

“Explorer, you tell yourself this is not what you came for.”

- Gwendolyn MacEwen



## LITANY

The small things that end the world: a windblown fuzz fleck snags a song spinning on vinyl; a goldfish gives up the ghost; an airborne mumps virus that might land *here*, lands *there*; a silver coin, tossed with a wink; a button; a single cry croaked from a homely baby's throat – *Mama!*

Why, oh *why* didn't I have a fresh white blouse? For some reason, I imagined a babysitter would wear a white blouse. But when the call came, I only had time to rake a brush through my hair, jam in a poodle barrette, and change into my least-dirty turtleneck and slacks. I pinched my soft inner arm into a rose, into *real*, that it really was *my* turn at last.

I wouldn't have heard the phone *at all* if the mote, the tiny fuzz ball from a pilled sweater, or seed-pod fluff or something, hadn't sailed in through the window I'd cracked open ever so slightly to ease my bedroom's stuffiness. It drifted, as if choosing a landing spot, then landed dab-smack on my new spinning vinyl record. Snagged in the stylus. The Chordettes' "Mr. Sandman" furred and slurred. The dream those divine singers asked Mr. Sandman to bring them ground down to *Bang me a drum*.

To pluck the fluff away I'd lifted the stylus, and in that songless second the telephone clanged in the kitchen. I hot-footed it there. If my mother and I lived in a house instead of a flat, I wouldn't have made it to the phone on time. But I only had to dash a short stretch to answer the phone. A satin voice summoned Sadie Wilder.

“That’s she. I mean, me,” I burred.

The caller was Shirley Bannister. *The Shirley Bannister*. I already knew all about her, from my friend Wanda Keeler, the Bannister’s official babysitter. Oh, I’d heard about Shirley, pretty wife, baker of pineapple upside-down cakes, her dashing husband, Forest, who fetched Wanda and drove her home in his Austin-Healey and tossed an extra coin her way at the end of each night – raising her babysitting fortune to \$4.00 – and winked, “Later Gator.” Wanda never once fumbled the coin. She rode the gravy train. To me it seemed brash for a married man to wink at her like that, and him so much older, but she must have found it harmless enough, and she got paid. How Wanda loved to lavish the litany of dreamy items she bought with her babysitting fortune before my eyes, sashaying in her poodle skirt, darling sweater sets, snazzy saddle shoes. Wanda called 1954 a *ring-a-ding year to be a girl, the living end!* Easy for *her* to say, I thought, with her steady job, her pretty things. Maybe she meant Marilyn Bell, the swim champion. No, she meant herself. I’d known Wanda long enough to bet on it.

Drop the quarter, Wanda, just once. When Forest flicks the coin in your direction, fumble it into a dark, unreachable spot in that flying chariot. It was fall, after all, perfect season for a fallen leaf, a blundered coin. Let it be palmed, for once, by another girl – *me*, a dowdier life form.

My mother had promised I could babysit when I turned fourteen. I turned fourteen, slipped my hand-printed flyers – *Reliable Girl for Hire: Available to Babysit* – under windshield wipers in parking lots, pin-stabbed them to grocery store bulletin boards. Seemed you had to know the right people. Wanda Keeler’s mother played bridge with Shirley Bannister’s set. My mother pinked seams at Don Vale Textiles. She had no time for games.

Yet now Shirley Bannister's voice silked through the receiver quaking in my hand. She was awful sorry for the short notice. She'd gotten my number from Mrs. Keeler. Wanda had caught the mumps and couldn't babysit for them; they were in a pickle. They had the De Havilland dinner and dance. If I could help out they'd make it worth my while: \$4.50.

I *had* noted Wanda's empty seat at school earlier that day. Now I pictured her swollen face, like a stricken chipmunk sickened by bad acorns. No gravy train for *her* tonight.

*Heyzoose Marimba!* I reasoned if I really shone I could squeeze Wanda Keeler out of a job and it would be *me* raking in almost \$15.00 a month, *me* cruising in an Austin-Healey. And that didn't include Forest's tossed coins. *Duck soup*. No more second-hand peeks into Wanda's big fat gazing ball. She'd lorded her babysitting wealth over me long enough. Whoever commanded the Universe Express was letting *me* ride, for once – was giving *me* a crack at the good life. Too bad my friend had to fall ill for this to happen, but the world was chipmunk-eat-chipmunk, a sad fact.

To gallivant into my future, I only had to open the window and allow it in, and it had taken the shape of a tiny fuzz ball.

I told Mrs. Bannister I'd be punch-pleased to help out.

Static fizzed the line. Her silk voice returned. "You've never babysat before, have you Sadie?"

Wanda's mother might have left out that detail. "Uh-uh."

A worried sigh buffeted my ear. Rain ponedged the kitchen window as wind backhanded a branch against the pane, making me strain to hear Mrs. Bannister. Normally, she was saying, she didn't hire inexperienced babysitters, but given how last-minute this whole thing was, how important it was for her husband – who was lined up for a promotion – to attend the De Havilland dinner and dance, how based on Mrs. Keeler's report

of me as a “good, well-behaved girl, if a touch shabby in grooming and appearance,” they’d take a gamble on me, green as I was. Mrs. Keeler had added I was of “Jewish persuasion,” but Mrs. Bannister and her husband held no prejudice, she said, and it would be good for their children to meet a person “of my persuasion.”

*Shabby?* That was the moment I wished for a white blouse, proof I *wasn't* shabby. What Mrs. Bannister said next sounded so queer I bit my lip to stamp my laughter: I hadn't been sharing Coca-Cola with Wanda Keeler, had I, or getting in her germ zone, like, heavens, kissing her, had I? Mrs. Bannister knew girls sometimes played pretend games. She needed a mumps epidemic in her house like a rip in her nylon stocking.

I assured her no Colas had been shared, no kisses. I felt fit as a fiddle. Shirley said her husband would fetch me at five-thirty.

Her pencil scritch'd down my address.

Her silk-voice declared me an absolute lifesaver.

I'd barely hung up the receiver, when my mother phoned on her break at Don Vale Textiles. She'd be working late. Again. Big contract. She said she'd much rather be home. Malton Weather Station had issued a wind and rain warning. *Oy vey*. My father's old phrase brought him back more vividly than the photograph in our foyer. I'd memorized what my mother had penned on its reverse side. *Family Picnic, Kew. Robert. Baby Sadie. Me. We ignored the 'Gentiles Only' sign. We love the beach.*

I'd just gotten out the words, “I'm sorry you have to work late, Ma,” before she had to get back to pinking.

I scrawled her a note: *Gone babysitting!*

How surprised she'd be!

Then I bopped into my bedroom to throw myself together as best I could. On my small desk, my homework was piled high; I'd tackle it in the morning.

Tonight, *life* beckoned. Universe, you've tapped me at last. Thank you.

While I swatted at my hair – which was unrulier in damp weather – I tried to recall what Wanda Keeler had told me about the Bannister kids. Oddly, she rarely mentioned them. When I'd asked, clouds scudded across her pink face; she'd have pie in the sky if not for those *little firebrands*. The giant baby, Faith, was *a stink missile sent straight from Russia*, who could only be left to seethe and howl in her crib until she wore herself out. Whiny Bobby, a first grader, who jabbed his toy pistol into Wanda's thigh, *bang-bang*, scaring her half-dead. And always wanting more.

Of small boys, I knew nothing. "More what?"

My friend's eyes rolled back like numbers on an old-fashioned cash register. "More treats. More Mr. Potato Head games. More Dennis the Menace. More play dough. More everything." The boy, at least, could be bribed with cookies to climb into his little bed. "Those kids are spoiled silly and I can't tell you how often I'd like to smack both their precious bottoms crimson, Sadie. Babysitting for the Bannisters would be the cream gig if not for that pair of flies in the syrup. But the job pays a fortune, which makes it worth those two annoyances."

Wanda had been swishing about in her new poodle skirt the day of her 'flies in the syrup' speech. I'd begun to worry that I might be a bit *stunned*; week after week, I'd let my friend *torture* me with her new threads after school at her house. The way she lorded her litany of profit over me razzed my berries, turning me the brightest emerald shade of envy. But always I trundled back for more, I did, just to hear those swishing skirts, and to finger those soft knits. She made me *drunk* with her peep shows. Drunk on the Bannisters' *whole beautiful life*. Such a stylish, gallivanting couple, out dancing or fine dining with their boating friends at least one night a week, even now, with the

school year under way. My mother and I didn't know anyone like them. Wanda Keeler told me about their house – 67 Humber Green Drive – “It's utterly grand. The prettiest home on the block. Right out of some glossy magazine.” There was pineapple upside-down cake in the sparkling seafoam green kitchen and Wanda could stuff away as much as she wanted. And, of all things, they had a *dumb waiter!* I didn't tell Wanda she shouldn't talk so harsh about the servant. I chomped back my opinion, since I was a guest in her house, a lowly spectator, I was, of her peep shows.

Lately I'd been letting Wanda Keeler win the spelling bee at school because if she lost – and Wanda could *not* lose with grace – she didn't invite me over to her house. Earlier that week she'd blundered. *Moat*. As in: *ditch filled with water around a castle, village, or fort*. My friend thought *mote*, as in tiny speck, even though the word had been explained pretty clearly to *my* ears. I'd had to out-blunder her blunder, either that or trot home alone. Even the nights my mother returned from work at a decent hour, she made for glum company. And school was all dire film reels – *Beware of Communists! Drugs make you a raving maniac. One day the sun will burn out.*

I checked my watch. The Austin-Healey was due any minute. I stashed extra feminine protection in my purse, and glanced out the kitchen window. The trees doled their leaves, punted about by gusts, down to the soaked earth, in the steady, determined rain. Just another October night for *some* people, but not me!

“Later Gator!” I trilled into our empty flat. I tented my head with my pea coat, my makeshift umbrella. Then I sprinted towards the idling Austin-Healey, a sleek vector purring and shimmering in an aura of raindrops.



My friend was right. Forest Bannister was one cool daddy in his tweed overcoat and driving gloves. He had an English accent. Whenever Wanda had spoken of Forest, her mouth gushed into Niagara Falls. “What a dreamboat! He could be Montgomery Clift’s twin.” My friend just *vaporized* when he charioted her around; now it was *me* vaporizing. I felt shabbier than ever. My damp, worn pea coat across my knees in the Austin-Healey, its interior all soft rawhide and silver gizmos and resolute dials.

Forest thwacked his chariot into gear like he expected nothing less from it than to rocket us straight to Jupiter. He drove fast and didn’t seem worried about speeding tickets. Given the fortune the Bannisters paid their babysitter, and given they had a servant – a dumb waiter – I guessed he could afford any fine the cops threw at him.

Beneath the sky’s grey soup, the Healey gobbled Lawrence Avenue. *Sh-boom, sh-boom*, the wipers sang, as my stomach flopped like it did when riding the rollercoaster at the Exhibition. Wanda and I had, once. The Keelers’ Nash Rambler was a wheelbarrow compared to this magic-on-wheels.

Against the darkening bruise of sky, Forest Bannister’s headlights were bright, burrowing concepts. Flying along in high style like that flooded me with possibility. That’s where I lived now: in possibility. Like the poem by Emily Dickinson we read in literature class. Poor Emily, never rode in an Austin-Healey.

Veils of rain whipped the beautiful car. I stroked the leather seat delicately as if it were some thoroughbred racehorse. I half-expected the seat to nicker back at me. It was warm inside the chariot. I’d had no time to apply *Stoppette* under my arms. I worried about my smell. I was on the ride of my life with the

coolest daddy. I only hoped his aftershave, a walnut tang, masked my damp parts.

Forest didn't speak for a long time. He'd been riveted to navigating the wet streets. "So, you're the Wilder girl," he said at last, gearing down. We slowed enough that I could see shops aglow with their crates of apples, peaches and pears out front, tarps thrown over them, buckling and slapped by fruit-hating weather. At first, I thought Forest Bannister meant wilder than Wanda Keeler. That would be a cinch. She was a Sunday school teacher. A Goody-Two-Shoes. The speed at which we travelled really strung me, it did. He must have meant my name. Wilder. I fought to ignore the monthly jabs in my pelvis and sucked in my stomach to look shapelier in my turtleneck.

"You're prettier than the Keeler girl," Forest added, "Matter of fact you're the prettiest babysitter we've ever had."

I had to reel myself back into orbit. *Sadie, return to Planet Babysitter this minute. This is employment.* Forest then remarked what a lifesaver I was. First, I thought candy, lifesavers. After a few more wiper *sh-booms*, I twiggled.

"No sweat, Mr. Bannister. I hardly do anything at night except maybe go to Wanda Keeler's house or watch *Howdy Doody*."

*Dense Bunny*, I scolded myself silently, *for reminding them of their real babysitter. Keep Wanda's ghost out of this Healey!*

Forest barrelled onwards, leaving me in the conversational dust. "You'll love the house," he said, like he was a real-estate agent and I was a home-hunter instead of a pinch-hitter sitter. Seemed he liked pretend games. His voice surged forth: how he and his wife came from England, both only children, took the trans-Atlantic plunge, how the Humber flowed right behind their house, *prime riverfront property*.

"You tell me, Wilder girl, how many people can claim to live right on the banks of a river?"

“Not very many, Sir?”

Forest Bannister amped up his talk many revolutions per second: how they’d modernized the house for full pleasure and convenience, including a dumbwaiter! Then he dropped some builders’ lingo on me about the house, called it balloon-framed. “We had the original downstairs redone,” he vaunted. “Knocked out the walls – gutted it like a giant pickerel, opened it right up.” Then he described the “stately maple” in the back yard, tree-house potential up the *wa-zoo* once Bobby and Faith were old enough to climb; they’d explore the Humber’s shore for arrowheads, too, some history for the kids.

Silently I wondered if history was that easy. But he seemed like the kind of man who could make a concept hold water just by talking about it. Forest then extolled the virtues of their neighbourhood: swell for raising a family, everything within reach. Two golf and country clubs, Lambton and Weston. Heck, the riverbank practically spewed golf courses. Humber Heights School was nearby. The racetrack, fairgrounds, a stone’s toss away.

“We’ve got it all here – made in the shade,” he trumpeted, releasing some switch that greened a dial as he turned off Lawrence onto a side street. A good life, theirs, on the riverbank, though they could do without the Hospital for Consumptives so nearby. But every silver lining had its cloud, didn’t it?

I couldn’t imagine clouds right now, even though the sky was clotted with them. I was inside the perfect dream. I might dress shabby but I was enthusiastic, reliable. All I had to do was be the perfect babysitter, the *absolute lifesaver* Shirley Bannister said I was, and I wouldn’t be shabby much longer. Her husband had a soft spot for me already, I knew from his pretty remark. I just needed to impress his wife.

Forest went on about his Healey, which he’d had shipped

special from England.

“How do you fit them all in here? The family, I mean, Mr. Bannister?”

He spanked the car along the liquid street, maneuvering easily around a fallen branch. The headlights had their own piercing intellect. Maybe English light was smarter.

Forest told me Shirley used the Saratoga for running the kids around, groceries, her Wednesday girls’ bridge club, though he had to admit she heartily enjoyed a spin in his Healey. The Saratoga was a junk heap, he added, but once his promotion at De Havilland came through, they’d upgrade.

His spin remark heated my cheeks. He turned onto Riverstone Road. Everything around there had river names. A few short jabs along yet another street. “Almost home,” Mr. Bannister pivoted his face for an instant to wink at me.

After several more spurts of speed along another street, we shot across a swing bridge. A final thrust up a driveway on an incline, then he braked behind a blue Chrysler Saratoga in the driveway of 67 Humber Green Drive. I had arrived at the fabled world of Wanda Keeler’s babysitting spoils, all of which, if I did a topnotch job, could be mine.

Duck soup.

The house rose, exalted, before me. It was white, with green shutters above the sloping lawn. Lights blazed within. Rain and a dim milky sky only threw the home’s *hominess* into greater relief. A stately maple towered darkly behind it, its branches brushing the roof. Wanda had told me about the short path behind the house that led to the river’s reedy banks. I wouldn’t be going back there tonight, and I was glad of that, not being a water person. Last summer, with the Keelers at Sauble Beach, I’d hunkered under the umbrella while Wanda, who’d had diving lessons, cavorted like a dolphin in the blue sparkle.

I trailed Forest up the stone steps to the front door's wreath, graced with orange berries and a merry yellow bow. Shirley Bannister flung open the wreathed portal and stood, backlit, classy, in a maroon lace cocktail dress. With a trim waist and billowing skirt, she looked so much like Grace Kelly I couldn't help but gawk.

Wanda's stories sadly missed the mark with the wife. My friend hadn't done this feminine vision justice in any way, shape, or form.

As the rain pelted down, Mrs. Bannister waved us inside with quick little 'hurry, hurry' gestures. I planted my feet at last within the open-concept main floor, hearing strains of soft music mingled with dog-barks. There must have been an entry hall once but clearly it, too, had been gutted like a pickerel.

Taking my pea coat, Mrs. Bannister, smiling brightly, told me not to fret about my sneakers. The carpet was slated for cleaning in a few days. She scanned my rumpled slacks and turtleneck; I worried that her eyes, for the briefest instant, grew critical, but her manners were so flawless I decided I dreamt trouble where there wasn't any; a hair later she beamed at me again. I wondered where the dumb waiter was, why hadn't he answered the door? Maybe he had the night off? I decided the firebrands must already be asleep, though it was only a little after six o'clock. *Huzzah*, piece of cake, easiest money in the world.

A smallish tousled dog the shade of caramel candies whirled in circles near Mrs. Bannister's feet. "Okay, Shuster, yes, yes, okay, boy," she cajoled the circles into half-circles, as the barking waned and the dog, wagging, sniffed my damp sneakers. I could hear the music better now. Perry Como. I took in the place gradually, spying, on a small table, a hand-painted note folded like a greeting card. *Welcome Babysitter Sadie! October*

15, 1954. A few of the same decorative sprigs of berries wreathing the front door were taped to the note's corners. I wondered if Wanda Keeler had received a similar note. If she had, she hadn't mentioned it. Maybe it was something special, an omen of my rising star. I remarked on the note to the Grace Kelly ringer.

"We like to make our babysitters feel welcome," she smiled. "Especially those of other – persuasions."

Angel that she was, I wished she'd drop the 'persuasion' stuff. My mother and I hadn't observed any official religion since my father's illness took him from us when I was six. It was like we lost faith. We didn't keep a kosher kitchen. I wasn't even sure how I felt about God.

Mr. Bannister declared himself bound for the wet bar downstairs. On his master's heels the dog skirred along. How different, husband and wife. Forest's commando driving style keyed me up. Shirley was all warmth and cream. I could have listened to her lollipop voice all night.

I'd often wondered if Wanda Keeler had plumped up her stories of 67 Humber Green Drive to fuel my envy. But other than downplaying the wife's splendour, my friend's account of the swish house where she babysat was spot-on. It was queer to be outside looking in for so long, and then, suddenly, *inside*. My sneakers reveled in the plush carpet. I noticed the house's "clean lines." *Chatelaine* always praised "clean lines." The open concept flowed. Two steps cascaded down into the sunken living room, which had a sexpot feel, with its black pile carpet, gold sunburst wall clock, red Naugahyde sectional sofa, and sleek black lamps with ceramic cougars crouched at their bases. A regular passion pit. The lower, open area contained several vertical beams fuzzed with broadloom; they extended to the ceiling like arms bearing an offering. Supports, I guessed. The section of wall above the

hi-fi console was papered in black and gold shapes like from a geometry kit. Only one thing didn't jive with the open concept: a curtained cart on wheels, for serving drinks, maybe?

"You have a truly beautiful house, Mrs. Bannister."

Shirley smiled sweetly. She spied me looking at the book on the coffee table. Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care*. "Oh, that's our bible," declared the pretty mother. "Everything you need to know is in those pages." From a smart case tucked in a pocket in her lace dress, she retrieved a lighter and sparked a cigarette. She wanted to show me the kitchen; after that we'd meet the children.

So, they weren't asleep. The silver lining clouded. Into the kitchen, I followed Mrs. Bannister. She showed me the dumb-waiter, which wasn't a bald man bearing a tray, but a little box that lifted and lowered through the house for convenience, a flying cabinet of sorts. I marvelled at the seafoam green appliances, which were every bit as brilliant as Wanda Keeler had painted them with her words. Everything gleamed.

"Sadie?" Shirley Bannister tweaked my elbow in the gentlest way. "Are you all right? Are you with me?" Smoke garlanded her face.

"Sorry. Sure. I am."

This vision in a lace cocktail dress flashed me a quizzical glance. Then, "Oh, *fiddlesticks!*"

I worried I'd done something wrong already. She hurried over to the Formica table and seized a goldfish bowl, which had a little castle in it, and water, slightly cloudy with a few strings of fish turd. Everything but fish. Out she plucked the castle, before draining the water down the sink, her high heels clacking with purpose across the tiled floor. Then she stowed the empty bowl in a high cupboard.

"Davy Crockett is dead," she said, her voice riddled with distress.

I could only look at her, blankly.

“Bobby’s goldfish died this afternoon,” she explained. “If that boy spots the empty bowl he’ll get all tied in knots again. I was here, in the kitchen, baking squares. I looked over at the fish and” – her lovely claret lip trembled – “I swear, Sadie, it raised its dorsal fin in the way of a salute, rolled once, gopped, and floated to the surface. I’d never witnessed any living creature die before, Sadie.” Her lip quivered harder.

I imagined the fish floating inert as a wedge of mandarin orange. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Bannister.”

She sniffed. “Bobby is inconsolable. I didn’t want to go into it over the phone earlier, Sadie, but it may take a bit of extra work to cheer him. He’ll be confused that his regular babysitter, Wanda, isn’t here. But don’t worry, we’ll make it worth your while.”

I told Shirley Bannister I knew a few magic tricks, and tap-danced, so that by the night’s end Bobby would feel so chipper he wouldn’t remember the day’s loss. (For crying out loud I couldn’t dance a single tap, but in that magic house with its flying cabinet, what skill couldn’t be conjured?)

Mrs. Bannister resumed her kitchen tour – such divine seafoam appliances, I thought – until, suddenly, *Bang! Bang!* A little boy wearing a Davy Crockett raccoon hat burst into the kitchen, shooting toy pistols into the air, *Bang! Bang!* He scared the jeepers out of me. Seeing me, he stopped, breathless, and stared all doleful. He had to be the older firebrand.

“Bobby, stop shooting guns and say hello to Sadie Wilder, the babysitter,” Shirley Bannister ordered her son.

The boy lowered his pistols. “Hell-woe, Sadie Wilder the maybe-sitter. Mommy, can I watch telly-wish-on?”

(Too cute. I figured the little monkey could talk normal if he felt like it. He was trying to charm his mother and I could see

by her face, it was working.)

“Yes, for a while.” Shirley turned to me. “Maybe some telly will take his mind off Davy Crockett. The poor kid’s so down about his goldfish.”

He didn’t look down to me, but what did I know about kids?

Bobby galloped – guns, holsters, and all – out of the room just as his cool daddy swanked in with two drinks. “Rye and water, just how you like it, Shirl – straight from the wet bar.” Forest passed one glass to his wife, advising she “chug a lug,” because time ticked onward. Shirley took the glass in her exquisite fingers, her nails painted a lovely coral to offset her maroon lace cocktail dress. Her hair was stacked and looped, and though she lamented she’d had no time to Toni-wave it, she looked as polished as a beauty queen.

From the sunken living room, the television clamoured, a laugh track. Wanda Keeler once told me those weren’t real people laughing, only machines. I hadn’t wanted to believe her, that seemed like a nonsense burger to me, but now I saw what she meant. The screeches of mirth were too extreme and frequent to be normal humans. They sounded like maniacs.

We convened in the spacious kitchen with its gleaming floor tiles. A brief, odd cocktail party except no cocktail for me. The husband and wife didn’t seem that concerned about being late for their dinner, but glamorous people like the Bannisters, galivanterers, must know the drill.

Forest chortled. “My wife says Wayne and Shuster are too coarse for a six-year old boy, what do you think, Sadie?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly.

Forest swanned his glass sideways, a startling gesture for such a manly man. “I told her, ‘don’t be silly, Shirl, the jokes are way over the kid’s head’.”

His wife grimaced indulgently (still managing to look stunning)

and excused herself to do her “finishing touches.” She told me Forest would pick up where she left off, and light-footed it out of the kitchen.

Dousing me with directions, about snacks, bed times, diaper changes, some things his wife already went over, Mr. Bannister showed me a cookie jar. “Bobby’s rations – two before bed.” He found this very droll. I figured I’d better stay serious. He pointed out the jars of baby food for Faith. Lots of puréed squash. Then *my* rations, stored in a new Tupperware container, note taped to it, *Babysitter Squares*. A letdown it wasn’t pineapple upside-down cake, but what could I do?

Forest strode around the kitchen distractedly, glancing at his watch, pointing out this and that. Why I’d need the toaster I didn’t know, just kept nodding *uh-huh*. Rain splatted the window with the cherry-print curtains. Bobby’s shrieks of glee reached us from the living room along with the spasms of canned laughter, regular as some kooky heartbeat, on *The Wayne and Shuster Show*. I heard a crazed outburst that sounded like “*Toga! Toga!*”

Shirley Bannister whisked into the kitchen, a freshly lit cigarette between those divine coral fingernails. Loading down her other arm was a large being: part-baby, part-toddler. A jumbo baby.

“Have you ever changed a diaper, Sadie?”

I shook my head. She bid me follow. I trailed in the wake of her smoke and perfume. The being smelled putrid. I scrunched my nose, trying not to breathe. If I hoped to be a contender for Wanda Keeler’s job I must remain unflappable. Shirley Bannister breezed ahead of me into the open concept where the machine still meted out roars and guffaws. Bobby was sprawled out on the floor, until his mother ordered him to turn off the telly, hurry upstairs, bathe, brush his teeth, and change into his

pajamas. The boy obeyed with a moping posture and stomped up the steps, gun holster flapping desolately against his small thighbones, the tousled dog at his heels.

Mr. Bannister chugged back downstairs, to the wet bar, I guessed.

The sunken living room felt very quiet after the pulses of mirth, only the sound of muffled wind and drumming rain. Shirley Bannister slanted her cigarette in a ceramic ashtray with a goose about to fly. They owned such stylish things. She led me over to the strange cart on wheels with its curtained lower section. For the first time, I noticed its padded surface. Onto it she lowered the huge baby. “And here’s our Faith. Fifteen whole months old, our little Plum.”

For the first time, I got a good look at the being. Despite the smell, I managed a poker face. She rattled me; I’d no clue what to do with babies, especially giant ones. I bent my mouth into a smile, supposing they felt reassured by such gestures.

The ‘Plum’ made a face at me, an ugly, scrunched, confused scowl on the brink, I was sure, of erupting into ear-splitting wails. She didn’t look like a Faith to me, more like a Gretchen or Hilda or some cranky space alien. Several babies lived in our apartment building, and many were pushed around in prams out at Golden Mile Plaza; *any* of them looked better than this creature with her crib-hair and blotchy complexion. There was something wrong with her one eye. Warped. Off-kilter. The full force of Wanda Keeler’s declaration hit me now, along with a new wave of diaper stench, about babysitting being the dream job except for the firebrands.

Shirley Bannister bent, removing equipment from the lower part of the table, its curtain shoved aside. She told me to stand tightly against the table to block the baby from rolling onto the floor. That meant getting closer to that wretched smell. I willed

my nose to not wrinkle. Beating her fists into the air and squirming, the baby shifted from side to side on the table and a sound like *ech ech ech* spurted from her mouth. She rocked harder from one side to the other like a flipped-over beetle trying to right itself. She terrified me.

“Hello Little Plum,” I ventured.

That did it. Faith exploded into panicked screams and bawled with unbelievable fury, even louder than the earlier television.

Shirley, her hands full of power and cotton and pins, rose and stroked the baby’s crimson forehead. “There, *there*, Sweet Pea,” the mother crooned. The baby wailed. Over the din, Shirley explained that the baby “made strange,” that this was perfectly normal, she’d grow out of it. Geez Louise why couldn’t she grow out of it *tonight*?

Her racket finally subsided. Trembling, I wondered if the money really *was* good enough, if my throat *wasn’t* a bit swollen or sore. But I felt fine. Aside from monthly cramps. I bucked myself up by picturing the saddle shoes I’d buy. Just a matter of getting through a few hours.

Mrs. Bannister unbuttoned the baby’s pink sleeper. Her husband came back upstairs and hallooed over to us. He’d ring the Old Mill restaurant to hold their dinner reservation and his wife called that one crackerjack of an idea.

“I’m sorry I made her cry,” I told Shirley Bannister.

“Don’t be silly, Sadie, she’s just not used to you. Give her a little time.”

The face with its askew eye skunked me from the changing table and though the bawling rage had stopped, the *ech ech* whimpers continued, along with the huffs and puffs of wind sucker-punching the house.

“Observe,” Shirley Bannister advised. So, there I was, in diaper school. She set the clean, folded diaper, cotton wipes, pins

and baby powder near the Plum's robust, kicking feet. Then grabbed the baby's ankles and lifted her chubby legs high enough to lay a clean diaper under her bottom. The baby still wore her fouled diaper, which puzzled me but the mother's movements were so flowing and assured, my doubts dwindled. The mother had often performed this trick. The squirming and kicking lulled, the baby's expression shifted to a dull stare, one eye drifting blankly towards the ceiling light fixture, or Mars. The mother chattered praise to me, how 'Little Faith' would take her first steps any day, how her Plum had started saying a few words, quite precocious, according to the child-rearing books. I had to take her word for it; I'd only heard screaming and *ech ech ech*.

Forest Bannister's suave telephone patter reached us from the kitchen between rain needles against the house that sounded like angry rice hurled at a cursed wedding.

His wife unpinned the soiled diaper, releasing the full icky force of its contents, the outcome of all that puréed squash. Shirley cooed. "Oh, you *little smelly Nelly*." Then bunched the bad diaper in her hand, holding in the smell. She slid it down into a pail behind the curtain. Then she asked me to pass her a clean wipe, and I did, marvelling at how she cleaned the baby's cleft with a few deft strokes. She released her daughter's ankles. Faith kicked her legs and gurgled like a happy fountain. The purplish blotches on her face paled to a less bilious shade, but she was still homely, a face like hers wouldn't appear on a baby-food-jar label any time soon.

"Always wipe front to back," Mrs. Bannister instructed. "I almost forgot, Sadie. It helps if you sing. Try it."

I thought of the vinyl record on my Cobra-Matic, the fluff snagged on the stylus that delivered me to this dreamy home. Striving to mimic The Chordettes' honeyed strains, I sang

“Mr. Sandman.”

“Lovely, Faith likes that,” the mother said, sprinkling powder on her child’s nether parts. The baby seemed indifferent to me, but at least she wasn’t crying. Then Shirley pinned on the clean diaper, careful not to jab any tender flesh. She took another clean wipe and swabbed her own hands and her daughter’s, those tiny perfect fingers the baby’s best feature.

“All done,” Shirley beamed, buttoning the sleeper and scooping up the baby, holding her high like some offering. “Nothing to it. Now we’ll take Faith upstairs to her crib and with any luck she’ll settle down and you should only have to change her once tonight.”

Queasily, I trailed them upstairs, stunned by how much *work* it all was, astonished at the Bannisters’ ability to gallivant so often, filled with wonderment at where they found the steam. The house’s second floor was predictable enough, carbon copy of Wanda Keeler’s home, a hallway sprouting rooms. The Bannisters had thrown their renovating energy into the downstairs. Easy to know which door was the bathroom, gushing water behind the closed door, Bobby’s bath.

Shirley Bannister led me through the second door on the right to the nursery. A lamp with a ceramic lamb for a base beamed soft and muted, across a room so small, the crib occupied a quarter of it. Wall shelves held stuffed bears, a Tiny-tears doll. Bronzed baby bootie. A dormer window’s curtains starred kittens. A furry unicorn shared a rocking chair with a single book. Mrs. Bannister saw me eyeing its cover. “Dr. Spock, upstairs copy,” she remarked. The mother lowered her baby into the crib over which dangled a dancing seal mobile. The seals swayed lightly and the Plum gurgled and pointed to them. I was still afraid of the giant baby, how *alive* it was, who knew what it might do next?

In the corner, there was a dresser, on its varnished top, a tin carousel. The sweetest thing in the room and the prettiest toy I'd ever seen. Must have cost plenty. Shirley spied me admiring it and wound it into motion. The tiny horses on their red and white twist poles began to rise and lower, the carousel's wispy song like an ice-cream cart's tinkles along a summer street. Mrs. Bannister said the carousel sent the Plum right to sleep and sure enough when I glanced over, through the crib's slats, the baby's eyelids drooped, nearly closed. Maybe she'd sleep the whole time. Maybe this *would* be a piece of pineapple upside-down cake after all.

"Shirley!" Forest summoned from downstairs.

Mrs. Bannister formed a *shhh* signal with her coral fingernail against her lips as we tiptoed out of the nursery. She pointed out Bobby's room and advised he should be in bed by nine at the latest. As I followed her swishing lace skirt she added I should check on Faith every half hour or, if she broke out crying, carry her downstairs and change her diaper. My brain dog-paddled with instructions, the thought of picking up the jumbo baby brought new jitters.

At the bottom of the steps Forest met us. He wore his fine tweed overcoat and his driving gloves again and held open his wife's coat in a debonair way. And *what* a coat – elegant, rose-taupe in the latest silhouette style with a draped back, oval collar. Like one in Morgan's Department Store window. Shirley looked darling, drifting into the coat, like a girl in a romantic play, crooning, "Why thank you, kind Sir." I could see playacting meant a lot to married people. Playing dress-up. The coat pantomime stirred something in me and silently I vowed to be the best babysitter they'd ever had, light-years better than chipmunk-cheeks Wanda Keeler.

"I thought we'd take the Healey tonight," Forest told his