved that, even if I felt a bit like a fraud, like I was being fiscally irresponsible, like Lily Bart from Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth*, who can’t live without the maid she can’t afford. Like Lily, I loved the indulgence, the help, the seeming necessity. But we all know what became of Lily Bart. This predicament nagged at me—but I could not imagine life without Heather.

FOR SEVEN YEARS, she managed our lives and helped us raise our children, loving them as if they were her own. If she was invested in our lives, we were invested in hers. We sponsored her for her green card, helped her study for her GED, adjusted

our schedules so she could attend college to earn a degree in early-childhood development. In her sixth year with us, we bought her, freshly minted green card in hand, a ticket to Port of Spain, so she could return home for the first time in more than 15 years. Instead of a down payment on a house, we had Heather; and every day we were grateful, even as we scrambled to pay her.

But then, it seemed, it was time to say goodbye. With Livia, 7, and Jasper, 3, both now in school, we could no longer justify the expense. It occurred to me that the definition of real wealth today lies in being able to afford the babysitter after you no longer really need her. I tried to make the best of Heather leaving. We found her a few jobs to choose from, which would start after she had the summer off. In our new routine, my husband and I would divide the care between us, and that would be wonderful—more time with the kids, more involvement in their lives—and we’d fit work in. Indeed, though I felt sad to lose Heather, I was happy for what I’d be gaining. For seven years, I had not been in charge, and this seemed like an opportunity to reclaim some of what I had happily surrendered. I had fantasies: I would teach the kids to love fruit; we’d visit the museums on a weekly basis; I’d become more involved at their school. Heck, I’d even allow my son to wear nail polish (something Heather would never allow—“What’s that boy doing with polish?”). In some ways, she had been too rigid with them: their hair always perfect, Jasper dressed like a football player, Livia like a princess. I would stop having to defer to Heather. We could even begin saving for that down payment!

FANTASY AND REALITY, of course, rarely add up. Heather left for Trinidad, and we drove off to Maine for a few weeks, during which I planned to firm up my authority with the children and develop a routine. But I soon realized how very much authority I had ceded in having a nanny. If I had been trained to defer to Heather, the children had been trained to mind her. Most of our visit to Maine was a disaster. They whined, they cried, they refused to listen. Heather’s name was invoked. She bathed

them better, brushed their hair so it didn’t hurt, fed them couscous with vegetables cut so minutely that they couldn’t tell they were eating vegetables. “I miss Heather,” became the refrain.

Sure, we’d been on vacation before, leaving Heather behind. But this was different. We all knew it. Heather would not be coming back. To make matters worse, just before we left for Maine, my husband had taken on a big assignment that made him essentially unavailable. He needed to work; we needed the money. So I was doing the child care alone. My fantasy of fitting in writing had been just that: There was no time once I’d fed the children, bathed them, played with them. Indeed, I was exhausted before the morning was through. Back home, of course, the schedule would be even more hectic—the days filled with playdates, lessons, and the endless preparation of food. (I hadn’t yet discovered the long list of other things Heather had tended to: the cutting of 40 nails, the cleaning of ears, the mountains of laundry, the schedule-juggling, the ferrying.) Jasper would be in school just a few hours a day; I couldn’t cram eight hours of work into three hours. I’d made a mistake. The novel I was working on languished on my desk. During the reign of Heather, my husband and I had published two novels, two works of nonfiction, one collection of poetry, and countless articles between us, all while teaching full-time. Privately, I cried. I longed for my work, for the peace of those days.

But then I thought of mothers I admired, how they seemed to enjoy creating systems that worked, made mothering easier, kept their kids in line. They had schedules, rules, charts with smiley faces for when the children were good that, once accumulated, won presents. When Heather had come into our life, she had whipped us into order with systems of her own. Thus, I had been insulated from the full brunt of parental responsibility. Approaching the problem as if it were some sort of complex math equation, I determined to understand how to make this work.

TOWARD THE END of our trip in Maine, on a cool, overcast day, Livia and Jasper wanted to go for a walk to an island that was accessible to the shore only at low



tide. After a bit, Jasper became tired. He started to whine. He wanted to be carried. He pulled, he nagged, he threw a fit. Livia caught it like an infectious disease. I was walking with two screaming kids. I wanted to throw a fit, too. But I stopped myself: an act of God, really. Instead, I spotted a sand dollar and picked it up and showed it to them. Their eyes grew as they inspected it. They wanted to find another. At low tide, sand dollars are found where the waves meet the shore. Finding them became a game, and in this way we made it the mile and half to the island, where we saw seals bobbing in the water, their friendly faces very dog-like. We sat and watched the seals as the waves crashed into the island, the kids smothering me in kisses and attention. Their little fists were filled with sand dollars. We'd all won something. It was a revelation: I realized I wanted to do this more than anything.

AFTER THAT WE fell into a routine that we carried back home with us—perfect by no means, but it was ours. I came to accept

that I'd start working again eventually, that really, these days of young children wouldn't last so very long. I wanted to figure out the tricks that got Jasper to walk to the island, that got Livia to fall in love with blueberries (I paid her a dime for each berry until she didn't need to be paid anymore, until she was begging me to buy them). When the going got rough, I'd remind myself of that walk.

The memory of Heather, however, wouldn't recede. My son would look at me with his big, chocolate eyes and ask why Heather wasn't coming anymore. Livia would ask why her friends still had their sitters. The apartment felt somehow empty without Heather. We missed the strong scent of her perfume. We missed the ginger chicken she made. We missed her reprimands. ("Martha, I told you Jasper needs to wear an undershirt. He'll get the cold.") We missed her walking into the apartment in the morning in her vibrant colors and well-pressed linens, her elegance and pride shining on us, making us safer and brighter. Finally, I missed her commanding help. In her absence, I

realized unequivocally that she was the system I had created to make working and mothering possible.

A few months into full-time motherhood, I got a call from an editor: Would I like to go to Morocco to write a piece? My husband's schedule allowed him only three days a week to be with the kids after school. Even knowing this, I said yes to the editor and was thrilled inside. I began those old calculations: The Morocco piece would pay for 20 weeks of Heather part-time, with a raise to boot. Jackpot! Of the jobs we'd helped Heather find, the family she liked best needed her only three days a week. I asked if she'd consider working for both families, at least until my son was ready for kindergarten. Without hesitation, she agreed, then asked, "How are my boy, my girl?" In some essential ways, my children are her children. And when she walks through the door on her days with us, she brings the extra bit of love that tethers us to a present tense that began when the babies were born, and that we (Heather included) are not yet ready to cede to the past. ■