

I WANTED TO BE BEAUTIFUL

I wanted to be beautiful. She was beautiful. That was the first thing that came into my head when I saw her. You are beautiful. She was also wearing these amazing snakeskin Prada boots. Her feet—ha. Her feet were huge. It made her look goofy. I liked her goofiness. It made her different. It looked good on her.

On my first day as her nanny, one of the mommies at the playground joked that we were spouses (because we were there together while her husband stayed at home, looking at Facebook), and I told her, “No, I like men. Always for me, men. Men, men, men, men in my history, no women.” Orlando Bloom is my perfect man. Or, ha, anyone from Australia.

Her answer was to laugh (she laughed like a horse, so funny) and say, “I’m married, I swear, I even have a ring to prove it!” That ring was huge. It was a huge square-shaped diamond. I hated that ring. It symbolized her richness and my poverty. That ring was the huge ugly space between us.

. . .

My roommate Maria got me the job. She asked her boss, who said said, “I think I know someone.” This is how everything in New York works. Someone knows someone who knows someone. I had heard (from where, I could never remember—was it a poster on a bus?) that your employer could help you get a visa, so I hoped this “someone” was one of those employers.

When I entered that apartment for the first time, from the elevator, her personal elevator, I thought: I want this. This is what I want. I want an apartment just like this and I want to be that beautiful woman in the kitchen, even though I could only see the back of her at that moment.

The apartment looked like a page out of the issue of *Vogue* I had just been reading on the train. For one moment, I thought I would show her the magazine (maybe it actually was her apartment in the magazine?) but I didn't do that. I wanted to play cool.

She had Jackie on her hip. She was on the phone. When she turned to face me, I saw she had a nice face. Very red lips, very blue eyes. She nodded at the couch. I went to sit there, and I watched. She swayed her body so Jackie wouldn't cry. She wore black jeans and a pink top—magenta was her favorite color, it must have been—and her hair was like a mermaid's: long and so many shades of bright blonde, going down her back like a waterfall.

She walked into another room. I looked around me. Red velvet couches and potted plants by the windows. Outside, all the pretty buildings, gathered like friends.

She came back with a bigger boy. Both boys had her icy yellow hair. The three of them reminded me of a family from space, or Finlandia. Icy yellow hair, pale icy skin, icy blue eyes. They also reminded me of the wax people at the museum in Times Square, where I had just taken a photo with the wax Orlando Bloom.

"This is Herbie," she said, about the bigger boy, "And this is Jackie," she said about the little one. Her voice was very loud.

“Hi Herbie, como estas?” I spoke in Spanish because being a bilingual nanny is a very good thing. Herbie turned away from me. Children are so annoying. I would have rather done something else, but this job just fell onto me, and I needed money to survive New York. “Herbie,” I said, “are you hiding in your mama’s legs?” When I said this, my face got *rosada*.

“Oh, thank god you speak English! The last woman who came barely spoke a syllable of English! Ah!”

“Of course I speak English. This is America.” I heard my Salvadorian accent when I said “America.” Next time, I would say it more slow-ly. I didn’t tell her I had basically learned English from chatting with people in chat rooms online. That’s because I had big dreams, bigger dreams than my friends at home. If someone had asked me then exactly what my dreams were, I don’t think I could have answered. I just knew I wanted to be like this woman, who people thought was beautiful because of her beautiful things.

“I know! Why don’t the rest of your people know that?” She laughed. “No offense.” She ran a hand through her hair. Her hands were as big as her feet. She—herself, her body—wasn’t too big though. She was normal size, same size as me.

“No problem,” I said.

“This is so good! You can talk to the housekeeper. She doesn’t understand anything I say, it’s bad.”

“Sure.” I shrugged.

“Great!”

“Where are you from?”

“Kansas,” she said.

I did not know one thing about Kansas, so I kept my mouth shut.

She stared for a long time. Inside her eyes, I was not sure if she was mysterious or dead.

Herbie made a noise. Our attention turned to the boys. That’s how it is with children: your attention is always in two places.

“Herbie, can you say hello?” Herbie didn’t move. “Herbie?” She began to sing, “Herbie, Herbie, Herbie, Herb.” It was to the rhythm of the ABC song. I thought it was very nice that she did that.

During the interview, she didn’t ask me very much about myself. She said she liked to hire people based on a vibe, and she thought I had a good vibe. I didn’t know what that meant until I went home and Googled it. In the moment, I had said, “Great.” Thank God that had been the right reaction.

During the interview, she also gave me the facts. “Here are the facts,” she said. Jackie was eighteen months, Herbie was four. Herbie was named after his father, Herb. Jackie wasn’t named after anybody, but wasn’t it a cute name? Yes, I said it was very cute. She would need me to work every weekend from 8 am to whenever they got home if they went out. They went to a lot of events. It was “exhausting,” but it was also “part of the deal.” She said it was like Spiderman. “Power comes with great responsibility.” They owned an investment strategy business. I didn’t know what that meant, but if it bought you an apartment like this, then it sounded good to me!

She had other nannies during the week. Five nannies total. Maybe I could fill in for them sometime, based on my schedule. She had fired the last weekend nanny because the woman didn't have twenty dollars cash on her. "Everyone in New York should have twenty dollars cash on them at all times! Unless they're homeless! What if we have another 9/11? How are you going to buy a water bottle?"

Yes, I said, of course. She said, "Do you have twenty dollars on you? Open your purse, let me see." I didn't know if she was joking—it was very hard to know with her. She laughed always, but was not funny or happy in her laughter. I showed her my money. I counted it all. "Forty three dollars," I said. She said that was, "Good, very good."

I had been waiting for her to notice my Marc Jacobs bag. I put my wallet back in. The shiny gold label was pointed in her direction. "Is that real?" she asked. I had spent three months working for it. "Yes, it's real, of course. I love fashion," I said. I took the *Vogue* out. "See?"

She touched the leather. "I might have this one. Maybe," she said, "I can't remember. Too many bags! I can't even remember them!"

Then, she was interested in my jeans. "Are those Citizens?"

"Yes," I said. "The high waist."

She pulled the fabric at the knee. She had no problem touching other people when she wanted. "You're wearing, like, hundreds of dollars worth of clothing. You might be too rich to work here!"

"No no no no," I said. But I hoped that soon, I would be too rich.

She would pay me \$13 an hour, which wasn't so much ("You're *really* going to have to save for that next Marc Jacobs!"), but, if she was going to help me get a visa, she would have to help pay for the visa, so I said yes yes thirteen is fine! I had heard your employer could help you get a visa here, but I didn't want to mention it to her yet. Waiting was a better plan. I would wait six months.

The boys were quiet. She said, "Where is El Salvador anyway? Herbie, can you ask her?" Herbie didn't say anything. I said it was next to Honduras. She said, "Can you ask her where Honduras is?" I said, "Next to El Salvador." That made her smile. Her teeth were white, even though I thought one of them might be dying because it was grey at the top. She said I was "clever."

I kissed the boys and told them, "Nos vemos el Sabado." I thought she winked at me, so I winked back.

I was so full of hope then, I probably imagined that wink.

Then, I thought if we owned the same bag, she would see me. She would see we were not so different. Women. Close in age. Yes, born in different countries. Yes, God had given her more—more beauty, more whiteness, more money. But, I was like air. Like particles. I would exist in her space and become part of it. The red couches she had chosen, the plants she had bought, her baby's bottles, her golden hair. All of these things would become my life. Her life would become my life.

. . .

On Saturday, at 8 am, I showed up blond.

Before, I was a sentence. Now I was a highlighted sentence.

“Holy shit,” she said, “is that a wig?”

Herbie and Jackie were watching cartoons in the living room. The TV was on so loud.

“No,” I said, “it’s my hair.” I listened to myself say “herr.” Next time, more slow-ly. She didn’t look like she liked it. I had to know. “You don’t like it?”

“No, no, I like it, whatever. I mean, you look like a drug dealer, but who cares!”

“Honey?” It was the Dad, Herb, calling from the bedroom. He was as loud as she was. “We need to get tickets to Palm Beach. Have you gotten tickets to Palm Beach?”

“No, Palm Beach sucks! I don’t want to go there!”

I laughed. My laugh made her smile.

When Herb appeared, my first thought was: a Russian doll who looked like Santa. Short, round, old. This meant she had not grown up with money in Kansas. This meant she was more like me than I had thought.

“Let’s go to Jamaica or something!”

Herb shrugged like it might be okay with him. He took his computer to the couch. He lay down, put it on his belly, and opened it. Herb only put himself into positions where if he closed his eyes, he could sleep for hours.

“Mommy, I’m hungry,” the little Herbie said.

“Talk to the person who takes care of you,” she said. “This is your new nanny.” She pointed at me. Her hand was shaped like a gun. Herbie didn’t blink.

To me, she said, "I just don't *enjoy* the Mommy stuff, shoot me." She sighed. "I'm doing my make-up, you feed them." I watched her walk away. She wore a pretty dress. I would have worn a dress if I weren't working. It was the perfect weather for a dress, she was right.

I found Herbie a granola bar in the cabinet, and I put milk in a bottle for baby Jackie. I put them in their strollers, and sang to them in Spanish while I put on their shoes and socks.

At the park, we put the boys in swings. Jackie in the baby swing and Herbie in the big boy swing. I liked Jackie better. He didn't talk.

"Do you *enjoy* the park? I just don't *enjoy* the park."

I shrugged.

This was when the mommy said, "Are you spouses?" and I said men, men, men, men, and she showed her ring.

When the mommy, who was round and wearing unflattering stripes walked away, she said quietly, "I'm sorry, but how can you be fat and live in New York City?"

I laughed and shook my head. "You are funny," I said. "Too honest."

This made her very happy. She liked compliments. Her favorite was when you told her she looked good. She smiled. In the sun, I could see the powder on her skin.

After the park, we went to have lunch. She spoke to me through speaking to the children. "And then, Herbie, your new nanny will take you to lunch at Whole Foods, or anywhere, I don't care. And Jackie, she'll check your diaper every two

hours or whenever it smells like shit. Then she will take you home to nap, Jackie, while Herbie does art—“

“—no art!”

“Or reads.”

“No!”

“Good luck with that,” she laughed. “Also, we have a security system in the house, so I can always check on you through the cameras.”

“That is funny,” I said.

“Oh, it’s not funny,” she said, “I’m dead serious.” But she laughed. She did not look dead serious. “And when you’re out, I want pics. Pics of my boys!” She touched Jackie, then Herbie on the head. “Do you have an iPhone?”

I took it out and showed her. I wanted her to say something about my background photo (of a beach near my hometown), but she did not.

“You have an iPhone, it’s a miracle!” We were standing in line at Whole Foods. The man on the speakers was saying, “Register fourteen, register twenty-two.” She said, “You’re like so much more advanced than your countrymen! Or women! Whatever!”

On the walk home, through their cool New York City neighborhood, where everyone looked like a model or an actor, I saw my blond hair in the reflections of the store windows.

These were the stores from my magazines.

And this was a woman who shopped at those stores.

As we pushed the same brand of stroller down the same street with the same color hair, I wondered who could tell the difference between us. Our feet moved at the same time. Like together, we were one horse. For a moment, as I smelled the cool air and noticed the orange leaves on the sidewalk, I forgot she was even there.

. . .

Herb the Russian doll was exactly where we had left him, but now he had takeout boxes all around him on the couch. He opened his eyes when he heard us.

“Honey?!?”

“Honey!”

“We need to get ready for the event!”

“The event?!?”

“Mitch’s thing and then the fundraiser!”

“Honey!”

We parked the strollers. “You can put Jackie down for his nap and play with Herbie in the playroom,” she said.

Same as in the morning, she did not give the details—for example, which room was Jackie’s?—but I thought this was because she knew I was smart and she trusted me. I unstrapped the boys. She went to her room. I saw she had left her diamond ring on the counter. I was smart. I could be trusted.

I turned on the TV for Herbie while I put Jackie to sleep. Afterwards, I sat with him and watched. Thomas the Train.

It was then that I saw her ugly side for the first time. She opened the door quickly, walked across the room quickly. She was wearing all black. Black fabric was in the air behind her. She was like a bat or a witch. She turned off the TV. "It's art time," she said. "Remember, I can see you." She pointed to a camera, a real camera up high on the wall, and left.

What had changed? What had changed? She was like a different person. I wanted to cry. We did art. Would the camera notice I was crying? She hated me, she hated me. What had I done? I needed her to like me. I needed a visa. I needed a rich man. Orlando Bloom!

Later, Jackie woke up. We had dinner. Pasta and broccoli. There wasn't much food. I saw there was another camera in the dining room. And another one in the kitchen, and another one by the door. She texted me, "Pics please!" I sent pictures of both boys eating. I had to take so many to get two good ones. Children are always moving. She responded, "Cute!" Her exclamation mark relieved me. Good, she was happy again.

I put the boys to bed. Eight o'clock seemed like the right time. Then, I waited. And waited. Where was she? I did the dishes, I wiped the counters. I imagined her at a party, watching me on the cameras with her iPhone. With those cameras, she could have been watching me all the time. The thing was, I never knew.

I ate pretzel chips behind the cabinet door so the camera in the kitchen wouldn't see me. I noticed she had taken back her ring. I pretended to read a book in English and closed my eyes behind the book. At one o'clock in the morning, they came home. I rushed from the playroom to the door.

“How were my boys?” she asked. Her voice was so nice, so sweet. She had turned back into the original woman I had met. She smelled like perfume. I felt confused.

Herb said nothing to me. He went to the couch and opened his computer.

“Very good. We ate some pasta and broccoli.”

“Oh good, you fed them *greens*?” She smiled.

“Yes,” I said.

“Great job today,” she said. She put her purse on the counter and sighed. “Oh, we had so much fun at the benefit. I wish you could have been there with the boys. Next time, maybe we’ll bring you.”

“Yes,” I said. Maybe I would meet a man there.

“Well,” she touched my arm so gently, “get some rest. We’ll see you at eight.”

. . .

Seven hours later, I came back. In the morning, she left us forty dollars and said, “We’ll be gone all day. Take them out, they get bored at home.” She wore riding boots, her hair was in a ponytail. “And Lupe is coming,” she laughed, “you can make a native friend.”

I didn’t want any native friends. Especially not if they were like Lupe.

Lupe reminded me of a wolf. She had black hairs coming out of her chin, and grey hairs growing by her ears. I think her teeth were even pointy.

Lupe was lazy. She told me she did what a lot of Latinos do. She pretended not to speak English so she could work less. To everything, she said, "Yes." Yes, yes, yes, yes, even though what she really meant was, "I do not care what you are saying to me."

She called our boss La Fea. In English: the ugly. When I asked why, she said La Fea was black inside. Like a black aura? No, Lupe said, La Fea didn't even have an aura. She was just black inside. I didn't want to ask her if La Fea had gotten her a visa. She might be jealous if I got one, and then she'd want one, too, and I would get the blame.

I did everything right for the cameras. All the time, I was performing a little bit. When we went to the park, she wrote, "Where are my pics!?!?" I sent pics. She wrote, "Amazing!" So she was happy today. It was this type of happy person who would help me get a visa. The witch person would definitely not help me get a visa.

That night, they got home at midnight. I was pretending to read the same book in English. I went, again, to the kitchen to meet them.

"How was your night?"

Herb went to the TV. She took her pink scarf off and sighed. "Stupid people should be killed."

I nodded to show my sense of humor.

She took off her ring and put it on the counter. "Let me pay you," she said, tying up her hair. I couldn't wait for my hair to be that long. Herb turned the TV on loud. No one asked about the children. She went into her room and came back with

cash—hundred dollar bills, there must have been a safe in the bedroom—and handed it to me.

“How was Lupe?” she asked.

“She was okay.”

“Okay?”

“She left socks in the kitchen.”

“Where?”

I pointed generally at the kitchen.

“Gross,” she said. “If she does it again, maybe I’ll fire her.” The elevator came.

“Well, have a great weekend!”

Lupe hadn’t left socks anywhere. I don’t know why I wanted to get her in trouble. Why did I want to get Lupe in trouble? Because she was a gross old immigrant housekeeper and I would never be a gross old immigrant housekeeper. She was making all of us look bad.

. . .

The next weekend, I came in my riding boots and my pink scarf, but she wasn’t there. Only Lupe was there, and a note: “Here’s forty bux. See you tonight.”

Lupe gave me advice about being an immigrant. She told me where to buy cheap groceries in Queens. Stupid Lupe, I didn’t live in Queens. I lived in Washington Heights! She also told me not to buy any more expensive purses. She told me to save

my money because crazy people like La Fea fired people like Lupe and me all the time.

“You and me are not the same,” I said.

Lupe the wolf shook her old head as she continued to Swifter the floor.

. . .

When she came home that night, she wore a zebra-print belt. The next day, I wore a zebra-print belt. I waited for her to comment on this coincidence, but she did not.

For weeks, it went on like this. I barely saw her. She left us money and went out all day. We communicated in text messages. I texted her pics, pics pics so she felt involved in the lives of her children. Even though, when she came home, she was usually so tired, she forgot to ask about them.

Lupe did tell me one true thing. At this job, you just had to survive. I was learning ways to survive. In the morning, I put the children in different positions in the park. Usually I did: on the swings, at the picnic table with a snack, drawing with chalk, and the slide, but only if it was a cloudy day because the slide was not in the shade. All the pictures had to be in the shade. Otherwise, La Fea might recognize the light of morning. When she texted me, “Pics!!!” I sent her the pics and pretended we were at the park when we were really at the Whole Foods cafeteria for hours, or at Sephora buying make-up.

We were alone a lot. One thing I did not expect was to love the children. They were very annoying, yes, but we spent so many days together, I began to care for them. La Fea seemed the most excited about her boys when she told me, “I’m going to take them to Africa.” Of course, they didn’t know what Africa was.

La Fea was such a hard person to understand. Sometimes, she was so nice, and other times, she was terrible. One day, after she got mad at me for making all the broccoli—“What kind of person makes this much broccoli!?”—even though she had told me to make all the broccoli that morning, I went to the bathroom with my iPhone and Googled the disease that splits your personality into two or more. She might have had this disease.

I cried many times in that bathroom. I thought about quitting many times. But: the visa. I had to wait six months. And I loved her boys now, and I had gotten used to the airy smell of her huge apartment. I liked the plants by the windows, and the red velvet couches she had chosen, and I even liked the soft brand of tissue she bought for the bathroom, even as I used it to dry my tears.

. . .

Finally, six months passed. I waited for a happy day to ask about the visa.

La Fea’s response was: “Oh, are you joking? Because you must be joking.”

Was she joking? Why was she laughing?

“No, I am dead serious,” I said, to use her expression.

“How would I possibly get you a visa? People don’t just *get* visas. I’m not the President!”

I began to cry, right there in the kitchen with her. I thought she might hold me. Or at least give me one of her expensive tissues. She did not. My tears did not move her. She was wax.

I went home crying. All week, she didn’t text me. She didn’t care how I was.

When I came back to work, she wasn’t there. It was just Lupe, who said, “What were you thinking? Are you on drugs, girl?”

I felt so stupid. I had misunderstood everything. Why had I thought she could get me a visa? Had it been a poster on a bus? Or had I imagined it?

“If we never get visas, why are we here?”

“To suffer like idiots.”

“It’s not fair.”

Lupe said, “Your hope has made you blind.”

There was the view: of New Jersey out the beautiful windows, and closer, Lupe with the Swifter, and closest, on the counter in front of me, between two plants Lupe had moved there to clean, her sparkly diamond wedding ring.

I took the boys to the park. I took all the usual photos. When she texted me, “Hey Visa girl, send pics!!!” I sent the pics.

When she texted me, “Why aren’t you home for naptime? I don’t see you on the cameras!” I responded: “We are invisible.”

She never answered.

When they came home, at two o'clock in the morning, they woke me up. I had been working for eighteen hours. I went to the kitchen.

"What was up with that weirdo text you sent me today?"

I thought she would be more angry. No, she was laughing. She did not take me seriously at all.

I had her hair. I had her Marc Jacobs bag. Her riding boots, her Citizens, her pink scarf, the same Burberry long-sleeved shirt she had. She said nothing about this.

So I did. I said, "Do you like my outfit?"

While she filled a water glass, she said, without looking at me, "Do you think I haven't noticed that you buy the exact pieces I own?"

I was shocked. My English came out badly. "I owned some of these things before I ever met you!"

She blinked many times, like there was something stuck in her eye. She sipped her water. "Whatever," she said. "Also," she pointed her gun finger at my head, "I think you should dye your hair back. This isn't working for you."

I was still thinking about how I had owned that Marc Jacobs months before I ever met her! But it was useless to say this, and useless to defend my hair. I was also worried I would say "herr" again.

I said, "Can you pay me please?"

"You're being really weird." She sighed and tied up her hair as she walked to her room. Herb the Russian doll turned on the TV.

I looked out the windows at the lights of all the other windows, in all the other buildings. Together, they looked crowded and unhappy.

She came back out in her bathrobe, her expensive silk bathrobe. She handed me the cash.

I said, "I quit."

"Another one bites the dust," she said. "Give me your keys."

I had been ready for this part. I took her keys out of my pocket. I had already detached them from my keys. I handed them to her. She nodded. She put them on the counter. She looked at the counter, at the blank space that was there now.

I walked around her. I pressed the button for the elevator. My heart was beating.

The elevator came. I got in. She put her hand against the door so it wouldn't close. She looked at me for a long, long time. She said nothing. She looked at me right in the eyes. She was in there.

It was not until weeks later that I understood the look she gave me. When I called Lupe, crying—what was I going to do? I needed a job to survive New York!—Lupe said, "So you tried to sell the ring and you found out it was a fake." I said yes. It was worth nothing. La Fea always left it. It was a test to all her workers, and I had failed the test.

Lupe got me a job. Cleaning. Cleaning the apartment of a rich bitch who never sees her children. She is a different kind of bitch than La Fea—La Fea was prettier. Sometimes, when I'm home alone, Swiftering, I will remember the last time La Fea

looked at me. How she was in there, and how she saw me. She knew exactly who I was.