

And God Created the Au Pair

Pascale Smets & Benedicte
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Extract

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From: Nell Fenton
To: Charlotte Bailey

Do not, repeat do not confuse dishwashing liquid with dishwasher liquid. Dishwashing liquid is in fact washing-up liquid in N America and when used in the dishwasher creates a giant foam monster that pours through what one naively assumes are the watertight seals on the edges of the dishwasher door. First tried to scoop the pouring tide of foam into kitchen sink but that immediately filled up with foam that would not die so then had to fill buckets with foam and run and throw them out on the deck. When Michael finally responded to my shrieks for assistance and wandered downstairs he (most unusually) had the good idea that we should sprinkle the small sachet of dishwasher powder that came free with the machine over the foam. Surprisingly it did in fact kill the beast. But everything very wet and foamy afterwards and him very smug.

From: Charlotte Bailey
To: Nell Fenton
Re: the beast

Didn't the size of the bottle alert you? Any sign of missing saucepans yet?

From: Nell Fenton
To: Charlotte Bailey

Bottle was huge. V easy mistake to make. Saucepans still mysteriously absent. Have unearthed one box of stuff so am now able to grate things or whisk things.

From: Charlotte Bailey
To: Nell Fenton

Have some ghastly problem with our drains at the moment, v stinky & wet at the bottom of the garden. Albert who is here to paint the kitchen full of gloomy predictions, have to say feel a bit gloomy myself but am resolutely trying to hide it as it only encourages him.

From: Nell Fenton
To: Charlotte Bailey

Sure it's nothing too serious. You know Albert would rather eat his own head than miss an opportunity to revel in a bit of doom and gloom. Have finally tracked down saucepans (in the basement under approx 1000 boxes of toys).

Went downtown today to buy lots of ugly expensive school uniform, for ugly, expensive (though apparently excellent) new school. Remarkably, Ollie though only doing mornings has to wear uniform on Fridays complete with blazer (absurd as he is not yet 3 and a midget to boot), so have had to go to all that expense so he can look like a small square waiter one morning a week. Felt really nervous about driving my big new car on big roads at first, but have discovered that

a big road is in fact a good thing and you never need to mount the pavement to ease past an oncoming car like in London.

From: Charlotte Bailey

To: Nell Fenton

Don't know about that, find big roads really scary & am used to sweatily squeezing past other big cars in tiny roads though must admit despite much practice am still apt to misjudge spaces. My car is looking quite well used, though cheerily not as bad as Amanda next door's. Not entirely her fault as I did reverse hard into her car twice while parking last week (Dan watching – made me nervous).

Fran is preparing for yet another driving test. Talks about it endlessly. Told her 'I'll reverse over her if she says 'I'm definitely going to crack it this time' once more.

Saw Helena in Tesco today, she trapped me by the bananas, her face a mask of tenderness as she enquired how I was coping now you've gone. Said I was just about bearing up (meant it as a joke but then noticed her eyes had alarmingly filled with tears), she did lots of nodding then said what a lovely neighbour you'd been and she'd always remember your unique approach to life. Said it like you'd died instead of just moved abroad. She paused a lot before she said 'unique approach' which made me suspect it was more a reference to the untidiness of your house than the uniqueness of your approach.

From: Charlotte Bailey

To: Nell Fenton

Hurrah. Have just spent £400 having video made of my drains in order to 'pinpoint problem area'. Unsurprisingly 'problem area' turns out to be where stinky wet patch is (drain cracked, lawn will have to be dug up). How to file video? alphabetically between Christmas & Easter? or between Dan's buttocks as sort of aide-memoire not to waste our money in the future (he insisted we have it done)? How are the children? When do they start school? Mine back this Thurs, Ellie v excited about going into year 1 and feel irrationally optimistic about Maddie starting in nursery.

From: Nell Fenton

To: Charlotte Bailey

Should definitely make Dan sit and watch the drain video (keeping the empty case between his buttocks while he watches). School started yesterday and they were all v cheerful when they came out which was a huge relief. School drop-off and pickup, the ultimate N American experience. No standing round in the playground chatting to other mothers. Everyone queues up in their huge cars and when you get to the school there's a 'drive-thru' and you hand your children out to a teacher, and at pickup lots of teachers striding around with walkie-talkies and when you reach the school there are your children waiting for you. They aren't quite handed out through a little window, but almost.

From: Charlotte Bailey

To: Nell Fenton

Very glad it went so well. Girls back yesterday too. Ellie thrilled about it, Maddie's start in nursery not so auspicious. In fact I could say ghastly. I had secretly harboured insane notion that world's weepiest child MIGHT go in without crying. Needless to say it turned out I had been wildly optimistic. Resolved to harden my heart against squirty & copious tears (so squirty & copious actually left a wet patch on my trousers), naturally failed miserably and had to bolt to the car.

From: Nell Fenton

To: Charlotte Bailey

Your problem is you're too good-humoured and your children grow attached to you. If you were a ratbag like me you'd find your children parted from you quite cheerfully.

Next-door-but-one came round today to introduce herself and brought her two daughters AND home-made cookies. Wish I could report she was wearing a pinny, but even without that, quite a pleasing piece of good ol'-fashioned neighbourliness. Younger daughter, Takara, is the same age as Josie (though approximately half her height) and they seemed to get along quite well. Older daughter was a pill, couldn't have made it clearer that she'd come round under duress, and slumped onto the sofa exuding adolescent surliness from every pore. Don't think from early indications Suzette and I are going to be soulmates. In the time it took to drink a cup of tea and eat a home-made cookie she managed to tell me 1) her husband is very brilliant and successful 2) her daughters are both very gifted and intelligent, also musical, 3) she has a troublesome

time finding the right hairdresser as they all make such a fuss over her hair. Suggestion here was that her carrotty mane is so very beautiful it's almost more of a curse than a blessing. She does a lot of languid flicking it back over her shoulders. She also very cleverly managed to weave her flat stomach into the conversation (her eyes definitely skittered across mine at this point). If I were more skilled at these things I could have raised the subject of bottoms, because I would estimate hers is at least 50% bigger than mine. She also brought me up to speed on her marital situation – current husband, Kane, is no. 2 and is half-Japanese which apparently makes their home 'very culturally rich'. Luckily she and husband no. 1 are still really good friends and Sophie (daughter of no. 1) adores Kane and just loves having two dads, so everything is wonderful. Altogether a very promising encounter, hope Josie and Takara do become friends as I shall very much enjoy hearing in what other ways Suzette is generally marvellous.

From: Charlotte Bailey

To: Nell Fenton

How fabulous, love the sound of her carrotty mane. You do realise you equal each other out. Her shrunken daughter & oversized bottom equals your oversized daughter & shrunken bottom.

From: Nell Fenton

To: Charlotte Bailey

I've been going round this house trying to hang pictures etc and am discovering that though it looks very new and fancy it is in fact constructed of compressed cardboard. That,

together with the fact that the downstairs is mostly open-plan, means the children can hear every hushed conversation we have even when they're in their bedrooms. Doorbell is v offensive too, plays an eight-note tune and sound comes through an intercom which is in every room so makes me jump out of my skin every time it rings. Also a ridiculous number of bathrooms and a sauna in the basement. Cannot envisage any circumstances under which I would want to use it.

From: Charlotte Bailey

To: Nell Fenton

Re: big vulgar house

Grant you everything sounds amazingly vulgar (speaking of which Dan suggested you could use sauna for 70s-style sex) but since everything is new, presumably it all works, also how fantastically liberating tastewise – no poncey agonising over whether it's better to buy genuine antique bog from salvage yard for 3x price of naffer but more practical reproduction one. In absence of your steadying influence did buy poncey antique loo for spare bathroom. Turns out you were right – impossible to clean as glaze v patchy. However, what you didn't know & I have triumphantly discovered is will only flush vv small poos.

From: Nell Fenton

To: Charlotte Bailey

You should put a discreet little picture up like a no-smoking sign but with a poo instead of a cigarette (wd also help with the cleaning problem).

From: Charlotte Bailey

To: Nell Fenton

'Drain patrol' came today to replace cracked piece of pipe. Rather mystifyingly, although you would think a trench the approximate depth & width of drain to be replaced would be adequate, it appears not. Excavations have now reached such magnitude, suspect they have become confused between the words 'pipe' & 'tube' & are actually building a tube station (tube theory further supported by the size of their quote). Hugh is overjoyed and desperate to get out there. V tricky to keep him in as workmen keep leaving door to garden open & he v darty & determined.

From: Nell Fenton

To: Charlotte Bailey

Probably will increase the value of your house though, being so close to a tube station. I've discovered intriguing feature of this house which is that floor throughout hall and kitchen which is granite? polished stony stuff anyway and which is speckled grey, black and white is perfect camouflage for anything at all, gratifying when this is dirt, but annoying when it's a small object you've inadvertently dropped. God forbid I drop a contact lens on it. Garage now completely full of empty boxes and packaging as we don't know what to do with it all so have been lobbing it in there. Suppose we will at some stage have to actually use it to put the cars in but will worry about that later.

From: Charlotte Bailey

To: Nell Fenton

Floor that hides the dirt, definitely worth the odd lost contact lens. I have dirt-accentuating floor and still lose stuff all the time.

Rained really heavily last night & in usual weekend fashion sent girls downstairs with Hugh to watch telly so we could have a lie-in. Lie-in cut short by sound of Hugh crying & Ellie calling me, v ominously citing Hugh & mud as the reason for waking us. Came down to find Hugh freezing & thickly coated in mud from what was once our garden but now closely resembles trenches of WW1. Ellie's explanation for letting him out was that 'he wanted to'. Whole episode entirely my own fault for being lazy and sluttish.

From: Nell Fenton

To: Charlotte Bailey

Count yourself lucky that it was only mud. Rob called me down proudly the other day because Ollie had done a poo on the potty and Rob had decided to wipe his bottom for him as a nice surprise for me. Had to completely strip both of them and clean quite a large surrounding area. Rob very pleased and expectant so I had to say 'well done for trying'.

From: Nell Fenton

To: Charlotte Bailey

Suzette and Kane invited us for a barbecue lunch today. Michael naturally grumpy, on the very limited exposure he's

had to them says they are stupid and boring. I on the other hand thoroughly enjoy the little glimpses I get into their life and was therefore happy to go. Not disappointed in the least. Sophie, the older daughter, emerges sufficiently from her sullen silence when on her home turf to be obnoxiously rude to them both – wasn't hungry/didn't like any of the food served. Suzette eventually tensely excused her from the table and she slouched off inside. Once she'd relaxed after Sophie's departure, Suzette was in quirky mode, lots of tales of her madcap exploits, how she'd chased a racoon out of her bedroom in her undies (so a bit sexy too) at their cottage up north (everyone here has a cottage up north), how she'd driven to Montreal with the girls on a whim one night because she wanted them to absorb the French language (thought this bit sounded slightly bipolar, it's about a five-hour drive . . .), how she'd charmed the Canadian border guards into not charging her tax after a shopping spree in the States (doubtless her glorious red hair played its part). Obviously her life is a chick flick and much more fun than mine. Very best bit was when we had ice cream. She was talking to Michael while holding up her spoon and slowly running her tongue along it. Not sure if she fancies him or if she's just one of those women who automatically flirts with all men. Michael, bless him, was looking at her with puzzled distaste which she no doubt read as scarcely controlled lust.

From: Charlotte Bailey
To: Nell Fenton

Michael probably just thought she had a tongue disorder.

Anna rang last night to get your address (again). Told me Rory and Theo had missed first one and a half days of school as

she'd got the date they went back wrong – thought they went back same day as Guy and Isabel so they missed the first day and then on morning of next day discovered Toulouse-Lautrec had badly chewed one of Rory's new school shoes and bitten the buckle off one of Theo's. So then instead of just sending them in trainers, decided to drop Greta at nursery and 'whizz' into Buckingham to buy boys shoes en route to school. Whizzed there but couldn't whizz on as she 'broke down'. This conversation conducted to the background of Geoffrey shouting 'You didn't break down – you ran out of bloody petrol again.' Anyway after fulminating for 20 mins about how this time she really was going to get rid of Toulouse-Lautrec, Anna came over quite sentimental, said she misses you and blood is thicker than water (about 9 times).

From: Nell Fenton

To: Charlotte Bailey

That dog will survive us all. Why would she get rid of him for something as trivial as eating school shoes when she failed to get rid of him after he ate Geoffrey's passport before he went to Dubai?

Went to a fundraising meeting at the school this afternoon (doing my bit). Also thought I might meet some other parents since you never meet anyone at the drive-thru. I took Ollie along since I always did in England to such things. Heart sank rather when I saw all the women v done up and manicured, meeting in a formal boardroom and NO children. Braved it anyhow and sat Ollie on my lap. They began with minutes from the last meeting – v bad sign. Ollie asking me questions in a loud voice from time to time but otherwise ok. It dragged on and on and Ollie was getting more and more pissed off.

Someone gave him some crayons and paper which kept him sitting quietly for a few minutes till I noticed he was chewing them and spitting them onto the table (not only embarrassing but also slightly worrying regressive behaviour). At this point the head of the school (a really giant arse) was addressing the meeting and all the other women were gazing at him with rapt admiration. Anyhow couldn't take it any more so shuffled out in disgrace. Shall not be going again.

From: Charlotte Bailey
To: Nell Fenton

Unclear about the headmaster's giant arse – does he have one or is he one?

From: Nell Fenton
To: Charlotte Bailey

Is one. Has a substantial arse but wd not be fair to describe it as giant.

From: Nell Fenton
To: Charlotte Bailey

Michael's new office held a party last night. Felt a bit of a twat as clearly everyone else had come straight from the office and was in work clothes and I was in party gear. Also we had to do a lot of standing around chatting and I wore my high boots which I always forget make me want to gnaw my feet off after 10 minutes. Still, met some people who are slightly more normal than the manicured soccer moms in their giant cars

from the school and one woman in particular, Nina, who Michael says is brilliant and lured over from Vancouver, is really delightful and has twin boys of Ollie's age, so that was promising.

From: Charlotte Bailey
To: Nell Fenton

Re overdressing – you should have explained to attentive circle of fellow guests (captivated by your English frankness) that this was just the kick-off to an evening of intense socialising and your real destination was a much bigger fancier party later on.

PS Fran v glum today. Had rather bad luck during driving test so didn't 'crack it' this go as she'd predicted.

From: Nell Fenton
To: Charlotte Bailey
Re: Wrinklies

Poor Fran, fear she'll try again though. Went to our posh mall first thing this morning. Disconcerted to see mall absolutely full of old people in snowy-white trainers and neatly pressed tracksuits. Apparently 'mall walking' is how old people get their exercise here, and obviously makes sense when v cold/hot, but surprising when outside is gentle September sun. Perhaps winter strikes with terrifying suddenness here and you can't be too careful?

From: Rachel Lockwood

To: Nell Fenton

Dear Nell

I have again proved my shortcomings as a friend and failed to email you to see how all is going. Are you settling in? and how are the children finding school? Jonathan has started at the local school and seems almost insultingly unconcerned about leaving me in the morning. Probably punishment for the fact that I never made finger puppets or did Play-Doh with him. Also the food at school is better than the food at home because they get jelly. (Is there no limit to my inadequacy?) Send me your news, we are thinking of you all and are planning how we can scrape up the money to come and visit, if I can ever get Jack on a plane that is.

Fondest love to all

Rachel xx

From: Nell Fenton

To: Rachel Lockwood

Dear Rachel, all is well here though still lots of unpacking to do. The house is quite nice, v comfortable in a vulgar way and the children seem to like their school, so far. Not seeing much of Michael who's working really long hours but hopefully that will settle down. Toronto is fantastic for children, lots of lovely clean parks and the restaurants are cheap (as is everything, in fact) and very child-friendly. Would love you to come with or without Jack, we have lots of room, 3 spare bedrooms and about 84 bathrooms. Charlotte & co are

coming at Christmas I hope, but perhaps you could come for Easter? Love Nell

From: Nell Fenton

To: Charlotte Bailey

The house is such a bomb site and I'm so desperate for some help – Michael never around – have hired a very unpromising cleaner called Cynthia. Got her through an agency and am resolutely ignoring her obvious shortcomings, not least of which is the fact that she seems a bit mad (mutters darkly all the time) also I cannot understand a word she says though she is Jamaican so I suppose English is her first language.

From: Charlotte Bailey

To: Nell Fenton

It's a time-honoured family tradition to have a dodgy cleaner and at least you have one, Gina-the-cleaner is leaving me. Also your house is finished so presumably things don't come off in your hand all the time (Dan stuck in bathroom for 20 mins yesterday when door handle fell out on bedroom side), everything a constant tip here AND I don't like new kitchen colour. Albert keeps looking at me through narrowed eyes saying 'You don't like it, do you?' so on top of hating it have to keep hotly denying I hate it as Dan will definitely divorce me if I change the colour again. Suspect Gina moving purely to get away from us and the spectacular shambles and Dorset was just the first county she came across into which debris from our house hadn't spilled. Feel quite sad about it, even though she's dreadfully unreliable (come rain or shine she might turn up) I'm really fond of her. Think we're going to get an au pair next, instead. Fran

says the trick is to get a beautiful Swedish one as it's the ugly ones who go after your husband and the beautiful ones who think he's a sad old wanker.

From: Nell Fenton
To: Charlotte Bailey

I can't believe Gina lasted as long as she did, was totally unsuited to manual labour with that inner ear problem of hers.

From: Charlotte Bailey
To: Nell Fenton

Nonsense, she cleaned very well, only staggered a bit and hardly ever toppled right over.

I've been looking at au pair details from agency, incredibly depressing as makes me feel absolutely ancient. They all seem to have been born in the 1980s. Also they're all so WORTHY. When I was 18 I was getting drunk on the King's Rd & trying to get to grips with smoking without setting my dreadlocks on fire. Nowadays all 18-year-olds (Swedish ones at least) 'love to work with childrens'. Will have to choose a short one as shower in top bathroom has v low showerhead.

From: Nell Fenton
To: Charlotte Bailey

Think it's moderately unlikely that they would list drinking and smoking as hobbies on their application forms, however keenly they pursue those activities in their spare time.

From: Nell Fenton
To: Charlotte Bailey

I'm going to kill Michael. Went to another work party and this time checked with Michael how smart/casual it was going to be. He assured me it was casual. Should have known he would not pay attention to such details. Turned out to be a party for the people they really wanted to impress (unlike previous hoi polloi party) and as we arrived we were photographed for society pages (vv bad – was wearing fairly skanky cord jacket) and when we got in all the women were in full evening wear, and me in very ordinary navy trousers, Gap t-shirt and cardigan (silk admittedly, but much washed), also in my distress managed to get potato-sized blotch of red wine on my t-shirt in first 10 minutes. Chairman's wife came up and kissed Michael, who was mortified since he hadn't bothered to shave (party being so casual). Since he's half-man half-gorilla, it's not insignificant when he fails to shave. Serves him bloody well right.

From: Charlotte Bailey
To: Nell Fenton

How could you not know he'd get it wrong?? This is the man who says 'I like that dress' when you're wearing a skirt. Like any NORMAL man, will say any old crap that pops into his head just to shut you up, also much more likely to say it's casual wear as party clothes require much more input from husband – eg 'no your back doesn't look at all fat in that/knees don't look weird/the choker doesn't make your neck look short' . . . and if he were interested enough to correctly assess dress code he would be no good to you as he would not be married to you as he would almost certainly be gay.

From: Nell Fenton
To: Charlotte Bailey

It's true that clothes aren't his specialist subject, what with all those confusingly different names clothes can have. (Colours also v problematic for him, brown and grey – how can anyone tell the difference?)

From: Charlotte Bailey
To: Nell Fenton

Fucking hell. Central heating finally packed up last night, quite frankly can't believe the ancient & poisonous boiler has lasted this long. Albert came round today in a last-ditch attempt to try and revive it. After 45 mins of the boiler equivalent of heart massage announced 'it's a gonner', had urge to add 'still, it had a good innings' but felt it would be disrespectful. Should have replaced the whole lot before we moved in last year but since at that point we were operating on the 'only absolutely essential work to be done' principle and it was (just) working it seemed unnecessary. Now v necessary & timing worse as have just paid to have 'tube station' dug in our garden & I really want to come to visit at Christmas.

From: Nell Fenton
To: Charlotte Bailey

Deepest condolences on your loss but you still have to come at Christmas whatever happens.

Now Josie has made friends pesky child has been nagging for a birthday party. Had hoped that her birthday being over a

month ago and the move etc would have made her forget, but no, bless her retentive little brain. Also she wants to invite the whole class so am failing to benefit from huge advantage of an August birthday where one can invite the whole class with impunity since 60% are invariably away. Have arranged something called Mad Science for entertainers and having set stupid precedent of doing handmade invitations for the last 2 birthdays have had to come up with appropriately mad and sciency card. Was quite pleased with my idea of cutting out test-tube-shape cardboard, with big bubbles coming out the top. Only noticed when I had done about 20 that they are vv phallic when upended. Still, not bloody doing them again and anyway it might prompt gratifying August-type refusal rate.

From: Charlotte Bailey

To: Nell Fenton

Try not posting the invitations at all but instead storing them safely in a nappy-changing bag for at least 2 weeks then performing secret, frantic, last-minute phone round (on discovering them crumpled & dirty in bottom of said bag), should yield 30–40% refusal rate if past experience is anything to go by.