

A Long Island Downstairs Viewed from Upstairs

Growing up in Cedarhurst in a big house with servants largely substituting for parents brought joys and sorrows that today's appliance-laden nuclear families can scarcely imagine.

By Johanna Garfield

It has sometimes occurred to me in my years upon various psychoanalytic couches that the earnest interest of my therapists in parental actions and influences during my infancy and childhood was misplaced.

Wealthy children of my era (the '30s) who lived in large houses in prosperous suburbs of New York City were, to a greater or lesser extent, all raised, not by parents at all, but by servants. That is to say, I sometimes heard them referred to by others—or in Carole Lombard movies, or in English novels—as “servants.” My mother's generic term for them was “the help.” To call them “servants” would have shocked my brother and me to the depths of our democratic souls, to say nothing of completely misrepresenting their true relationship to us as children.

To us—to me—the help occupied a wonderful limbo somewhere between family and friend, neither as stickily close as relatives (and far less judgmental) nor as detached as outsiders. They were around much more than my parents to talk to, and were often my allies in struggles with them (as I, to my mother's extreme annoyance, was theirs). Some I loved passionately, and one was a feared nemesis who still inhabits my nightmares. But loved, hated, or something in-between, they were an integral part of my growing up, of the way all of us—at that time, in that milieu—grew up.

The number in residence at any one time generally ranged between three and five, depending on such variables as whether the cook's husband doubled as chauffeur, the chauffeur as butler, or the cook as part-time cleaner or laundress, or whether the maid could drive. Some were transient; some were with us for 10 years or longer—the latter the constants of my early life.

My mother was in fact a somewhat shadowy figure to me until I was almost 8. Before that, the dominant female figure in my and my brother Frank's life was Hennen, a gentle, soft-spoken German nurse whose departure to marry her best friend's widower while I was in second grade broke my heart. Prior to that, on those rare days when Hennen (a childish mispronunciation of “Helen”) went to visit her sister and nieces in Brooklyn, I would become so hysterical at the prospect of a day without her, under the unfamiliar ministrations of my mother, that Hennen would sometimes change her mind and stay home with me. For this she asked no extra pay, I found out later. She simply felt that her duty, her loyalty

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Newsday illustration by Bob Newman

and, I suspect, her real love, was with us—or rather with me, for my brother Frank was older by then, and much more independent.

It was fragile Hennen, with her fine brown hair parted in the middle and tied in a knot behind her head, who supported my chubby body as I struggled to master the small two-wheeler inherited from a cousin; Hennen who sat with me when I was sick; Hennen who accompanied me to school and met me afterwards.

When she left, I went into a real childhood depression, the prototype for all my subsequent feelings of abandonment. She wrote often—loving letters in an often indecipherable Germanic script—and I can remember the day she came to visit, a year after her marriage, vividly. We sat and clung together on the steps of the side entrance to our house, and I was filled with a searing sense of desolation at the knowledge that she'd be leaving soon again.

Hennen was contemporaneous with Tom Knipe, our chauffeur, whose flaming red neck and Dick Tracy profile I considered the height of masculine beauty, and who was the object of my first childish crush.

Tom was a man of many parts. He taught Frank and me how to carve animals out of bars of Ivory Soap (though none were so fine as his own) and stayed till midnight once to put together my first full-size two-wheeler when, to my intense disappointment, it arrived unassembled.

Like Hennen, Tom was fiercely loyal to our family and devoted to his job. Our Peckard, with its tiny blue lantern on top, was his pride and joy, and he washed and polished it endlessly. Although he went home at night he refused to take a single day off—including Christmas—during the entire 10 years he was in our employ. With the self-centeredness of childhood, I never even wondered what his wife, Mary, or his two boys thought about such an extremity of devotion. Tom was simply a “given” in my existence, and I was more shocked by his eventual patriotic departure to aid the war effort by working at the Sperry Gyroscope plant than I was by the initial Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

After Hennen, we had a series of what, for lack of a better term, I'll call “nursemaids”—women who did cleaning while I was in school, but who were responsible for me afterwards, and who were hired on the understanding that they would share my room. This was not due to a lack of space, but rather because of my terrible fear of the dark, and of being by myself at the end of a long, lonely hall. I looked forward to the arrival of each new roommate with great anticipation, and it never occurred to me that they might resent having to sleep in my room. Besides, the enforced intimacy gave me unusual access to their beauty secrets and their private lives. I thoroughly enjoyed my vicarious participation in their lives, and especially in their romances.

Jeannie, a dim-witted blonde with a bumpy ski-slope nose, who always smelled to me faintly of ammonia, was the first of this category to arrive. Though as a companion, she wasn't much fun, I was fascinated by her relationship with Henry—“crazy Henry.” Tom used to call him Henry; he was an almost dwarfish Armenian who met Jeannie on her very first Wednesday off (the cook always got Thursdays). She had gone to the city via the Long Island Rail Road, where Henry was a conductor, and it was love at first sight—on Henry's part, anyway. From then on, he came over regularly in his conductor's uniform, and often threatened to kill himself if she wouldn't marry him.

Some nights when Jeannie saw him coming, she would run screaming up the back stairs and try to hide from him in our joint bedroom, but on others, she'd baffle me by doing a complete about-face. Then, almost in a frenzy, she'd douse herself in powder and perfume, darken her pale lashes with Maybelline (the transformation was just like in the ads) and sail off with Henry. Since I could never get to sleep till she was back, I was witness to the fact that she often got in at 3 or 4, at which time she was never too tired to wind her hair into meticulous rows of tiny pin curls. Though I didn't like Henry, and wondered why—“Jare”—(my

nickname for Jeannie) had taken up with him at all, I was impressed with the depths of his passion. I heard that she eventually did marry him but that the marriage didn't last.

I can't remember just when or why Jars left, but one day a few weeks later, I was stubbornly refusing the pleas of Clara, the current cook, to get out of bed and go to school (in the absence of a nursemaid, the task of doing so had somehow devolved upon the cook), when the door opened, and in stepped Betty Saunders. She was a pretty, peppy brunette from Syracuse, who, I quickly decided, looked exactly like Loretta Young, one of my many movie star ideals of beauty.

“Now you get right out of that bed this minute, young lady,” she said with authority in a clear, musical voice. I loved her at once, got out of bed like a shot, and proceeded to transfer some of the passionate devotion I'd felt for Hennen to her.

Betty won the permanent respect of my brother and me shortly after my mother's 20-year-old “couturier” took up residence in our house, apparently under the impression that he was to be waited on hand and foot by “the staff,” rather than to be part of it. Though in actuality “D'Laurence” (Donald Lawrence Weinberg, that was) came from Tremont Avenue in the Bronx, one would have thought him to be the manor born. It took Betty to put him in his place.

“Miss Saunders, will you please draw my bewth,” he drawled, the first day of his arrival. Frank and I, who were observing the speech and actions of this new addition to the household with fascination, were appalled. Though we'd had help all our lives, D'Laurence's imperious tone was completely alien to us. Betty rose to the occasion magnificently. She turned slowly around, and with a look of withering contempt, and in a perfect imitation of his affected manner, replied, “My dear fellow, you can go draw your own goddamn bewth.”

Donnie (for so we soon called him) burst out laughing, and he

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and Betty became fast friends. But alas, Betty, too, was lost to me by matrimony to her longtime boyfriend, and I was alone again.

Sally, a regal and soft-spoken black woman, remained with us for 20 years, and was my friend and staunch ally during that entire period—as I was always hers. No matter what the merits of the case, I always assumed that she was right and that my mother was wrong. She lied for me if I hadn't practiced the piano, giving explicit details of time and effort, and once defused my mother's rage at me for having spilled black shoe polish on my bedroom rug by spending three hours on her knees removing the spots with a mysterious but effective homemade compound.

Jasper was another matter. He seemed quiet and pleasant enough until one night, after he and Sally had had a fight, when he waited for her with an ax in the garage beneath their apartment. He missed his target only because of the gloom. My mother fired him, but eventually, at Sally's urging (for once, her thinking was incomprehensible to me), rehired him. It was at this point that Jasper became the archetype for my adult fears of violence, and for my methods of trying to deal with it. I smiled at him the placating smiles usually reserved for kidnapers in my childhood nightmares ("Spare my life; I'll be nice; I'll be good. Like me; let me live.") And all the time I knew that behind his slow walk and dreamy smile lurked a man capable of murder.

And there were others—many more. There were Lily and James, who were with us for a few years while Sally was ill—my only friends during a self-imposed period of isolation due to overweight; Otis, a homosexual butler; and Annie, a maid who slipped out of my room nightly to meet her "friends" (I never told my mother). There was fat Martha, a laundress with purplish veins in her face and wiry red hair, who smelled of lye and other cleansers. She got drunk on our liquor regularly, and scared me terribly one night when she stood reeling in the door to the butler's pantry during dinner, cursing us all out as "damned infidels."

But, as with Jasper, that wasn't the end of Martha. My mother fired her; then rehired her a few weeks later. I couldn't understand, then, why she had such people back, but I now realize that it was a certain preference for the familiar, no matter how awful, and the terrible dependence she felt on the "help." The huge houses we lived in then weren't meant to be run by one. It was another way of life, and troubles with the "help," gossip about the "help," and a general preoccupation with the "help" took much of my mother's time.

In the gradual democratization—to say nothing of mechanization—of the United States, servants in a home have become more and more a rarity. The "do-it-yourself" era has invaded every aspect of life—and that applies to the wealthy as well as the poor. With washing machines available, why hire a laundress? With frozen foods and McDonald's, why cope with another person and her problems in the already tension-filled nuclear household? Besides, domestic work is considered menial by many, and perhaps rightly so, though I sometimes wonder if it is really any more menial than many jobs today.

But to me and others of that time, the help offered all the drama that was perhaps present in the extended family of the past and that was somehow missing in the rest of our lives. Because I lacked friends my own age, I undoubtedly sought their companionship more than most, and in the kitchen, the garage, the laundry room, the back stairs, their lives became mine. They shaped and influenced me—shaped and influenced all of us, I'm sure—as much as our teachers or parents or friends. It wouldn't work now—but it was great fun while it lasted. □

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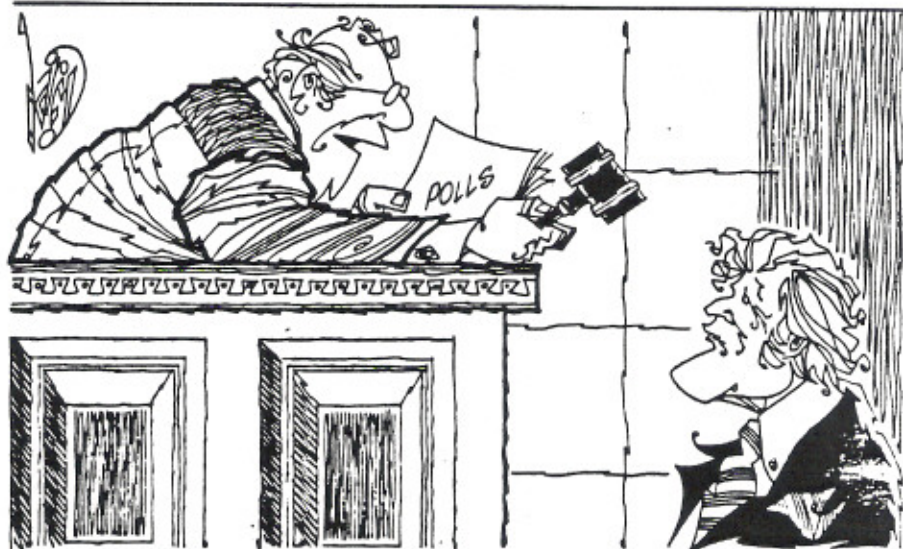
Buying a loaf of bread in 1920 Germany.



Saving for a wheelbarrow in 1980 America.



'Is Jerry still in the race? His Adidas just came back without him.'



'Ted Kennedy, many voters have charged you with untrustworthiness ... do you have anything ambiguous to say in your defense?'