

# Jewish Girls and African- American Nannies

Listening in on a profoundly loving and complex relationship the world ignores

In the last issue of LILITH, we put out a call for Jewish women who, as children, had had close relationships with African-American nannies or housekeepers. (We knew this was in some ways a politically verboten topic, despite the focus of this year's best-selling book, "The Nanny Diaries.") The response surprised us, not only because so many women contacted us, but because the timbre of the e-mails, phone calls and hastily penned paragraphs was urgent and emotional. The women spoke of love, gratitude, loyalties, regrets, guilt, and the complexities of race and caste in these powerful, often primary, relationships. Even women whose families had only weekly household cleaning help reported complicated feelings around these relationships. Every woman LILITH spoke with commented that this was the first time someone outside their families had taken seriously "a connection that so potently informed my life," as Laurie Gunst, from Dubois, Wyoming, put it. "I've been waiting to talk about this," Gunst explained, "for a very long time."



"Thank you for triggering my memories of Mercedes," wrote Joanne Drapkin of Bandon, Oregon. "I haven't thought about her for literally decades. I shared a bedroom with her for two years when I was five to seven, yet I don't even know her last name. My mom would know, but she passed away. I have no idea how she influenced my life, but I'm positive she did. She was kind and so comforting, and I know I loved her. I wish my family had valued her enough to stay in touch."

"There aren't words to describe what Dorothy [Faust] has meant to me," Arlene Hazelkorn of Scottsdale, Arizona, wrote. "She has given me unconditional love for the past 44 years. As a child, I sometimes wished I could live with her full-time instead of with my family. Her house was my refuge. I felt very honored growing up with her, going to church, having her as part of my life."

"Jacky Classens saved me, actually she saved all of us," wrote Vivien Schapera of Cincinnati. "My brother's behavior was unusual—he cross-dressed and was gay—Mom and Dad fought all the time, and I was an 11-year-old former insomniac with daily headaches and stomach aches. Jacky stilled our angry voices, cooled our pain and patched our broken hearts. Where did she find the strength?"



Eighteen-month-old Laurie Gunst  
with Rhoda Cobin Lloyd,  
Richmond, Virginia, 1950

Clearly, LILITH hit a geyser with this topic, in part because so many women were eager to talk about the African-American women who were hired to “live in” or “live out”—often a woman who was “our family therapist,” or “the one who taught me morals and values,” or “my sternest critic and my greatest defender,” or “the mother who walked me down the aisle at my wedding”—but also, as Annette Ravinsky of Turnersville, New Jersey pointed out, because “nobody ever asks us about these intimate relationships which are so devalued,” yet can be so profound.

Indeed, African-American female domestics and even nannies have inhabited one of the lowest rungs on the sociological ladder in America, and their relationships with children—especially girls, who seem to form much more intimate bonds with them than do their brothers—has spawned a literature so scant that it’s disturbing. Yet up through the 1950s, being white in the South meant that you were very likely to have a black domestic in your household; the sheer numbers of them created a caste that harbored valuable and almost exclusive knowledge of the workings of two deeply segregated cultures, a caste that shuttled back and forth as community caretakers, and that was often “despised” by other African-Americans for its “weakness in conforming with

what whites wanted,” as Susan Tucker puts it in *Telling Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South*.

Lillian Smith, in *The Killers of the Dream*, says of her own early relationship with a black domestic, “I knew, but I never believed, that the deep respect I felt for her, the tenderness, the love, was a childish thing which every normal child outgrows. I learned...that the human relations I valued most were held cheap by the world I lived in.”

In the interviews LILITH conducted, certain themes echoed and recurred.

Many Jewish women harbored discomfort and even shame over how “one-way” their relationships had been. “I always felt guilty that I didn’t know more about Scotty’s family,” said Rachel Kadish of Brookline, Massachusetts, of Isolyn Scott.

Some of this ignorance, of course, is part and parcel of childhood: the world revolves around us, and we are largely blind to whatever doesn’t. Many women regretted that they didn’t start asking anxiety-engendering questions about race and caste and their own privilege—or even about whether their nanny had children of her own!—until they were off at college, when it was often too late. These relationships often had no continuity built in—no ongoing contact with nannies’ families, often no knowledge of their current addresses. None of the white women we interviewed (except one) had ever asked their nannies whether their parents or grandparents or great-grandparents had been slaves or sharecroppers. (In our interviews with the domestic workers, all of them spoke of forebears who were slaves), and the question upset several women “because,” as Arlene Hazelkorn put it, “I feel appalled that it never occurred to me to ask.” Race was a taboo household subject in the memories of the women with whom we spoke, and only Judi Samuels, of Newton, Massachusetts, remembered how her nanny had reacted when Martin Luther King was assassinated:

“Mattie Pearl [Winkler] was in mourning,” Judi said. “She wore crepe and had a button with his portrait on her clothes. Those were dark days; she was in that devastated state for a long time. ‘What will be the hope for us?’ I remember her saying. That’s when I realized, for the first time, that Mattie had an ‘us’ that didn’t include me. Just like, I thought, our family’s having the T.V. tuned to news about Israel all the time maybe didn’t include Mattie.”

Another set of feelings that some women mentioned was, as Samuels put it, “some ambiguity about whether I was allowed to have this love relationship,” or, as another informant (requesting anonymity) said, “being anxiously aware of the fact that I preferred Louvenia [not her real name] to Mom,” though a more universal feeling was that any loving non-family adult in the household was an out-and-out gift to

Scheuer children, "The Golden Rule. It covers most situations."

The white women we spoke with lacked a social or historical context for some of the more universal behaviors of their nannies. In the book *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940*, Elizabeth Clark-Lewis makes it clear that "training" was critical to young women whose race shut them out from virtually all avenues of employment besides domestic work. "Training" meant learning how to cook, iron, make beds and care for younger children, and the white women I spoke with emphasized that their black caretakers, more than their mothers, insisted that they learn these skills and, in the words of Hazelkorn, "do my household jobs every day." Most white women we spoke with also described their nannies as "a combination of strict and loving." All talked about their black caregivers' "toughness," "strength," and "endurance," without more broadly contextualizing these traits as fundamental

to generations of African-American "mammies" or domestics (not to mention slaves) who needed these abilities to survive abject poverty, chronic anxiety about the safety and well-being of their own children, and unboundaried work that often left time only for Sunday church, and sometimes not even that.

Our Jewish informants also made a distinction between their biological mothers who were "busy and running" and their nannies, who would, as Samuels put it about Mattie, "always sit down. If Mattie was cleaning or cooking and we had something we wanted to tell her, she would sit down. I learned that from her and it's been invaluable: If someone has something to tell you, sit down."

*White mothers were nearly universally remembered by their daughters as having importantly modeled loyalty, generosity and respect towards their domestic help, and of that being, in Elizabeth Scheuer's words, "a profound lesson." (Not one person mentioned her father in these discussions.) The employer's generosity was often, in fact, extraordinary, and a singularly Jewish aspect of it was an insistence that the domestic become educated.*

Samuel's grandmother told Mattie that "if she was going to be a member of the household, she would have to get her G.E.D." Drapkin, who remembers almost nothing about her nanny recalls that "there was a bookcase on Mercedes' side of the room. I remember that," she said. "My parents believed in reading." And Imogene Ferguson of Brooklyn remembers "Mrs. Brodsky treating me like a daughter and insisting I go



Mattie Pearl Winkler and Judi Samuels

any child. "Jacky was a 'safety valve,'" wrote Schapera, and Kadish said simply, "For a child, any grownup outside the family is necessary fresh air."

*All of the LILITH readers with whom we spoke mentioned how important religion was to their childhood caregivers or domestic workers, and the latter concurred. Most read the Bible daily, all "praised the Lord" in regular conversation, and almost all attended Sunday church, often with little white girls in tow.*

"When I stood in line 41 years ago trying to get a day job that paid more money," explained Lucy Johnson of Washington, D.C., "the woman ahead of me said, 'When I stand in line, I ask God to help me.' When I heard that I stepped out of the line, because I knew God was going to help me *with or without* the line. I bought a *New York Times*, answered an ad, and I've been walking with God in the Scheuer household ever since."

Linda Byard of Yellow Springs, Ohio, remembers Mrs. Harris (she never learned her first name) warning her "during a moment of my impertinence, that her Bible was my Bible, and I better shape up. While Mrs. Harris helped unwrap the Passover dishes, she also told me that the Passover story was her story. At the time, I could not think why she would tell me this," writes Byard, though the comment ultimately "stayed with me and is something I don't forget." "Let the day's own trouble be sufficient unto the day," Isolyn Scott used to tell Kadish. "Scotty had a difficult life, but she always said, 'Why worry when I can pray?'" Mamie W. Jackson used to tell the

to school. She enrolled me in OceanSide High at night. I was the only inkspot there so she would sit in the back of the class with me. When we got home I would lie on her bed and she'd go over my homework."

Perhaps the most lasting and uncomfortable impression that stayed with us after listening to so many Jewish women talk about their intimate relationships with their African-American caretakers was that we Jewish women ourselves don't derive much self-esteem from our mothering; rather, we derive it from our educational degrees and our employment outside the home. Indeed, we ourselves seem to have internalized a devaluing of motherhood. Nearly every Jewish woman we interviewed talked about the difference between their biological mother's "expectations"—getting As in school, competing in extracurricular activities, practicing a musical instrument every day, training for a profession—and their nanny's "unwavering support and unconditional love, whether or not," as Scheuer put it, "I got a C+ on a quiz." But only the nannies echoed Dorothy Faust: "I just knew I loved those children without a doubt, it's just something God put in me. When you open your heart to children you tap into the deepest you, it's a well of love."

LILITH doesn't presume, in the narratives that follow, that our informant pool is either broad-based or representative (or that, as white interviewers, we didn't skew the response)—after all, these are women, both white and black, who wanted to talk to us about intimate relationships in their lives that have been lifelong, loving and even, in some ways, transcendent. Perhaps the most moving sentiment we heard was Rachel Kadish's in relation to her nanny, Isolyn Scott:

"When you love someone," Kadish said, framing her sentiments carefully, "you want to see the world from their point of view. Perhaps that is Scotty's most enduring gift to me."

Here are the stories of a few of the many women who responded to LILITH:

Judi Samuels, 53,  
Newton, MA

"Although my mother taught me many things that got me through life, Mattie Pearl [Winkler] taught me how to love. She never called me Judi, she called me Judidarlin'—that's the essence of the relationship. We were each other's darlin's.

Mattie came up from the South in 1940, she was 17, without any schooling and barely literate. She had left her baby back with a sister or grandmother. She stood outside a supermarket in Flatbush [Brooklyn] to see who was carrying the most bundles, because that person might need household help. That's how she first came to live in my maternal grandparents' Orthodox home and take care of my hasidic great-grandfather, Zayde Dovid. Mattie was devoted to him, she learned some Yiddish so she could talk with him, the two of them had a very strong relationship. She also took care of my mom, who was

only four years younger than her, and my mom's brothers.

I know my grandparents paid her well—they had strong feelings about unions and workers' rights. My grandmother used to say, "You never pay a person without paying Social Security"—that was a law. They also couldn't bear having an illiterate in the house, so they made Mattie go to school and get her G.E.D. She was a family member and they expected her to behave that way, to read books. My grandmother also always assumed the Mattie was entitled to have a life. Mattie was a devout Baptist; on Sundays she'd be at church.

When my mom and her siblings were grown, Mattie moved out, married a wonderful man, Willie, brought her son Bobby up from the South and had a regular life. She worked for my grandma, then for my mom, for my uncles, for my father's cousin Sol, for my *zayde* on the other side of the family, even for our rabbi (my father was the Hebrew School principal). I remember the rabbi helping Mattie with things (like getting her a safe, affordable apartment) many times over the years. Everyone loved her, in all the households.

I would tell Mattie things  
you wouldn't tell your mother  
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were making out with a guy.

Mattie was very patient, and she kept us in line, "Do your homework." She was physically demonstrative, hugging and kissing and giggling and touching. Everybody trusted her with their "souls." My brothers adored her and would tell her secrets. I would tell her things you wouldn't tell your mother—if you got your period, if you were making out with a guy. I considered her the most "real" person in the household—there was no affectation, she wasn't worried about what other people were going to think. She was "other"—my eye into the other—she was the only black and poor person we knew, she was a different class, she was the only person I knew who wasn't automatically educated, and she was *really* Christian. She was also brave and tough; she had left the only life she knew to live with strangers and learn a new culture. I loved my mother—she was creative, bright and devoted—but I was grateful I could have Mattie in another way, like having an affair. It had nothing to do with how much I loved my mother.

One year at *Pesach* (we didn't ride on *yontif*; so it was always at our house; my grandmother would be at our house for five days cooking), Mattie appeared suddenly in a white uniform. The uniform was her idea. She would bring one or two sons to help; she knew everything about *Pesach*. I was a teenager, and I thought, "My God, this looks like slavery!" I was in an enormous tumult in my brain, I was thinking we better not talk about what this seder is about! When the seder was over my grandfather—I adored him, I never thought ill about him about anything—took all the wine from half-drunk cups and poured it into a container, and put it aside for Mattie to take home. What was going on here? "What is that?" "Mattie will be so grateful to have it." I didn't understand. Alcohol, dis-cards—I thought it was black stereotyping. "People spit in that

wine," I told my grandfather. "You think these people like spat-upon wine? We put our fingers in it! Why don't we *buy* her wine? There's a whole bottle we didn't open." My eyes were open—I thought we all had an equal relationship, but maybe the rest of my family didn't think that. For the rest of my life there was a taint—my grandfather who I adored.

*My grandmother used to say,  
"You never pay a person without  
paying Social Security."*

I started to hang out with Mattie's son, Alan. I'd call him on the phone. It was to get back at my grandparents. He was different. He was really handsome, in that forbidden way, we both had frizzy hair, he was sexy, he came from a different world. I told him how much I loved his mother. "Well," he said, "You have her all the time." It was my coming-of-age. I realized I *did* have her, and that meant he *didn't*. I felt terrible. I hadn't thought of her a lot as Alan's mother, shlepping all those hours on the train, living in the projects. No wonder Alan got in trouble. No one was there to guide him. I had two mothers, and he hardly had one. I had everybody, and my grandmother. I was rich in relationships. I felt very very bad about it, so bad.

I had one fight with Mattie when I was nine. I was so respectful to her, but this day the doorbell rang and I yelled up, "Mattie, can you get it?" And she yelled back at me, "Judydarlin', I'm an old woman! *You* go get that door!"

When I used to dream about my wedding as a young girl, there wasn't a groom; the love story was about Mattie being my matron of honor. But there was a ruckus about this for various reasons, and it didn't happen. I was very distraught.

Time passed, Mattie got older, Alan married a nurse and they had a deaf child. My mother, who's a speech therapist, did for this child like her mother had done for Mattie—this child belongs to *me*; I can help in a way no one else can. Mom constantly advocated for this daughter, opened doors for her, used her influence to get her into Lexington School for the Deaf. At all times, Mattie's family and ours felt like an extended clan, a weird extended clan.

Well, my first marriage ended, I had 3 children, and when I was 44, I was about to get married again. I'm paying for this wedding myself. I can do what I want. "Mattie, I want you to be the matron of honor at my wedding." It was the most remarkable thing in my life, my life came full circle. At the *bedeken* [the unveiling], it felt like I was "coming out," like I could proclaim to everybody there that I have this love, this essential part of me. Mattie and I, we were finally like two adults. It was fantastic.

A few years later, Mattie died. Her funeral was a Baptist Homecoming Service. She was dressed in a wedding gown in an open coffin, they lifted her body up to greet the Lord. Everybody was happy, she was greeting God.

All these women came over to me, I was sobbing my eyes out. "Are you Molly Winter [my grandmom] who's done so much for Mattie? Are you Betty [my mom]? Oh, you're

Judidarlin'!" I was inconsolable, all these women were so worried about me. They did testimonies; I learned so much about Mattie's life, her rich life in the projects. She had this role at church as the woman who fed the poor. She had taken in this young man who had been completely strung out on drugs, she made him live with her. Mattie had taken on this whole retirement career; I didn't know anything about this part of her life.

The last time I saw Alan was at my own father's funeral, two years after Mattie's. I made sure Alan was notified of the death just like a family member. He made an enormous effort to come; he came back to the house just like family, and then one of my uncles drove him home. It was very important to me—as I was there for his mother's funeral, he was there for my father's. We were still an extended family.

So this is Mattie. If she hadn't been black, it would have felt different. We never talked about race, but I had some kind of identification with her world, and an affinity we had was that we were both very religious. I was very very proud that my family took care of her. Religion was huge to her, she was such a fulfilled person—it just oozed out of her. Mattie rounded out my life, and gave me a part of my life that I wouldn't have had otherwise. I didn't have to show up at shul or get an A on my report card. Mattie and I were so complete. I couldn't wait to talk about her.

*Arlene Hazelkorn, 45,  
Scottsdale, AZ*

*"My earliest memory is of going to Dorothy's house—I used to go for days at a time. I was the little white, Jewish girl who attended Dorothy's all-black church regularly. Unc [Dorothy's uncle] was the minister and Aunt Eva prepared the "oneg." Dorothy's daughter Eleanor treated me like a big sister. I mean I *lived* over there—Dorothy's house was my refuge.*

My mom and I struggled in our relationship. I used to want Dorothy to tell me what it felt like to work for my family, but she wouldn't talk about that; she feels it's dishonoring of them. All she'll say—like about one of my brothers—"Well, he's a different character, Arlene." I know Dorothy and I are closer than she and my brothers are.

*When I got into high school,  
it was harder to see Dorothy  
ironing for us.*

After my brother died, when I was two, there was a lot of blame, a lot of guilt. My father blames my mother—she was driving—but it's all unsaid. Mom blames herself. The loss of a child...your parents aren't available to you after that. Dorothy got to see *everything*, what the death of a child can do to a family. She was a stabilizing figure, a rock; she was going to be there no matter what. No one in my family ever mentioned my brother's name (my siblings still won't), and as a girl I used to

debate this, did he really exist?—I was so little when he died. But if I brought it up, my mother would cry.

When I was five, Dorothy got married and I went to the wedding. Afterwards I was crying and crying because they had to go on their honeymoon. I expected to go home with her. Dorothy always made sure she was given respect in our household; she took good care of her own needs. She wasn't a maid—we were not to call her that. She was the one who raised me, and she was proud of what she did.

When my father would come pick me up at Dorothy's after a weekend, Eleanor would run and hide because my father was the "bad man" taking Arlene away from her. God, I didn't want to go home with him either! It was safe at Dorothy's; there wasn't craziness going on there—Cousin Peaches lived upstairs with her daughters Lottie and Dottie.

Growing up, Dorothy let me be me. She has no judgments. She was serious, though, about my household responsibilities—like she wouldn't make my bed. She showed me how to make hospital corners. Every day when I make my bed I think of Dorothy. When I was in high school (it was the 70's), I would smoke pot. Dorothy would just say, "Arlene, open the windows, your mom's going to be home soon for lunch."

My parents were major supporters of Martin Luther King, very liberal. I remember at the pool I'd see the black women sitting on the side, I'd think, "Thank God my parents don't make her come to the pool and watch me." When I got into high school, it was harder to see Dorothy ironing for us. She was there to take care of *me*, but I didn't need that anymore. I felt uncomfortable.

I'm a lesbian, for 16 years I've been in a relationship. I've never told Dorothy—it doesn't need to be said—but she *always* says, "Say hi to Beth." To me, Dorothy was an example of a strong female. She didn't have a lot of men around her. She would comment about black males, that they're not to be trusted, that they're no-goodniks. I saw her function on her own

without a man; she worked, she parented, she was self-sufficient. She's still running a little day care—that's her karma.

I feel very honored that I grew up with Dorothy, going to church, having the experiences I had with her. She is a woman filled with love; there aren't words enough to describe what she has meant to me.

When I think of Dorothy and her house, well...I would have been content to stay there my whole life.

*Dorothy Faust, 64,  
North Chicago, IL*

*"I started working for Arlene's family when she was one year old—her brothers were in school already—and taking care of her was my main job. I would put everything down—cleaning, ironing, I hate cooking like God hates sin—to take Arlene to the park, or be there for whatever she needed. She wasn't spoiled, she was a good child. It was a big relief to the Hazelkorns that I loved those children without a doubt. I shopped time after time after time for Arlene, I'd go to the stores and just get little outfits. I'd dress her up and let her run around the house in her pretty dress.*

It meant a lot to me that the Hazelkorn family was very fair and liberal, they were such good people—some white parents wouldn't let their kids come home with me [to a black neigh-

*I was paid according to the pay at that time.*

borhood]. I was paid according to the pay at that time. I would get extras; I never felt I was taken for granted. They were like my family—when they were in trouble, I was there and vice versa. Arlene's brother was killed in a car accident when Mrs.

Hazelkorn was driving him to the dentist; that was a hard time for all of us, that hit us all like a rock. It was unbelievable that that child wouldn't come through the house and slap me and say, 'Hey, Dorothy!' I got closer to all of them then to help them mend. Over the years, whenever they burned a Jewish candle to remember their son, they would also light a candle for me, because I saved Arlene's life for having taken her home that day. That child always wanted to come home with me.

Kids have always taken to me, even when their mom is sitting right there. When I ran a daycare, I had a waiting list at all times. I yell at them, but it's all in love. I don't scold them hard. Children are more sensitive than a parent gives them credit for, and they do a lot better when somebody outside the family loves them and will do for them.



*Mamie W. Jackson with Scheuer family*

The world is wiser and wickered than it used to be, one person will hurt another without thinking twice; that hurts me.

We've been together for so long, Arlene and me, been through so much, and whenever she comes up, I fix her elbow noodles, Creamettes, with American cheese or butter. As Arlene grew up, I grew with her. You got to grow when they do—it's very painful. Arlene is my oldest child. Everybody knows.

Annette Ravinsky, 42,  
Turnersville, NJ

*"My immigrant Grandmom Sarah first found Miss Lula [Lula Cochran] going through garbage on the street—this was in Philadelphia in 1919 or 1920, and Lula was homeless and hungry. She had come up from South Carolina. Grandmom took her in and Miss Lula stayed with my grandparents for 50 years, until Grandmom Sarah and Grandpop Abe died; they left Lula enough money to live on for the rest of her life. Lula always called my father "my baby" (my Grandmom worked, Miss Lula is the one who raised him), and I thought of her as my grandmother. She never had family of her own.*

Lula was born in 1897, and we buried her in the oldest African American cemetery in America—Eden cemetery in Springfield, PA. It's beautiful there. After she died, my mom and I used to visit her there a couple times a week. I'd get really emotional at her grave. Miss Lula always kept a big black Bible on the kitchen table, and that's where we'd talk. If I had any problems, we would talk and talk. She would sing when she was working, like in the kitchen, "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel"—so growing up, I thought spirituals were Jewish songs. When Miss Lula had errands to do, she would take me along.

I'm interested in genealogy, and I include Miss Lula in our family tree. But when I tried to find out about her biological family, all I could track down was her death certificate, and all it said was "mother's name unknown," "father's name unknown." African Americans actually didn't get birth certificates in those days! It makes me sad. I feel like Jewish genealogy and African-American genealogy have similarities—records were destroyed or not kept at all. The only people who can trace their genealogy with a lot of ease are Protestant Americans.

Growing up, it seemed like the people who gave me the most attention and love were big, heavy-set people. My parents were big; they would always hug me. Miss Lula was a really big woman, and she always gave me a really big hug. I associate big people with love and comfort and all that good stuff. I have negative associations with being skinny—when Miss Lula and my father got skinny, it was because they were sick. They started wasting away, and then we realized they were dying.

I have such feelings of love for Lula. This might be offensive to some people, but whenever I see a big black woman all dressed up beautifully, walking down the street on the way to church, I always feel that love.



Dorothy and John Faust  
Inset: Arlene Hazelkorn, age 3

Imogene Ferguson, 57,  
Brooklyn, NY

*"I came up from Greenville, South Carolina when I was 17. I was 15 when my first child, Janice, was born, and I was working in a white restaurant. At that time, they didn't allow black women to be waitresses and be up front, you were in the back. If the white waitress isn't there, you have to take orders, but you're not allowed to take the tip. My boss wanted something sexual—they do stuff to black gals, you have to be careful to keep yourself out of the way of white men. My aunt was very upset, we didn't know what to do. I went to an employment agency; they had three jobs: I picked New York because it was the only place I ever heard of.*

My girlfriend Laura and I cried and cried on the bus—we started crying and we cried all the way to New York. My first family, the man comes into the bathroom, "My wife isn't here." I said, "Forget that, I'm leaving." There was nowhere to go! Mrs. Cohen and Laura came and got me, and Mrs. Cohen talked her girlfriend, Terry Brodsky, into taking me. Terry didn't need me, her boys were in college.

Terry and I cleaned together. Washing windows, I'd wash from inside, and she'd wash from outside. She used to dress me beautifully; every time Mr. Brodsky brought back something (he worked in the garment district)—blouses, slippers for Terry—he brought me something, too. When Mr. Brodsky was away, I would sleep in Mrs. Brodsky's bed. You could not tell me that I wasn't her child.

Terry said, "If you're with me, you're going to go to school." She enrolled me in Oceanside High at night. I was the

only inkspot there; she would sit in the back of the class with me. She always told me I was smart. She found people for me to work for—ironing, babysitting—she needed to approve of where I went because I was like her daughter.

Papa and Mama Mandel, they were Polish Jews. Mrs. Mandel didn't speak a word of English, but when I was sick she'd make me chicken soup and put a wet cloth on my forehead. Poppa would tell me about the pogroms, he would start crying, stories about the soldiers coming in and raping the women. He was trying to tell me that he understood about slavery because it happened to him. He would stroke my cheek and say something in Polish.

I used to cry all night because I had left Janice, my baby. Mr. Brodsky said, "What can we do to stop this child from crying?" I didn't want to say "I want my baby," so I said, "I want a red dress." The next day Terry bought me a beautiful beautiful red brocade dress. I also had a white silk dress that moves around my legs like Marilyn Monroe. What 17 year old has a dress like that? Mrs. Brodsky tried so hard to give me self-esteem. She was the first person in my life to tell me I was pretty.

Well, I fell in love and got stupid. I wanted to bring my baby to New York, and James said he was going to marry me and we

could all live together. It was past bad. He was abusing me, he isolated me from everyone, he never wanted me to go to Mrs. Brodsky's. He ripped the phone out of the wall. I was pregnant with twins, and he literally beat them out of me—they both died. My hearing is gone from him kicking me in the head.

I went to the Brodskys two or three days a week to do day work, but really I went there to cry and have my asthma attack and for someone to love me.

Terry tried to get us to counseling. I would pretend I was cleaning and go to a friend of hers for counseling myself. For a number of years I went to the Brodskys' two or three days a week to do day work, but really I went out there to cry and have my asthma attack and for someone to love me. When I didn't have money for food, she would have her brother—he owned a supermarket—bring groceries to me. That period with James was so bad, he wouldn't let me be in touch with

## Thoughts for the Now-Grown Girls... An interview with psychotherapist Katherine Jungreis, Ph.D., L.I.C.S.W.

The African-American nannies described on these pages are clearly very beloved women, but they also arouse some feelings of guilt and culpability on the part of white family members. Even if one's family treats the domestic worker fairly and well, being white makes you inescapably a part of a larger race-challenged society where whites' feelings towards blacks are laden with discomfort and a certain sense of responsibility. Also, Americans don't know how to *do* service class: We're informal as a culture, we don't easily acknowledge differentials in power—so this becomes a source of uneasiness, too.

Add to this the developmental piece (the fact that children who have nannies will generally, at some maturational point, feel themselves to be better educated, and headed towards more privileged futures than their nannies), and the Jewish piece—that having liberal religious values and a honed sensitivity to oppression creates its own identifications and tensions. And what do you have? Well, these intensely intimate relationships going hand-in-hand with some potent "non-discussables." The white women in these pages didn't talk about race (or class) with their nannies—big surprise! Most Americans don't talk about these things, and that's simply reflected in these relationships.

Children's relationships with their nannies are like those we have with our therapists—it's this odd combination: very intimate on the one hand, yet one-sided, lacking in mutuality. The love between nanny and child is true, but the nanny (like the therapist) knows the other's *whole* universe, while the child knows little of the nanny's. For kids, this is appropriate—only as we grow up do we begin to understand that adults are people with their own lives and perceptions and desires. *Of course* children love these women! Who doesn't want a "mother" who always puts our needs first, and who is less powerful than we are? Also, Mom and Dad, appropriately, have larger "agendas" for their children, whereas the nanny is free to be like the caring aunt or loving grandparent. Nannies have a perspective that's outside the family system. That's so relieving for a child. One's nanny or housekeeper doesn't have the authority of our mom, so she's also much less scary.

Those of us who had nannies often still idealize them, seeing them as "perfect"—their full selves or negative parts of themselves either blocked out or not experienced with any emotional force. The curious piece here is that at the time that children begin, developmentally, to *de*-idealize parent-figures and to take in the notion that grownups have many "sides," the need for the nanny in the household

decreases and by then often she's gone. Our emotional memory gets frozen in time.

If we could go to our childhood nannies as adults with curiosity about their full lives, it would be a gift. What's it *like* to be black—and for some, poor—in this country? What was it *like* to take three trains home in the winter, to have our mothers give you our old, chipped dishes, to see me have a lot more advantages than your kids? We want to hear that we were the greatest joy in our parent-figures' lives, that the caring was done totally without ambivalence or cost. Can we stand hearing that *both* are true: the love, and also the difficult parts? that if our beloved childhood nanny hadn't been, say, black and poor, she would have chosen very different work? Can we talk about why our culture perceives domestic childcare as demeaning? Can we ask our domestic worker what, in her estimation, comprises being treated "well" and what hurts? Can we redress the regret we feel that even though we were kind to our childhood nanny, even though we loved her (and she loved us), we knew hardly anything about her everyday life, what it was really like to *be* her?

If, as adults, we have the luxury of taking care of a Mamie Jackson or a Mercedes With-No-Last-Name or a Terry Brodsky, then, in some way, indeed, a line has been crossed. They have genuinely become family.

anybody. I know Mr. Brodsky died, and Terry got re-married, and I know she moved to New Haven, Connecticut. But then I lost track of Terry.

Eventually I turned my life around. I got my G.E.D., I graduated from Brooklyn College. I had five kids. I found a wonderful husband. I'm a political activist—I started out with the Equal Rights Amendment as a feminist; I was the only black in the League of Women Voters; I worked all kinds of political campaigns, voter registration drives. I just retired as a case-worker for welfare. I started on welfare, and I ended on welfare. I spend my quality time at my Baptist church. During the week, I have to talk to God in snatches, but on Sunday I can tell him all that's going on.

If I'd stayed in the South, I probably would have ended up in a factory. My mom was a domestic for one family for 15, 20 years; my grandfather and father were sharecroppers, then they worked in an iron foundry. I'm one of 10 kids. My great-grandmother was born in slavery. It's a caste system down there in the South.

If I could see Mrs. Brodsky again I'd probably have a real heart attack and drop right here. I have furniture she gave me 40 years ago; these dishes I've carted around for years—I knew someday I'd have a beautiful home, and I'd have the dishes. She taught me all about chopped liver, how to set a table. I sat at the table for seders; holidays were wonderful for me. I loved Terry Brodsky.

Next week I'm moving to a 90% Jewish retirement community; I'll be the youngest one there. I'm an activist and the people down there like it, they can smell it. I know what racism is, I know it in all its forms, but I can't afford anger and bitterness—it stops me from going where I want to go. I believe we are all children of God and that's because of Terry Brodsky.

I'm very proud of knowing Mrs. Brodsky, and I'm very proud of having come from nothing. I would give money for her to know I was all right now. I just always wanted her to know what a good job she did with me, fostering my development,

giving me an education. And guess where I was this weekend? at my daughter Janice's bat mitzvah! She's 43. She married a Jewish man; they give a lot of charity. All my stories about Terry Brodsky...I'm sure she had something to do with that.

*Rachel Kadish, 33,  
Brookline, MA*

*"The first thing I want to say about Scotty [Isolyn Scott] is that she walked down the aisle at my wedding, like a fifth grandparent. My brother had Grandma on one side and Scotty on the other. This was very important to me.*

Scotty "lived in" five days a week, and when we kids would get home from school, it would just be us and her and her "stories" on T.V. Sometimes Scotty would give us advice, which would always be religious-based. When she first came to live with us, her own kids were grown with families of their own—if they hadn't been grown, that would have felt very difficult for my family. Before Scotty came to live with us, actually, my parents had hired a nanny with a toddler. The

*Scotty was definitely a counterweight to Jewish women. She was always telling us to relax more and have more fun.*

idea was that Pierre would grow up with us, too; we had a good school system. The nanny treated me and my sister, though, much better than she treated Pierre, so it didn't work out. With Scotty sometimes the gap in our circumstances complicated things for me; I often felt guilty.

Scotty ate her meals with us, though at first she was very uncomfortable with this. She had worked for a family before us where she had been more like a servant. If we were arguing with my mother, she'd kick us under the table, "Don't start in with your mother." We didn't talk about race at home, but we did talk about politics. Scotty never chimed in.

She was definitely a counterweight to Jewish women. She was always reading the Bible, telling us to relax more and have more fun. She doesn't put up with any crap, and that feels different to me than the "good Jewish woman" model who always "makes nice" in the family, and never says No. She was a constant and sane presence in my life and family; there was a steadiness to her.



*Lucy Johnson with Elizabeth Scheuer's brother and mother*

Scotty's very frank and direct. When she's on my voice mail, it's "Scotty called," click. "You're putting on weight," she told me once when I came home from college. If my parents had been that blunt, I might have felt hurt or angry. You always knew when Scotty disapproved. She's also very sharp—in a different world she would have done very different work, I think, but she was at peace with where her life had taken her. She's a realist. Growing up with her, her outlook, to me, felt incredibly healthy. She's an amazingly joyful person, and she's had a difficult life. She has the most wonderful laugh, she sings when she laughs.

In high school, I didn't "outgrow" Scotty at all; to the contrary, I always wanted to know her opinion about my friends, and later my boyfriends. When I told people I was engaged, they all said "congratulations," but Scotty said, "Are you ready?" I appreciated that—she knew about life and she knew about me. When I said "yes," she said, "Then I'm really happy." I think she loves me, she tells me so. She's proud of me, she laughs at me sometimes, which is fine and good. My brother and sister and I are "hers;" she's proprietary.

Scotty was definitely not the only black person in my life—at my public school, my principal was black, my civics teacher was black, 25% of the kids were black. At college, Toni Morrison was my adviser. My whole life I've had enormous respect and curiosity and comfort with the black community. It feels important to me to build bridges, and I know Scotty has something to do with all this. When I was in college, a speaker once came to campus; he was pointing out that everyone is racist. "If you're in trouble," he said, "would you go to a white man or a black man for help?" I thought, "I'd go to a woman over a man. And first I'd go to a black woman. That's where I'd feel safe."

Joanne Drapkin, 52,  
Bandon, OR

"After World War Two, my parents bought a nice house in the suburbs-to-be [Hollis Hills, New York] and part of bettering themselves was that my father was expected to get "the help," so Mercedes was hired, and she and I shared a room for two years. Moms stayed at home in our neighborhood, but my mom found her life so isolating. She was a brilliant woman who ended up yelling a lot out of frustration. I remember she was always busy, busy, busy, and I was glad there was someone else to pay attention to me. Dad worked in the city six days a week, and was never home.

We were spoiled kids; my father designed Roy Rogers' guns and holsters, and I actually rode Trigger and met Roy. We had every toy imaginable. Mercedes and the Macklers' nanny were definitely my only contact with African Americans for years to come. Their skin was very black; they were beautiful and exotic. It's hard for me to believe that I don't even know Mercedes's last name, that I don't have a photo, that I somehow didn't ask my mother any of this while she was alive. If I could conjure Mercedes up, I'd want to know, "Were you okay living with us?"

Here you were dumped into this white family—for all I know you had children of your own." I would definitely want to say, "Thank you for all your love and care."

I have only two memories from those two years, both as vivid as if they had happened yesterday. One is of waking up screaming and of Mercedes coming right to my bedside. I was surrounded by fireflies and confused as to how they got there. By my pillow was an empty jar; obviously the holes I made in the lid were too large and they all escaped onto my pillow. I remember Mercedes quietly taking the bugs, one by one, and gently placing them back into a jar. There is something extremely magical and extremely comforting about this memory.

The other memory is of my parents being in Europe for a month, and by the end of it I was ready for my mother to return. I remember yelling at Mercedes, "You are not my mother and I don't have to listen to you!" I still feel badly that that might have hurt her.

Lucy Johnson, 77,  
Washington, DC

"I've lived with the Scheuers for over 40 years. My great-grandmother was a slave, my grandmom had 16 children, my granddaddy was a coal miner and a minister. Daddy was in the coal mines, too, and was a deacon—when you come from a coal mining town, that's as big as a black person could be. Mom was one of the first black women that graduated from West Virginia State College. She was a schoolteacher. But then the mines had closed in West Virginia, and we just didn't have the money. I only finished high school. I married too early and had five children and left my husband. I hit rock bottom.

I didn't have options as an African American, being poor—the only thing was to work for some rich family because the agency would pay your fare to New York. Like any mother, it was hard to leave my children, but I knew I would be sending money back, and we needed that money. My mom took the kids. When I left I had a child 18 months old. He was crying. If he'd been asleep, I'd have felt better. But I knew I'd be sending money home for those children.

My aunts they did domestic work. After awhile, it felt like I would do the same thing. So that's how I was a domestic worker from the start. All the people I worked for, natural they had money. I knew what I was getting into.

Well, first I worked for the Rothschilds, I was there for six months. I was doing \$35 a week. If I walked the dog, they added two dollars a week. They should have been paying me more. That was one of the poor Rothschilds. So I answered Mrs. Scheuer's ad, and she said, "No children." I told a big lie to Mrs. Scheuer.

In the summer, Mrs. Scheuer was away; they traveled a lot, and I was just like the Mama when she wasn't there. I brought my children to help out in the summer home; I was supposed to be their aunt. My daughter would forget and say, "Hey, Mom." Well, after two years, I confided in one lady who worked at the summer home—that's how the story got out.

I was taking some things from the sun porch and Mrs. Scheuer was working in the flower garden. Judge Fein's wife said, "Which one of the girls is yours?" I felt cold and then hot, I didn't know what to say. I told her the truth.

Mrs. Scheuer was broad-minded. I was just lucky. Every time I turned around, she was giving me a bonus. My children was independent; they took care of themselves—they didn't resent my taking care of white children. My daughter came to us when she was 13 and she stayed for three or four years. My granddaughter Jackie was six years old and she stayed with us for five years. I had another daughter and son who came from Cleveland and stayed six months. Mrs. Scheuer had asked me about them. "How is everything in Cleveland?" And I said, "You'll see them, they're here." Now that was nervy. I just thought, "I'll bring them home." The Scheuers always had enough room for all of us. We lived right across the street from Washington Cathedral.

Now Jackie, she didn't know any different—she thought the Scheuer kids were her sisters and brothers. It was one big family. You can't feel like you're really family, I just felt like Mrs. Scheuer was my best friend.

I never had an attitude about black and white. In West Virginia, there was more white kids I played with. Once, these playmates were with other white kids, and they started singing, "Nigger, nigger, black as tar. Can't get to heaven in a white man's car." I just feel like people just didn't know, they just repeated what they learned from their parents. I brush it on over. Educated white people are quite different, I think.

To me, I felt the Scheuers were big shots; they got to be bigger shots as the years went on, then he was an ambassador—it made it very nice. I liked that they celebrated everything, too—Chanukah, Christmas, everything. I had a blessed life. I'm a great believer in God helping me. God just sent me here.

Elizabeth Scheuer, 48,  
Riverdale, NY

"Our first live-in nanny came from the South, she wore a white uniform and took great pride in having a profession, she had business cards that said "Mamie W. Jackson, Licensed Maternity Nurse." She came for what everyone thought would be one or two months (when my oldest sibling was born), but ended up staying for eight years, until my youngest sibling—there are four of us—was born. Then she retired. After that, she still spent summers with us for many years (my parents only came out to the summer house on weekends—Dad was a member of Congress and traveled a lot; Mom maintained her business in New York as an interior designer). For the last years of her life, Mamie still managed to visit a couple of times a year for two weeks or so at a time. When she came, she'd do lots of accrued mending.

She had limited education, but she taught me more about morals and values than my parents did. She was strict about manners, and rights and wrongs, but she also unconditionally

When I came to New York for law school, Mamie was old, and our roles reversed. I would do things to look after her. Can I buy you groceries? How's the chemo?

loved us. There was a lot of mutuality in the relationship between Mamie and my siblings and me: there was respect and loyalty on both sides, and real tenderness.

When I came to New York for law school, Mamie was old, and our roles reversed. I would do things to look after her. Can I buy you groceries? How's the chemo? She lived in a housing project at 106th Street and First Avenue, and I saw her often, taking the bus across Harlem. Mamie had lost a daughter at Metropolitan Hospital (before we knew her) and she always said, "Whatever happens, don't ever let me get taken to Metropolitan!"—but she had a stroke and that's where they took her. The first thing my sister and I did was have her transferred to Columbia-Presbyterian.

She died of cancer shortly before my wedding—she was 83. In retrospect, I wish I had known more about her life, more about her family, but I guess the relationship was more just about love. I told her many times that I loved her.

When I was seven, Lucy [Johnson] came to our household, too, as a housekeeper/cook, and she still lives in my parents' home on a more-or-less retired basis. Lucy was the person who raised us—we all refer to her as our "other mother," my brothers call her Granny Lucy. We weren't very Jewish, but I do remember my mother once, uncharacteristically, hosting some Jewish women's group, and one of them asked something about being kosher. My mother apparently had a blank, baffled look on her face, so Lucy—she's quick—jumped right in: "Those are the meat, the others are the dairy," she said, pointing randomly to some china. Lucy often says, "You've done so much for me" (my siblings and I paid for her dental work; she loves to travel and we've sent her on many trips over the years—a cruise to Alaska, a trip to visit us in Israel, many trips to the flat that we maintain in London), but we always answer, "You've done so much for us." There was mutuality in my parents' and Lucy's relationship as well—they could unqualifiedly rely on her, and she could depend entirely on a comfortable home, a safe haven. My parents helped Lucy's granddaughter (she lived with us) through private high school in Washington, and she went on to Vassar, my mother's alma mater.

I don't think Mamie's or Lucy's being black brought special things to our relationships—my grandparents had two live-in Irish women for 30-40 years, and I've had an English nanny, Janis, living with us for 18 years (she has no children of her own), and for the last eight years also a lovely Brazilian housekeeper with her child, Gabrielle, who's now seven. My two younger kids think of her as close to a sister.

To some extent, I am, yes, replicating my childhood. I want my four children to have the gift we had of our housekeepers' and nannies' love. My last child's middle name is Lucy. Being able to do that was so important to me. ■