



I scanned the small ads at the front of *The Lady*. I needed a new position and I needed it fast. My lovely employers, an American couple with three children, had been told they were moving back to the States at the start of the next month. The move was as big a shock to them as it was to me, but while they were looking at a return to the land of apple pie and Uncle Sam, I was looking at unemployment benefit – unless I could find another nannying position pronto.

Pen in hand, I worked my way through the list crossing out the non-starters and no-hopers as I went. ‘Couple wanted . . .’ nope. ‘Part time . . .’ no chance. I need full-time wages. ‘North Scotland . . .’ Where? I’ll freeze! ‘Full-time nanny required for large establishment in Oxfordshire . . .’ Much more hopeful. I read the rest of the ad and circled it. ‘Fun and energetic.’ I ticked that box. ‘Live in.’ Was there any other way to be a proper nanny? ‘Sole charge of child.’ One child? How easy was that? ‘Fluent English, non-smoker, clean driving licence essential, yadda, yadda, yadda . . .’ All the standard things the middle classes want from their nannies. Just as well, I

thought, they don't generally add 'confident and outgoing'. I wouldn't cut the mustard on that one, but as they never do, I'm all right. I underlined the phone number.

In theory the next bit should have been a doddle: dial the number, say you've read the ad and ask if you can have an interview. Not hard, you might think. Except that it is for me. Nervously I rubbed my hands together and noticed they were damp with sweat. I swallowed and stared at the phone, as if by doing that I could persuade it to make the call on my behalf. I gazed at the receiver for about five minutes before I had raised enough courage to pick it up. Then I put it down again while I found a notebook and paper and wrote out all the likely questions I might get asked. That took a few more minutes. Then I thought I needed a cup of tea beside me in case my throat got dry while I was talking. It was a good half-hour before I finally began to dial with a finger that was shaking with nerves.

After I'd finished the call I felt quite saggy with relief. It had all been straightforward, although why I imagined it might have been anything else I didn't examine, except that I always assumed any new event or hurdle I came across in my life was going to be an ordeal. This time – as anyone would have expected – all that happened was that a woman answered, took my details, asked for my CV and said she would be in touch in due course.

A couple of days later a thick cream envelope arrived in the post for me. As with the telephone call, nerves meant I sat and stared at it for a few minutes, wondering what it contained. Eventually I realised the best way to

find out was to open it. The words 'I am pleased' leapt off the page at me. They never said 'I am pleased' if they were giving you the brush-off. My eyes raced down the rest of the page: '... invite you for an interview ... Please bring ... The successful applicant ...' All the usual stuff.

I put the letter down on the breakfast table and all my insecurities began piling in again. I'd clocked the address where the interview was to take place – Chelsea. A place in Oxfordshire and a house in a posh bit of London. So my possible future employer was seriously rich. Which meant my chances of being successful had just gone down the pan. I mean, I've got all the right qualifications but mine haven't come from one of those swanky nanny schools which cost a fortune to go to and make you wear a uniform. Which, in my experience, is the sort of nanny the really rich want – the sort of nanny who talks like them, the sort of nanny who knows how to ski, has a double-barrelled name and sees pictures of her relations in *Hello!*

However, I'd got the interview and I had to give it a shot. Maybe no one else had applied; or, if anyone had, just maybe they hadn't gone to the right nanny schools either. To have any chance at all I had to try. Time was running out for me, and as soon as it did, so would my money and my options.

A few days later I was pacing the streets of Chelsea, killing time till my interview was due. Knowing London traffic and the endless possibilities for delays on its public transport I'd allowed over half an hour extra to reach my

destination. As I loafed about the neighbouring streets, the chill February breeze wheedling its way under my scarf and jacket, I wondered about the other interviewees, my chances of landing the job, who my future employers might be in the unlikely event of my success and what I would do next in the more likely event of failure. Going back to Pinner to live with my mum and her boyfriend really wasn't an option and, with rents in London being what they were, affording a place on my own on the dole was about as unlikely as getting the job.

If I'd been nervous at the prospect of making the initial telephone call, it was nothing compared to my blind panic as the hour of my interview approached. I felt sick and sweaty. I'd worried about what I should wear, about finding the house, about my qualifications and my experience, but most of all I'd worried about making the wrong impression. I can't help it, it's how I am. It's probably why I like working with kids.

Generally kids don't judge, and one thing I always worry about is what other people think about me. And generally I assume the kind of people I have to work for aren't rating me very highly. My background – only child of a single mother, father unknown, raised in suburbia, educated at the local comp, never travelled, never done anything the least bit glamorous – is worlds away from theirs. My mum always insisted that I spoke properly and said it would help me get ahead, which it has done. My accent has never been an issue with my employers.

Two minutes before my allotted time I pressed the doorbell with a trembling finger.

As I waited for the door to be opened I noticed that unlike many of the other huge, red-brick houses around this one just had a single bell. It hadn't been broken up into flats. House prices in London meant that 'seriously rich' was probably an understatement. I felt even more shit-scared. I wondered who it might be: some Russian oligarch, a footballer, a rock star? The door opened. I was going to find out soon.

'Yes?' said a woman in a suit.

'I'm here for the job interview,' I said. My heart was pounding and I tried to smile but I was so seized up with nerves that it probably made me look like a halfwit. I wondered who this woman was. Mrs Russian-Oligarch? Staff? Whoever she was, she didn't smile back.

'And your name?'

'Lucy Carter.'

'Follow me please, Miss Carter.'

I stepped into the vast black and white tiled hall. A beautiful staircase swept down into it. In the middle was an oval table with a big flower arrangement on it. I felt as if I was walking into a film set. The place was unreal. Yet again I wondered who owned it, not that it really mattered. If I got the job it was the kid I was going to be responsible for. But it's only human nature to be curious, isn't it?

Nerves made me check my appearance in the big mirror in the hall as I scuttled past. I looked scared, I thought. My eyes looked like those of some small creature about to get pounced on by another, bigger, fiercer animal. However, my short hair was tidy despite the wind outside

and my thin face had a nice rosy glow – probably also courtesy of the wind.

I was shown into a book-lined room with a large desk in the middle of the floor. While I waited, I had the chance to take it all in. On the one wall that didn't have floor-to-ceiling bookcases was a fireplace below an oil painting of a stunning young woman posing against a tree in wonderful, landscaped grounds. I knew I'd seen her face before but for a second or two I couldn't pluck her name out of my memory. Then I spotted the horses in the background of the picture. Pennies started not just dropping but cascading. That was it! Of course. She was the world-famous, beautiful, tragic Countess of Arden.

My God, she was a woman who had had everything – and more. The only child of a multi-millionaire, she had become a hugely celebrated three-day eventer before she married the Earl of Arden, and the phrase 'golden couple' didn't even come close to describing how the media and the public loved them. A year after producing a son and heir she'd won gold for Britain at the Olympics and to cap it all the public had voted her 'Sports Personality of the Year'.

And then she'd been killed.

The Countess of Arden, mother of a little boy, young, beautiful, talented, National Sporting Treasure, was dead at the age of thirty. Tragic or what?

I wasn't entirely sure about the details of the accident except that the Countess had been kicked by one of her event horses. Just when her life had reached a peak of perfection it was over.

It was one of those times – like when Princess Diana died – when everyone could remember where they were when they heard the news. I had been in the children’s nursery, giving them their supper and chatting to them about their day, when I’d heard a cry from their mother’s bedroom. Thinking she’d hurt herself I whizzed into the next room and she was shaking her head and saying ‘oh my, oh my’ over and over. She’d just heard a news flash announcing Becca’s death.

The subsequent public outpouring had been much the same as the one over Diana. And just as there were then, there had been a few unhinged people suggesting that her death might have been not an accident but planned by some mad rival. There was a brief police inquiry into the circumstances of her death but they concluded it was just a desperately sad bit of bad luck: the horse had lashed out and she’d been in the way. However, the inquiry had caused enough of a delay between her death and the funeral for the national psyche to rev itself up to a day of mass hysteria complete with piles of flowers stacked up outside their place in Oxfordshire – Arden Hall – and huge crowds around the little church in the village where her funeral was held.

There had been some obvious differences between the deaths of princess and countess. For a start, the Countess was still happily married. Secondly, no one (apart from a few barking members of the horsey set clinging to the idea of a mad rival) was seriously suggesting there had been any sort of conspiracy about her death, and thirdly, the hullabaloo had died down as soon as the funeral was over.

That had been about a year ago, and I wondered who had been looking after the kid since then. The Earl had never been out of the papers during his brief marriage, but now he had disappeared out of the public's consciousness so maybe he'd taken over.

Staring at the Countess's picture I realised that I didn't know much about the Earl. I'd never even heard of him till he started courting Becca Hetherington. It was Becca that the press was really interested in: a top-class eventer and the beautiful only daughter of a fabulously rich industrialist. When her name became linked romantically with his some of his past had emerged, but all I could really remember was that he'd been in the army and had been decorated for some fantastically heroic act just before his own father had died and he'd inherited the title and the vast family estate. However, what with that and his wife's sporting achievements the papers had had a field day and the couple never seemed to be out of them – a bit like Posh and Becks. And of course, because of his title and her name the papers had dubbed them Posh and Becca.

I felt a wave of sympathy for the poor man. Before her death he'd been half of a perfect partnership, both of them young, beautiful and talented – they'd had everything. No wonder he wasn't seen around much any more. He must be heartbroken.

I heard the door behind me open and I turned. A pleasant-faced woman who looked more like a farmer's wife than someone involved with the glamorous Ardens entered the room.

‘Hello,’ she said, holding out her hand. ‘Miss Carter? I’m Annie.’

‘Hello, Annie,’ I said, taking her hand. I noticed it was rough and careworn, which reinforced the ‘farmer’s wife’ image. ‘Lucy, please.’ I hoped I sounded confident and self-assured and not shit-scared, which was the reality.

Annie had obviously spotted me staring at the picture. ‘I imagine you’ve already guessed who your employer will be should you get the position.’

I nodded.

‘I’m a friend of the Earl’s and currently standing in as Teddy’s nanny. The last girl had family problems – her mother was taken ill very suddenly and there was no one else to look after her – so it’s all been a bit unsettling for little Teddy as she had to dash off with almost no warning. The Earl has asked me to do the interviews. He’s not very experienced in the nuts and bolts of childcare so he’s asked me to find someone suitable.’ She gestured to two armchairs near the desk.

I sat down, wondering what the relationship between the Earl and this very ordinary middle-aged woman was. She’d said ‘a friend’ but she certainly didn’t look as if she belonged to the sort of set that Becca and Edward had always been seen with. Not that I really cared. Besides, being interviewed by Annie was going to be a lot less scary than being interviewed by the Earl. I counted my blessings.

‘Coffee?’ she offered.

‘Yes, please.’

She moved across to the desk and pressed a button on the intercom. ‘Mrs Porter?’ A voice crackled in reply. ‘May

we have coffee for two in the study, please?’ Another crackle. Obviously Annie was fluent in crackle because I didn’t have a clue what Mrs Porter had said – for all I knew she might have told Annie to naff off – but Annie thanked her and released the intercom button. Then she came and sat beside me, and ran her eye over my life history which she’d picked up off the desk.

‘So,’ she said, after a moment. ‘Why do you want to leave your present job?’

‘I’m afraid my job is leaving me.’ I explained about my current family returning to the States. ‘The news came out of the blue so it’s been a bit of a nightmare. However, Mrs van de Berg has said that under the circumstances she wouldn’t mind the children flying out to their granny’s in Washington a little early if it would help me secure my next job. They’re due to go before the move anyway to make it easier for their parents to pack up the house. She says a week or so earlier won’t make that much difference to her or her mother but might mean everything to me. She understands I should have had a proper period of notice and wants to do all she can to make it up to me.’

‘That’s kind.’

‘She’s a kind woman.’

The coffee arrived, served on a silver tray with milk and cream and home-made biscuits, brought in by the suited lady – Mrs Porter? I thought I could get used to this sort of life. Being waited on hand and foot had its attractions.

‘So how will you keep Teddy busy every day?’

‘Well, obviously I wouldn’t want to change his routine

too much at first. He's . . .' I racked my brains. 'He's about three, isn't he?'

Annie nodded. 'Four in the autumn.'

'I expect you do this already, but I would want to take him out for about an hour each day to play or to walk but mainly to have a good run about and get some fresh air. And we'd play all sorts of games which will help with learning later: measuring, counting or weighing things.'

'How do you feel about television?'

'I think a little now and again is great for children. I hate the thought of its being used as an alternative babysitter, but a few minutes a day doesn't do any harm. In fact I think it can be quite stimulating.'

'And what about bedtime?'

'Routine is essential to small children. They don't like things chopping and changing. They like a structured day. Unless the Earl has strong views otherwise I would expect Teddy to be in bed and asleep by about seven.'

'And what are your views on food?'

'I cook everything from scratch – well, except things like fish fingers, obviously. I believe that children should eat what is put in front of them, within reason, and if there's something they really don't like I try to avoid it. Not that I would serve up artichokes or curry to someone of Teddy's age, of course, but I wouldn't encourage faddiness.'

Annie quizzed me about any number of things from my views on discipline (firm but fair) to the number of points on my driving licence (none).

Then she said, 'Just one more thing, Lucy. How do you think you'll take to living in the heart of the country?'

For some reason I opened up about the dream I'd had ever since I'd read *Swallows and Amazons* as a child; that one day I'd be allowed to go away with a few friends and we'd sail and camp and cook over an open fire and the sun would shine and we'd have fun. But seeing as how I'd never lived more than twelve miles from the centre of London the closest I'd ever got to the great outdoors was Hyde Park. Still, you could dream about it – or I had when I was little. Being a grown-up with a living to earn meant that it was never going to happen now. And, sadly, that sort of unsupervised freedom wasn't a realistic dream for today's kids either.

I smiled wryly, tailing off.

Annie laughed. 'But the Earl did exactly that when he was a nipper. Not that he'd let Teddy do it. Times have changed, unfortunately.' She gave me a long stare, then said, 'Should you be offered the post, there's nothing in your private life which might mean your leaving sooner rather than later? It's just that little Teddy has had a lot of disruption in his life and stability is what he needs.'

Of course it was. His mother had been killed, for heaven's sake, and his last nanny had had to up sticks and go. That was enough disruption for anyone.

'There's nothing. Honest. No boyfriend, no family commitments. I was in both my last jobs for almost two years and I wouldn't plan to be with Teddy for anything less – longer, preferably.'

I left feeling hopeful. I'd done my best, but was my best good enough?