

The Good Nanny

BENJAMIN CHEEVER

“The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life or of the work”
--William Butler Yeats

Chapter 1 : “You’re in the country now. Safe at last.”

Experience the river views that inspired a famous school of art. Live in the grand estate neighborhood where Frank A. Vanderlip (First National City Bank) played penny poker with John D. Rockefeller (Standard Oil). This is Tara on Hudson. Full Air. Stunningly appointed Great Room with HuHhHUfieldstone hearth. EIK. Four Brs. Jacuzzi. A prestigious gem on one secluded acre. Special and unique. Walk to train. Maid’s quarters with separate entrance. \$850,000.

Sotheby’s had placed the ad in *The New York Times Magazine* section. Joy Gainsborough-Orsini had spread her Gortex parka on the sod, gone down on her belly to shoot the picture, and so the building—large enough in life—seemed to pierce the very skies.

Shown now in the last rays of a watery March sun, the edifice towered amid immature plantings. This was on the Albany Post road and directly across Scarborough Station Road from the Scarborough Presbyterian church. Although substantially smaller than the church, the house seemed to vie with that structure as to which was to be the more preposterous demonstration of man’s aspiration to transcend practicality. Both buildings were designed to excite awe. Both were far too large to justify their purposes as shelter.

The church was substantially bigger than its competitor, but the Cross residence had the gothic windows once reserved for places of worship, and a three-car garage mahal. It outgunned the sanctuary six toilets to one.

Featuring the largest lawn in the development, the wedding cake of a house was bordered on the left by a replica of Washington Irving’s Sunnyside. A miniature of the dome of Jefferson’s Monticello took the right flank. The builder’s motto and slogan. “The grandeur and genius of the past; the comfort and convenience of the future.” The development: Heavenly Mansions.

This was Saint Patrick’s Day in the new Millennium, and Tara’s owners were hosting a party. The invitations had been cardboard shamrocks with “You survived Y2K, now come toast Andie,” and then this line from Housman: “Malt does more than Milton can, to justify God’s ways to man.” Although few of the guests were drinking malt. They were drinking Frascati, and a fruity Chardonnay. All purchased at the Art of Wine in Pleasantville.

The host, Stuart Cross (no relation to the pens, thank you), was heading into the great room with a fresh tray of oysters. The hostess, Andie Wilde (no relation to the famous playwright and pederast, alas) was at the granite-topped island in the kitchen, taking the Saran wrap from a bowl of guacamole. Stuart was 59. Andie was 32, a small, slender brunette now wearing an ankle-length suede skirt, which snapped up the front, and a black cashmere turtleneck. Andie always gave the impression of having just finished an exhaustive crying jag. Perhaps it was the too generous use of mascara; perhaps it was something more fundamental to her character. This melancholy cast had rendered her irresistible to certain types of males, many of whom were powerful or rich.

She’d grown up bookish in bookless Vandalia, Ohio—Dayton’s airport town. “Raised in a bowling alley, but with the soul of an English maiden,” Stuart had said, casting the first of the honeyed barbs that snagged

Andie's heart. "If I weren't so old and shrewd, I never would have gaffed her," he said once when quite drunk. "I paid attention. Pay attention, and you needn't be kind."

Andie was half-Irish, but the party was being held to celebrate, or at least acknowledge, her promotion to the enviable but not entirely respectable position of top film critic for *The New York Post*. "Yes, I love my job," she said when asked. Everybody asked.

Stuart heard a cry of tires, and then what sounded like a collision, but by the time he put down the oysters and reached the window to look out, a red van was moving through the intersection. A green SUV, which was on his lawn, reversed back onto the road and followed the van.

"What happened?" Andie asked. "I felt just as if somebody had walked over my grave."

"Nothing to do with your grave," said Stuart. "Looks as if there was an accident at the crossroads."

"Doesn't that mean tragedy," asked Wallace Stevens (not *that* Wallace Stevens). "An encounter at a crossroads?"

"Traditionally, it means tragedy," said Stuart, going back to the kitchen to get the oysters.

"Can I have another?" asked Stevens, when the host reappeared.

"You ate the last tray," said Stuart. "Let's give somebody else a chance."

"You didn't want me here at all did you?" asked Stevens. "It was Scarlet's idea, wasn't it?" A tall, ungainly creature who might have been Lincolnesque, if it weren't for the weak chin and a terrible comb-over, Stevens—a book agent—had been the last guest invited and the first to arrive.

"He'll try and do business," Stuart had said. "And he's a spitter."

"He's had us to dinner twice now in the city," countered Andie. "You may not like him, but he is a brilliant agent. The man can ask the baldest questions, and somehow get away with it or almost. There are a half a dozen writers we admire, who never would have made it without him. Besides which, we *are* celebrating the patron saint of outcasts."

"We're also honoring the man who cast out the snakes," said Stuart.

"If we don't include Stevens," said Andie, "he'll hear about the party from your old friend loose lips Solon at Random House."

The agent had arrived a half an hour early—Andie was still in the shower—and presented Stuart with a one thousand, one hundred-page manuscript titled Gone with the Wind. (not *that* Gone with the Wind.) "Random House despised it, but I think it's perfect for you," he explained.

Now Stevens was making Andie blush.

"Is Tom Hanks here?" he asked.

"I didn't invite him," said Andie.

"He would have come," said Stevens, moving his face unnaturally close to that of his hostess. "Doesn't he want good reviews?"

"It doesn't work that way," said Andie, backpedaling out of range of the spray.

"Then how does it work?" asked Stevens. "I told Loretta that he might be here."

"I judge the movie on its merits," said Andie.

“Isn’t that a bit subjective?” asked Stevens.”

“Yes,” said Andie.

“But you don’t pay for your tickets, do you?” asked Stevens.”

“No,” said Andie, “not usually.”

“Which right away puts you in a different position than all the rest of us,” said Stevens. “Loretta asked me the other day if you got free popcorn. I didn’t know. Do you get free popcorn?”

“No,” said Andie. “Not usually.”

Stevens nodded pensively. “Did you ever try and figure out how much they pay you per review,” he asked.

“No,” said Andie. “I never did.”

“Loretta was saying they should wire a keypad into the seats,” Stevens continued. “After the movie, everybody could push a button for thumbs up, or a different button for thumbs down. The results could be tabulated and published. That way we’d really know what to see.”

“Enough charming chit-chat for now,” said Stuart, inserting himself between Andie and the agent. “How about a house tour? Anybody who wants to admire the Jacuzzi,” he said, “cue here.” Half a dozen late arrivals responded to the invitation, and Stuart started up the stairs. “The real estate agent promised a seasonal view of the Hudson,” he said. “I don’t see it. Unless she was talking about the nuclear winter.”

“Where do you write?” asked Wallace Stevens, when the party reached the top of the stairs.

“Actually,” said Stuart, “I haven’t written a word since we moved in, but I have picked the spot.”

“I think the places where creative people work are sacred,” the agent said, looking into the faces of the other guests for confirmation. None was forthcoming. But Stuart led the group into a small bedroom off the hallway. This had a dark oak table with one center drawer and a chair with a cane bottom.

Stevens went to the desk, “Do you mind?” he asked, looking back over his shoulder at Stuart.

His host said nothing.

The agent opened the drawer, found it empty, took a card out of his wallet, wrote something on the back, put the card in the drawer and closed it. Then he backed away from the desk and brought his face close to Stuart’s. “That’s my home number,” he said.

“Thanks,” said Stuart, wiping spittle from his cheeks as he turned and went into the hall.

“Instead of the river view,” he said, “we have a master-bedroom- suite –to-die- for. That’s what the realtor was always saying, ‘a master-bedroom-suite-to-die-for.’

“Died happy,” one of the guests chimed in.

“Somehow I don’t think Joy will die happy,” said Stuart, “but I accept the compliment.”

He lead the group down the hall and into the bedroom. This was large and with floor-to-ceiling windows on one wall. An ebony sleigh bed stood in the center of the room. A small, clever wooden desk

with pillars, cubbies, and a Hepplewhite chair was set in a corner. “It’s a reproduction,” Stuart said before moving out of the sleeping area and through the first phase of the bathroom-- two sinks, and a long mirror lined with light bulbs, in a style reminiscent of a theatrical dressing room.

“It’s fabulous,” one of the guests enthused. “The dream house for the dream couple.”

“And we dream big these days,” Stuart said. “Five people, four thousand square feet. Lucky Karl Marx has been discredited. Else we’d all be murdered in our beds.”

“Would they murder the nanny?” asked Rick Massberg, a colleague from the city and Stuart’s protégé.

“I think she’d be the one to let them in, while we slept,” said Stuart. “Or that’s my understanding of class war. We’ve got the walk-in closet,” he continued, leading the party deeper into the bathroom, “the Jacuzzi, steam shower...”

“Do you ever really use the steam shower?” asked a cleft-chinned blonde named Heather who worked for the Bathos literary agency in Manhattan.

“Yes, of course,” said Stuart, as the party retreated down the stairs. “So far we’ve *really* used it only twice.” The group crossed the kitchen, descended a set of bare wooden stairs and came into a large basement. Stuart hit the wall switch and there was an appreciative pause as the guests spread out and took in the huge space, entirely empty and with a ceiling nine feet high.

“The hot water is heated right on the oil burner,” Stuart said. “One fire instead of two. Cellar floor is as dry as a bone,” he said, tapping at the cement with the toe of one tasseled loafer. He extended his arms and turned once in a slow circle. “Imagine a gym, a wine cellar, prison.”

Solidly built and of moderate height, the host moved with surprising grace. He wore his curly gray hair long, in a style more befitting a musician than an editor. Despite his age and sedentary profession, he was still slender and carried himself with the grace and assurance of a natural athlete.

After the third glass of wine, he’d begun to tell everybody who would listen-- and some people who would not listen-- that with Andie’s increased income, he was now finally prepared to resign his editorship at Acropolis Books “and write the novel that’s been eating at my guts since I first achieved consciousness.” Wearing chinos and a white button-down shirt with blue pinstripes, no tie, but fastened at the throat, he was standing now, with one hand on the mantel, talking intently to a knot of guests. “I’m tired unto death of delivering other people’s children. Delivering them, and washing off the blood and sputum.”

“He’s blotto. Snockkered,” said Herbert Pipes, a friend from the city and the couple’s tax lawyer. “They’ll take you out of that elegant office of yours in a pine box,” he told his host.

“Stuart couldn’t quit back then. He was the sole support of his widowed mother,” said Andie, angrily.

“Maybe,” said Pipes, turning back to the other guests. “But you all should know that the very first thing Stuart told me when I met him was that he was going to leave his job and write the great American novel. That was twenty years ago.”

“Might quit,” snapped Stuart. “And while I’m making changes, I might also engage a lawyer who doesn’t tread on my dreams.” This was delivered in tones that were clearly meant to sound lighthearted, and just as clearly failed. The host opened his mouth again, perhaps to make amends, but he was cut off by the rising clamor of police sirens. The large gothic windows at the end of the great room had a commanding view of the Albany

Post Road. Stuart and several others moved to look outside as two squad cars raced North towards the Village of Ossining, followed by an ambulance and then a third police car.

“Move to the country,” said Stuart. “Escape urban brutality.”

“All right, all right,” said Kika Champion-Bourne. A friend of Andie’s since Kenyon, Kika had lived in Scarborough for a decade. She was the individual most responsible for convincing the couple to abandon that cramped apartment in Chelsea that Stuart had shared with his mother. Kika was tall for a woman-- 5’11”-- and had naturally blond hair, which she wore to her waist. “Your pal might be sexy,” Stuart had told Andie once, “if her hips weren’t so generous and her bust so ungenerous. Girls frequently pair off in college, with one being beautiful and moody, the other ordinary but reliable,” he told his wife. “I bet Kika was reliable.”

“You’re only trashing her because she’s my best friend,” said Andie. “And you don’t like to share.”

“There’s that,” said Stuart, “but even you can see how plain Kika is.”

Andie never aired out her husband’s poisonous remarks to her friend, and so they had the desired effect, which was to weaken the connection between the two women. Kika was not a dunce, though, and sensed the hostility. She treated her pal’s distinguished husband as if he were a naughty little boy.

“Now, now. Don’t get your knickers in a twist, Stu. You’re not in Manhattan anymore,” she said, wetting the index finger of her right hand and tucking hair behind her ear. “The police in Scarborough are like Maytag repairmen. Half the department turns out for a busted taillight.”

As she spoke another squad car pulled up to the intersection, paused, made a hooting sound with its siren and ran the light.

“I don’t care how bored the police are,” said Stuart. “That’s not a minor accident. Sounds like a race riot to me. Isn’t Peekskill north of here? A mob tried to murder Paul Robeson in Peekskill.”

“Now we *are* showing our age,” said Kika.

“Time out,” said Andie, stepping between her friend and her husband and putting a hand on each of them, trying to draw the charge of malice into her own body and then to the ground.

“As for the many police cars,” said Kika, shrugging off her friend’s hand, “your husband’s trying to judge the response by city standards. Can’t do that. There was a story in *The Ossining Citizen Register* yesterday about a woman who thought she was being sniped at in the parking lot of the Arcadian Shopping Center. The police closed off the Albany Post Road for an hour.”

“Sniping is my idea of serious,” said Stuart.

“It was three little boys,” said Kika. “A Briarcliff dowager had left her grocery bags lined up in the cart, while she went back into the store for more Bloody Mary mix. You know how that market has a target on its bags? There were three children out there with as many BB guns. I wouldn’t have been able to resist it myself. A jar of relish was slain.”

“I can’t help but feel that the city was safer,” said Stuart.

“You forget that your beloved wife was very nearly raped in the front hall of the apartment building you’re so mawkish about?”

“No,” said Stuart, I’m not forgetting that. But *four* police cars?”

“You’ll read all about it in tomorrow’s paper,” Kika said. “Don’t worry, big boy. You’re in the country now. Safe at last.”

Chapter 2 : The Trouble with Nannies at All

“Speaking of safe,” said Andie. “I’m genuinely worried about the girls.” Jane Wilde Cross (6) and Virginia Woolf Cross (9) had been taken out with the new nanny to buy six large bags of fat-free pretzels, and one of “nude” popcorn. “It’s in the health-food section,” Andie had explained. “You put it in a bowl and pour a little melted butter over it. No candy for Ginny. I don’t care how she begs.” The nanny (Louise Washington, a small—no, tiny--black woman of 37 from Yonkers, N.Y.) had come to work for the first time that day at noon.

Stuart glanced at his watch. “I wouldn’t worry yet,” he said. “The vaunted Miss Washington doesn’t know the neighborhood. She might easily have gotten lost.”

“On the way to the grocery store?” asked Andie. “It’s a straight shot from here to there. I don’t think so.”

Stuart sighed. “You’re always anxious about your precious girls,” he said. “And we haven’t lost one yet. Let’s give the childcare professional another twenty minutes. Then we can call out the National Guard.”

“You have a new nanny?” asked Pipes.

“Brand spanking new,” Stuart agreed.

“And?” asked Pipes

“And she’s an odd bird,” said Stuart. “The girls are encouraged to call her ‘Sugar.’ We’re encouraged to call her ‘Miss Washington.’ I’m not even sure she graduated high school: and you know what she wants to be? A painter,” he continued, not waiting for Pipes to respond. “Not a house painter, not even an illustrator. She wants to paint masterpieces. We’ve had three conversations and I already know that she wants to paint a picture that will hang in the Museum of Modern Art.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Kika.

“Now that they’re no longer comprehensible to the general public, fine arts are the easiest to fake,” said Massberg. “Take, for instance, the wife of our beloved publisher, take Helen Glass, nee Greene. So little is known about what constitutes merit in the visual arts that even Helen Greene thinks she’s got something important to say in oil.”

“I hadn’t heard,” said Cross.

“Of course not,” said Massberg. “You never pay her any attention.”

“Well, actually I like her quite a bit,” said Stuart. “She’s a classy woman who married down, and she’s never given Herbert anything to complain about.”

“If you admire her,” said Massberg, “you hide it well.”

“Didn’t mean to hide it,” said Stuart. “I’m restrained. I assumed she’d understand. She’s restrained herself.”

“Everybody enjoys a little flattery,” said Massberg.

“I suppose,” said Stuart. “But what are her paintings like?”

“Ghastly,” said Massberg.

“Oh,” said Stuart. “I’m afraid I’m not terribly surprised.”

“What about the Nanny?” asked Massberg. “Is she any good?”

“Better be,” Cross replied, “otherwise, I’ll leave a prestigious job to write my novel and spend all my newly liberated time baking cupcakes for the class picnic and picking Legos out of the bottoms of my bare feet.”

“You misunderstood me,” said Massberg: “I didn’t wonder if she could nanny. I wondered if she could paint.”

Cross smiled broadly, and then shrugged. “What are the chances?” he asked. “No education. No training. And list for me the great black painters hanging now in the Metropolitan.”

“But you think she’s a good nanny?” asked Massberg.

“Took the children all of half hour to fall in love with her,” said Stuart.

“Speaking of children,” said Kika, “Where are they?”

“I don’t have any idea where they are,” said Andie.

“Wherever they are,” said Stuart. “I’m sure they’re perfectly safe. Unless of course they’re being sniped,” he said, giving Kika a meaningful look.

“Honestly,” Kika responded. “You’re such an old lady, Stuart. If you took the local paper, you’d calm down. You’re acting as if Ossining were the wild, wild West.”

“*The New York Times* is my local paper,” said Stuart.

“Not anymore,” said Kika.

“Who has the energy for two dailies?” asked Stuart.

“I thought you were about to retire,” said Kika.

“Pipes is right,” said Stuart. “I was being theatrical. I won’t quit. I might be fired, though” he said, his face brightening with the prospects of using this scenario to torture his wife and her friends. “I might be forced out. Humiliated. See me in a rocker then, out on the porch, pawing through the *Ossining Citizen Register*.”

“Never happen,” said Rick Massberg. “You’re right at the top of your profession.” Rick had brown hair cut as if his mother had put a soup bowl over his head. He was wearing New Balance hiking boots that had never seen a trail, a green flannel shirt and pleated chinos, which seemed designed to accentuate his pear-shaped bottom.

Stuart gave himself points for tolerating his dorky and apparently guileless protégé. “There’s something endearing about ambition exposed,” he once explained to Andie, “particularly if it’s hapless ambition.” When sending Massberg out on company business, Stuart often apologized in advance to his contemporaries. “He’s a little creepy around the edges, but also brilliant,” he’d explain. “The man’s read everything.”

Despite the edge of condescension, Stuart relished Massberg’s company. What secretly delighted the older man was to feign deep humility, and then let his junior contradict him. Which was what he was doing now.

“Pipes is right,” said Stuart. “If I leave Acropolis, it probably won’t be my decision. I’ll be pushed. It’ll be a defenestration.”

“Now you are over dramatizing,” said Rick. “You’ll never be fired. You’re Herbert Glass’s golden boy. He loves you better than either of his own flesh-and-blood sons. Besides which, you’ve been validated by the world at large. *Publisher’s Weekly* called you the best line-editor in the country. Every time they run an attack on Octopus, they call you up for a quote.”

“That’s because I’m the only editor in New York who doesn’t yet owe his job to the Octopus Corporation,” said Stuart.

“There’s that,” said Massberg, “but you’re also a master with a pencil.”

“A line will take us hours maybe;” said Stuart, “yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought / our stitching and unstitching has been naught.”

“Do you have all of Yeats by memory?” asked Massberg, breaking in.

“Oh no,” said Stuart. “Certainly not.”

“It was great,” said Andie. “We’d get caught in traffic coming down 11th Avenue, and he’d recite ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ for me.”

“This is no country for all men,” said Stuart, as if to illustrate his wife’s point. “Or for line editors either.”

“Better go down upon your marrow bones,” he continued, encouraged by his wife’s approval.

“And scrub a kitchen pavement or break stones.”

“All right, all right,” said Andie.

“Nobody cares about line editors anymore,” said Stuart. “Nobody cares about the text at all. We didn’t even read the most expensive book we bought last year. We paid two million for a name and a title, for smoke and mirrors.”

“That was a bidding war,” said Massberg, “There was no time to examine the manuscript. None of the other editors saw it either. And I’ll bet you anything *The Red_Hot Ticket* earns out. Besides, I’m glad we were able to get the Glass family excited about a new book for the first time in what, 25 years? Man can’t live by back lists alone. We need a fresh name. We need to show we’re players.”

“That’s where you and I disagree,” said Stuart.

“Agree or disagree,” said Massberg. “Herbert Glass will never surrender Stuart Cross. You’re what people think of when they think Acropolis. Isn’t the man who writes those epics about the Civil War heroine going to leave Holt for you? That’s what he told Cindy Adams. What is his name? Hammlecher Schlemmer?”

“His name is Martin Brookstone, and I wish he would leave Holt, but I’m afraid he’s just trying to drive up his price,” said Stuart

“Either way,” said Massberg. “You have a reputation.”

“Thanks,” said Cross, “but you have no idea how fed up I am. Can’t do the exact same job for thirty years without burnout.”

Rick wagged his head. “You know better,” he said. “It won’t be the same old job.” He moved to his host’s side, and awkwardly threw a stubby arm over the taller man’s shoulders. “Editor today tomorrow, Editorial Director,” he said, smiling out at a knot of embarrassed listeners. “I bet Herbert Glass sells the apartment within the year and retreats to Blue Hill, Maine full-time. The king is dead. Long live the king,” Rick said, stepped away from his colleague, and began to clap. Nobody else joined in.

“So,” said Pipes, when the silence had grown embarrassing, “what does anybody think about the nanny and the bathtub?”

The story of Tillie Cove, which had been appearing on the cover of *The New_York Post* for two days, had finally gained sufficient authenticity to surface in the B section of *The New York Times* that morning. Cove was

an English au pair working on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. She had been charged with manslaughter after allegedly allowing a 14-month-old to drown in a bathtub, while she cooed on the phone long distance to a beau in London. That was the *Post* story the first day. The second day the *Post*'s story was that Mr. and Mrs. Harrison Crown, 3rd, were eating at Le Bernardin, when their son drowned. An unnamed source revealed that they had shared an order of periwinkles. The entire tragedy, the girl on the telephone, the child perishing in the background, had been recorded by the video security system of the apartment in which it occurred.

"Wasn't there a case like this in Newton, Massachusetts?" asked Kika.

"That's right. Louise Woodward. Back in 1997," said Andie. "The Crown child drowned. Woodward was charged with having shaken a baby to death."

"Louise," said Stuart. "Why does that name ring a bell?"

"It's the name of our new nanny," said Andie.

"Oh," said Stuart, "I knew I'd heard it recently."

"You heard it," said Andie.

"I think Miss Cove will go to jail," said Pipes.

"The camera is a new element," said Stuart. "Which should make it an open-and-shut case."

"Should, but doesn't," said the tax lawyer.

"What you want," said Andie, "is a nanny who will love the children. A good nanny. Like the one Winston Churchill had."

"But not too good," said Kika. "I have a friend whose daughter at Brown won't speak to her biological parents. She spent Christmas vacation in Queens filming the family of her long-time Jamaican nanny. Bitsy Vander has no interest in her actual mother and father. She won a prize for an essay about her nanny titled "What Love Means."

"And I guess love doesn't mean paying the bills at Brown," said Stuart.

"Nope," said Kika. "Love has nothing to do with paying the bills at Brown."

"The trouble with nannies at all," said Andie "is that you're damned if you do, and you're damned if you don't. Fall into a truly bad nanny, and you'll lose the children to a grisly death. Fall into a truly marvelous nanny and you'll just lose them."