

A nanny-splendoured thing

By Ruth Ostrow

"DON'T scream or we'll shoot. This is a hold up," my sister and I yelled in deep voices, standing at the front door of our home, as our nanny, Katrina, fell to the floor shrieking with terror.

We had stockings over our heads, balaclavas on top and were dressed in long coats that we'd found in my parents' closet. Under the coats were bar-stools to make us tall and ominous. In our hands we clutched convincing toy guns.

It was a moment of exhilaration for two young girls only just into their double numbers. Pure bliss as the adrenalin of power pulsed through our veins. It didn't last. Katrina dobbed us in to mum and we were whacked around the legs with a tea-towel and dragged into bed by our ears.

As we should have been. The hold-up was only one of many cruel torments we had inflicted on the young woman. The week before we had balanced books on top of her bedroom door and watched them crash down on her head. The person who wrote that little girls are made of sugar'n'spice never spent a night in our house.

Which is why we had Katrina in the first place. Our mother, desperately struggling to regain some control over her life and her four less-than-angelic kids, had decided to get a nanny or a "live-in" as they were called in the 70s.

And after a long string of failed attempts, Katrina arrived like Mary Poppins to save us from ourselves. She was a gentle, reliable country girl and she stoically lived with us for many years, becoming a much-loved, if slightly shaken, member of our family.

I've been thinking about her and the others lately, as I go through my own struggle to get control of a life that includes a family, a busy career and, since moving to a country homestead, a massive, new and unforeseen workload. Which begs the question: Is it time to get a nanny?

A lot of my girlfriends have them. It's tres chic nowadays for working women to get a girl from interstate or overseas to come and live. Free rent and food, plus a small allowance, in exchange for light nanny duties before or after school and a bit of domestic help.

But as a gaggle of young women parade their credentials in front of me, I remember mum complaining that before Katrina came along, her nannies were harder work than her kids.

And I also remember why. Our first nanny, Aileen, was a state ward. She was one of the largest individuals I had ever seen. My mother took her on out of pity, for here was a woman who had been badly hurt by life.

She filled up every room. She had the biggest lips framing the fattest, whitest teeth in the world, and a smile that oozed so much good cheer that it hit you over the head and knocked you unconscious. Or maybe it was her breasts that

knocked you backwards: wobbling, confronting watermelons fighting their way out of a plunging neckline.

At any rate she was so voluptuous, she smothered every object she came in contact with. The vacuum cleaner was like putty in her large hands. Within moments of her using it, it had blown up. She had no idea of spatial relationships, bumping into things, breaking two of mum's vases in a week. As her bottom swiped the record player, she scratched dad's favourite Glen Campbell record.

Things were always exploding or crumbling to the floor in acts of bizarre clumsiness or self-destruction, and I remember the day she squeezed her gigantic form through our front door, tears streaming down her lonely face, and the guilt in mum's eyes as the taxi took her away.

Sadly, I was too young to appreciate her pain and show her real kindness. But if I learned nothing else from the experience, it was -- in my middle-class haven -- what a ward of the state was, and what it meant to be truly alone.

The next few girls proved even more troublesome. I remember a rather greasy-haired, bedraggled woman with a hygiene problem, who used to smoke in bed and one day set the bedspread on fire.

One girl was a runaway who had lied about her age. My parents didn't know it until five solid, Italian farmers -- a man and four sons -- stood at our front door carrying boxes and boxes of peas. They left the peas and took back our nanny who was hiccupping and sobbing all the way down our street.

Feeling we needed discipline, my parents hired a statuesque central-European woman called Helga. In the evenings when my parents went out, Helga would smoke long, thin cigarettes, show me dirty magazines she had hidden in her suitcase, and tell me about women who loved other women.

I was about 12 and I learned everything there was to know about every kind of kinky sex act from Helga. Until one day, my parents, who could never understand how an immigrant girl on a low salary could afford a mink coat, found her magazines. Apparently she was in many of them.

When I look back now, I can laugh at the craziness of it all. Those strange girls reeking of perfume or peas, their make-up strewn all over our bathroom, telling tales about their foreign worlds. I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

From a child's point of view, it was a great education. I learned about lesbians; STDs; orphanages; milking cows; Prague; malaria; Erica Jong; horses; and incest.

I was exposed to things my parents would not have wanted me to be exposed to, which opened my eyes and made me a broader, more aware, more tolerant human being. I wasn't cloistered from reality like so many of my peers.

And history will repeat. For I have chosen a lovely woman to expand our world. Gentle, intelligent, exotic. She is Malaysian Chinese. She cooks interesting food, has many stories to tell, and at night I find myself curled on the couch listening, as if I were a child.

My own child is sitting there too -- wide-eyed, hearing things that are new and challenging, savouring difference.

It is always hard, opening your home and heart in trust. We're all riddled with fear. And perhaps wisely so.

But from experience I've gleaned that letting new and unusual people into your life is a risk worth taking. It's where growth, expansion and learning reside -- for both mother and child.

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