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.”

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“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?”
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 Isolina 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 TV 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

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 sterner 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 socio-logical 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...
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 care-
givers 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

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,
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 empha-
sized 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 care-
givers’ “toughness,” “strength,” and “endurance,” without more broadly con-
textualizing 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 men-
tioned her father in these discussions.) The employer’s gen-
erosity 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
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 if you got your period, if you 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 affection, 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 yomtov, 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 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, discard—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, shepherding 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, used her influence to get her into Lexington School for the Deaf. Mattie and I were so complete. I couldn’t wait to talk about her. She had this role at church as the woman who fed the poor. She had 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. Uncle [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
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 stopped 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 neighbor]. I was paid according to the pay at that time.

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 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.
The world is wiser and wickeder 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.

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, slips 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
thoughts for the now-grown girls... 

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 unbusiness, 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 "nondiscussables." 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 "agenda" 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.

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
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,
Two, pretending to be cis, that neither told me. We were all very young, and I think 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."

"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.
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?

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 manners and rights and wrongs, but she also unconditionally 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 loved 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.