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The Mummy Diaries

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We were all in the kitchen; I was clearing up after the children's supper, and my husband came home early. He hugged all the children in turn, reserving his most lingering embrace for the puppy, then turned to me with a strange light in his eyes – as if scanning a distant savannah for migrating wildebeest.

'I'm going to Africa,' he said. 'For work,' he added rapidly, as if I would otherwise assume that he and Iman were off on an undercover expedition to find the source of the Blue Nile or the fleshpots of Zanzibar.

'Are you?' I said, because I had by this stage cleared up supper, and was supervising the children's homework while threading a new pair of Persil-white shoelaces into my daughter's grubby

trainers. 'Great! When?' I continued, after a prolonged pause during which I kept trying and failing to push the lace through the mud-caked slit in the nylon.

'Tomorrow,' he said. 'I'm afraid I'm going to miss half-term.'

The children's faces fell, and I tried to summon the spirit of the Blitz for their sakes. 'It's all right, children, we'll have a lovely time on Exmoor – Granddaddy and Jenny will be there and all the Johnson cousins are coming,' I rallied them. 'When will you be back?' I aimed, in more direct tones, at my husband.

'Not for a couple of months, I'm afraid,' he said.

That news, I have to confess, did absorb my attention for a second or two (like many husbands, mine claims I never listen to him nor answer his questions. This is not strictly accurate. I do hear him, but I tend to answer him in my head).

After the wails from the children had subsided, he said that not only would he be away for the next two-and-a-half months, but he would also not be

returning to Blighty at all during his African tour, which has led me to embark, this week, on a long-overdue, royal-commission-style review of my domestic arrangements.

Which are as follows. Since around the start of the school year I have acquired a pet (a glossy black Labrador-collie puppy, Coco, of which an awful lot more later, I'm afraid – we're smitten), waved my nanny goodbye and lost my husband to the Kenyan general election. So I am 'flying solo' until the end of term.

(Oh yes, which reminds me of the last time I was flying solo, in Brussels. I once let slip to my landlord, a courtly Belgian baron, that my husband was working three days a week in London and Eurostarring between the two capitals. He looked at me and his face broke into an appreciative smile for the first time – we had so far shared only sticky discussions about the villa's volcanic drainage problems, referred to as '*la vidange*', up until my happy revelation.

'*Mais félicitations, madame,*' he purred, gallantly

air-kissing my wrist. Then, he was so moved by my words that he broke into English – another first for us. 'Many, many Belgian women, *madame*, I assure you, would envy you such a *tellement parfait* arrangement.')

Well, I can't pretend I am as *enchanté* as a proper Frenchwoman would be by such a prolonged stint of grass widowhood, but I am taking steps to make it tolerable.

My cleaner now comes, if not daily, a spoiling three times a week, and I write out her large cheque on Friday with deep gratitude. I have an adorable team of midriff-revealing teenage babysitters who allow me to leave the confines of my house every so often. My beloved mother comes to stay for one night a week, and has taken my daughter's hamster, Honey, off my hands, having rechristened it Honeyballs, after unilaterally resolving certain gender issues.

Soon, I hope to be in a position to tell you all about my trip to Wimbledon to pick up a new au pair from a Latin-American convent.

But, meanwhile, I have a serious crisis on my hands. It concerns Coco, the puppy.

It has proved not enough for my daughter that I have bowed to her dearest wish and agreed to have a puppy. Now, of course, my daughter's newest dearest wish is for the puppy to have puppies. (In this, she is displaying perfect consistency. After watching *Parent Trap* for the third time, I found her in tears. 'What is it, darling?' I asked. 'I don't just want a baby sister any more, Mummy,' she sobbed. 'I want an *identical twin* baby sister. Please!') As she – Coco the puppy, not the imaginary, longed-for identical twin for Milly – is already nine months old, the moment when all the dogs in the communal garden will be tunnelling into our house to 'marry' Coco will soon be upon us.

There are, at the last count, four 'intact' male dogs on the shared garden and all of them have shown lively interest in Coco, who is – though I say so myself – the Naomi Campbell of mongrels, with long black legs and eyes like molten caramel. And all the dogs' owners – my Notting Hill neighbours

and friends – have made it crystal clear that any issue from any union will be my responsibility, and mine alone.

PS This really is the last straw. My husband has telephoned from Kenya – for the first time since he left – with the sole purpose of instructing me not to spay Coco under any circumstances. Having issued that command, he said the call was very expensive and rang off. Did I really sign up for this? And how on earth will my new au pair – *Dios mío!* – cope with Coco's litter as well as mine?



According to my American corporate-wife friend Helen, who helps keep me abreast of key developments in the parenting and personal-growth industries, I am 'nanny-phobic'. She made this intergalactic pronouncement after I had a long

whinge about how tough it was being in so many places at the same time (last week there were two parents' evenings on consecutive days, scheduled in the 5–7 p.m. meltdown slot, coinciding with my daughter's art lesson and my turn to do the school run back from Hampstead). And I still haven't been to the Latin-American convent in Wimbledon yet to choose an au pair.

'I don't get it,' she interrupted after I had been rabbiting in this vein for some time. 'Get the nanny to give the kids tea, while you meet with the teachers. And trade days with another mom on the run.'

Now, I cannot pretend that I dislike the next line in my chosen script.

Delivering it, for some reason, makes me feel like a superior, almost saintly, being.

'But, Helen, I don't have a nanny,' I say, my brave sigh just hinting at the sacrifices I am making in my noble aspiration to be a more hands-on, full-time mom. 'With all the children in school all day now, even though Ivo's in Kenya and I'm managing All On

My Own, I just can't justify the expense.'

It is at this point, trust me, that Helen or whoever will cry, as if no one in the history of childcare had ever had such a blinding inspiration before, 'I know! What you need is an au pair!'

Helen is right. But after nine years of sharing the family home with a giddy succession of twenty-two nannies/mothers' helps/au pairs, I know all about au pairs. I have been there, and next week I'm going there again, to the convent in Wimbledon, but I can't pretend my heart's not sinking.

Like us all, I've had a few fabulous Mary Poppinses who still send the children cards on their birthdays and presents at Christmas, whom we can smugly claim are 'part of the family', but many, many more I would cheerfully strangle.

Anyway, my nanny-phobia extends beyond my own house. I'm even more phobic about other people's nannies. I go into a terrible decline if I discover that someone has managed to keep a good one (all my good ones went) for more than nine months, which was my absolute personal best

(and I kept her for that long only because I was a first-time mother and told her she didn't have to work in the mornings, babysit, or do any housework).

Other mothers always seemed compelled to confide in me, as I shared my latest nanny crisis (I should explain this was when I worked in an office and had no choice but to hire nannies, lots of them), that they were 'terribly lucky'. I would be told how this other mother had had her Mandy for four years, and now Mandy had her own flat round the corner and Mandy had decided not to be a nursery-school teacher or neurosurgeon after all but, instead, to devote her entire life to looking after this mother's children, because she was 'like, so involved with the kids now' or 'couldn't bear to leave the baby'. Generally, I'd find it helpful, during the course of this gruesome smug-a-thon, to put my hands over my ears and shout: 'I'm not listening! I'm not lis-te-ning!' or pretend to cast around for a blunt object.

So, while my burn rate with nannies is legendary,

everyone else, of course, seems to have the magic touch with help. My sister-in-law, for example, has managed to keep the same nanny for eleven years, and I have often told her that her achievements as a top barrister and mother of four enchanting, well-mannered children pale in comparison.

The strange thing is, now that I now longer have nannies but am going for the au pair option imminently, I feel I've crossed the floor. I'm on the side of nannies, now. I mean, have you ever listened to a mother who has decided – after weeks of kvetching to their girlfriends – to give their nanny the boot? It freezes the blood in your veins.

I have known mothers to sack nannies for losing their house keys ('And you simply won't believe what she did yesterday,' you will hear them screech down their mobiles righteously). For leaving a baby alone for two minutes while they whiz to the loo or for making just one phone call or sitting Junior in front of *The Fimbles* during their 'working hours'.

And I also know a charming couple who went

away just before Christmas, leaving their au pair (remember, they earn a thumping £40 'pocket money' a week) house and dog-sitting what the family had been assured by the dog pound was a three-month-old, spayed rescue puppy.

On Christmas Eve, the family pet made a whelping pen of the father's study and festively produced a mega-litter of ten puppies.

Rather than lounge about the house with her boyfriend, as she had planned, watching DVDs and drinking their way through the wine cellar as any self-respecting au pair would have done, the poor lamb had to spend a merry Christmas knee-deep in soiled newspaper with a hanky over her nose, holding the fort, until the family returned from their three weeks in the Caribbean.

I heard this story from the father so I know it's true. 'And the new puppies weren't as much fun as I've made them sound,' the father admitted to me. But he was still whingeing about the fact that the 'wretched girl' handed in her notice just three days after their return from St Barts.