

From The Sunday Times

May 19, 2007

Beware of the nanny

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What is it with men and their children's nannies? Last week we heard how Robert Hastings, 31, had dumped his wife Claire, 36, for Amy Hillier, the 19-year-old nanny the couple had employed to look after their three small daughters. The Hastings marriage was going through a rocky patch – the couple had been together for 12 years and had recently come back to England from Australia, where Hastings's business had gone belly-up.

Claire Hastings confided in the nanny about her marital difficulties: "I would tell Amy that I wanted to work things out with Rob and she sat there nodding and listening," she told a newspaper. Shortly afterwards she discovered that her husband had booked a pair of tickets to Amsterdam (top marks for originality), and that he was not taking her. She hired a private investigator who took pictures of Hastings and Hillier enjoying a "romantic weekend" in Holland.

"I'm a good mother," Claire Hastings said last week. "How could he prefer a 19-year-old bimbo to the mother of his children? I'm like a brood mare who's been put out to pasture."

And kicked out of the stable, to boot: on hearing of her daughter-in-law's impending divorce, Robert Hastings's mother Louise instructed her solicitors to send Claire Hastings an eviction notice (she owns the cottage the couple lived in). So that's nice: three sad children see Mummy kicked out by their loving granny.

It is a strange fact of life that most women – no matter how high-achieving, beautiful or intelligent – have, at the back of their minds, a worm of anxiety about their nanny and her effect on their husband. I know a number of women who insist on hiring only "plain" girls, which is somewhat missing the point (Jude Law, you may remember, had an affair with his children's averagely good-looking nanny while engaged to Sienna Miller, who is beautiful).

Men don't usually run off with the nanny because she is the dazzlingly gorgeous, leggy Swede of 1970s sitcom fame, but because she often represents an oasis of enviable calm in the inevitable hurly-burly of family life. She's not neurotic, she's not needy, she just smiles and gets on with it in a nonthreatening, noncompetitive, adorably feminine way.

There are other aspects, too. Such as the fact that the nanny has a life independent of the family she works for and this reminds the husband of his carefree bachelor days.

She gets dressed up, she goes out and has a laugh, she spends Saturday in bed with a hangover: if you're a middle-aged man waiting for a midlife crisis to kick in, all of the above are aphrodisiacs – especially if your wife, on the rare occasions you go out together, grudgingly squeezes herself into pre-pregnancy clothing that won't quite do up, says she can't be bothered with lipstick and could you please bring her home early, because she's knackered and knows she's going to have to get up a couple of times in the night to see to the children. Who wake up at six.

All of this is true and none of it is sexy. Contrast with the blithely unattached nanny, living the life all middle-aged men feel they still ought to be living, and you can see how a problem might arise.

But none of that is as potent an aphrodisiac as watching a nanny being good at her job. She arrives in the morning, smiling and serene, and immediately imposes calm and cheeriness where, 10 minutes earlier, there was only chaos and bad temper.

She scoops grumbling children up and they beam at her happily. She magically gets rid of the breakfast debris, the newspapers that have fallen on the floor, the toys strewn unphotogenically about the room.

The children's mother, meanwhile, is looking massively stressed even though it's only 8am. She's muttering about her car keys, about how she's late, about the ladder in her tights. There's a blob of marmalade on her jacket, which isn't helping her mood, and she has already shouted at the children twice. Observing all this, her husband can't help but notice that mornings are a complete nightmare until lovely nanny arrives.

Should he spend the odd day working from home, he'll also not fail to notice that when his wife is in charge of childcare, it's all a bit unplanned and organic, which is a nice way of saying shambolic.

The nanny, by contrast, thinks of fun, educational things to do with pipecleaners and homemade play dough, believes in “structured” play and cooks delicious, nutritionally balanced food. If it rains, she doesn’t grumble about it but makes a game out of wellies and puddles, and comes back happy and rosy-cheeked, not caring if the rain ruins her blow-dry.

As for the children, they seem blissfully contented, their every need catered to. The nanny never raises her voice, or snaps, or rolls her eyes, or says, “Can you look after them for 10 minutes? I need a glass of wine.” She organises sweet tea-parties, with cupcakes and apple juice – and, well, it’s domestic bliss, really, except this paragon is not his wife.

All men respond to this version of domestic bliss: there isn’t a man alive who doesn’t wish that when he came home his wife would be smiling and fragrant, freshly lipsticked, proffering a cocktail before a delicious homemade supper, after which she would declare herself not remotely too tired for sex – au contraire. I don’t know many men prepared to say this out loud but I know they all think it. And why shouldn’t they? I’d think it, too.

While the husband is gazing in wonderment at the dream-like version of family life being played out before him by the nanny, he forgets entirely that she is working – that is, she is being paid for all this energy and enthusiasm. Rather like the man who wonders why his wife can’t be as enthusiastic in bed as the prostitute he visits on business trips, some men genuinely fail to make the connection between being good at a job you’re paid to do and the drudgery real world.

Their imaginations run away with them: if they got it together with the nanny, they think, there would be pancakes for breakfast every morning and trifle for tea and the children wouldn’t be that upset because they love nanny.

If you mix all this up and apply it to the averagely happy, which is to say also averagely unhappy, family, the mystery of why men run off with what, to their wives, is a mediocre-seeming nonentity is solved in one fell swoop.

Men don’t fall in love with nannies but with the alternative world the nanny represents. Men are stupid that way. Any attached woman ought to bear it in mind.

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