

KOA BECK

# NANNY OF THE STATE

**I BECAME A LICENSED** foster parent in 2021.

What predated my official permission from the county to have children in my home was a year-long process of both surveillance and education. For months and months, I consented to have the county do deep background checks on me in multiple states. I signed a release giving government workers permission to pull any and all of my medical records, including my physical as well as my psychological and emotional health. I was fingerprinted in a sterile government building with a waiting room that had a child's activity table in the corner; brightly colored plastic signaling that, despite austere appearances, children do sometimes exist in this space.

I took lengthy classes co-led by both a licensed therapist and social worker on how to appropriately discipline a child who has experienced physical injury or an emotionally distressing experience, assuring them that what happened to them before is not happening all over again. I turned in homework assignments confirming I understood the state definition of "neglect," which includes everything from not providing a child with enough food and clothing to denying them medical care.

I welcomed a social worker into my home with the clear understanding that he was allowed to walk into every room, to open every drawer and cabinet, and to ask me the contents of any closed bottle. He was permitted to evaluate the exact temperature of the hot water from all my faucets and the tenacity of the child locks on the doors that conceal my cleaning supplies. He was soft spoken when he suggested additional locks on my washer and dryer and to add another screen to my fireplace. But a suggestion from a social worker of his objective, to license homes for children, is not really a suggestion at all. In this dynamic, he speaks as an embodiment of the county itself, which has a standard of care for all children retained in foster care.

And under this agreement, I'm essentially applying to work for them. I'm acquiescing to care for children under their rules, their protocols, and their standards.

I'm a nanny of the state.

**BEFORE I WORKED** in media, I was a full-time nanny and babysitter. In Brooklyn, I ferried children along subway platforms and from bath time to bed time. In Oakland, I escorted siblings to playgrounds and held a newborn while asking a toddler to not go too far out. In Paris, I took a seven-year-old on buses two times a week to his piano lesson, reminding him to not leave his jacket behind again please. I've carried diaper bags I did not pack and enforced rules I don't believe in. I've deflected questions about impending parental separations while encouraging one more piece of broccoli. I've peeled the tails off of grilled shrimps because she won't eat them otherwise. I've helped with homework, I've read one or three more stories despite that it's well past bedtime, and I've washed all the dishes I've used and fluffed up the pillows so it's like I was never there.

Each family has always been its own ecosystem; a unique structure with elements that I can't control. I ingratiate into them, learning to cut sandwiches and carry snacks in the exact way their parents do, to wait in the exact spot after school that their mom does, to give them chocolate after homework like their dad does. I'm designed to mirror back the consistency of their home in every swirl of bubble bath. My value is that I can contort and adhere, regardless of what I did for the last family or what my personal preferences for the child might be. That's what a nanny does.

As a foster mother, this same dynamic is set across institution and bureaucracy, an elaborate and sprawling system where the city essentially functions as the foremost parental authority. The city takes the form of different government workers, varying faces and names and email addresses and phone calls from numbers I don't immediately recognize and then I do. At each incarnation, they are the state coming to tell me how hot the bath water should be, what baby formula should be offered, and where to store my dish soap.

The state is allowed to do this because they have ultimately assumed responsibility for the child in the face of harm. For parents who are struggling with housing, food security, mental illness, incarceration, drug abuse, and/or violence, the day-to-day safety of their children has been deemed so dire that the state must remove them and place them elsewhere. That's the alternative, thanks to multigenerational impacts of racism, ableism, classism, and gendered responses to domestic violence. Newborns through teenagers are "detained" and taken into the authority of the Department of Children and Family Services, who will

then place them with appropriate family or foster homes depending on their needs. And yet, these structural failures for Black, Native, Latinx parents, for mentally ill parents, for poor parents, get messaged through the juvenile dependency court as *individual failures*.

Parents are presented with a highly individualized plan by the court to help establish a “safe” home to which their children can return without state intervention. The tonality of the courts underscores this approach: *if they can get and stay sober, if they can establish a clean, secure place to live, if they can maintain a job, if they attend therapy*, they can reclaim custody of their children. Everything is on them.

This isolated framework to dissect why parent and child should be separated is further reflected in the infrastructure of the courtroom: parenthood is literally evaluated on a case-by-case basis, like there are no deeply rooted, long-standing factors as to why this has happened. The siloing presents the story as if it’s isolated to this parent and this child. No two cases are identical, but many grow from identical circumstances. Homelessness overlaps with substance abuse in a poverty spiral where little to no access to mental health resources or food security or affordable housing inevitably means ricocheting into addiction or violence or both.

Blame is singular where it should be structural: Why are these parents struggling with basic needs? What about their life and their challenges render them incapable of parenting on a fundamental level? What about their inability to secure mental health services or economic security at critical stages has yielded this reality?

At its core, foster parenting is often about women and the government’s failure of them: single mothers of color constitute a large portion of the 424,000 children in the foster care system every year.<sup>1</sup> California, the state in which I live and was licensed to become a foster parent, has the largest population of foster care youth in the nation.

Parents are essentially required to be bigger than their circumstances and punished for not being exceptional. Ultimately, the goal of foster care is to reunify parents and children. Nationally, about three in five children do reunite.<sup>2</sup> Until then, they are cared for in homes that are held to the standards of mine.

**THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM** was not designed for women, or any marginalized gender. The precedent of rulings and enduring legally sound narratives around sexual assault, pay equity, harassment, domestic vio-

lence, police brutality, and financial abuse solidify this at every turn. So how does a system that does not see women clearly define and enforce concepts of motherhood?

The tension between fostering and parenting reveals how standard definitions will not apply. I am not the “mother” that the court will be addressing, but logistically, I do the mothering. I have no biological ties to the child I’m caring for, but the person who does has been determined by the state to be unable to parent. That leaves us both in roles that do not fully recognize us.

Despite the ample surveillance, the state doesn’t actually see my care. They just trust it, much like the families I used to work for. As far as the court is concerned, I’m a glorified babysitter—an elaborate playroom with animal crackers that I’ll simply replenish. The state is not with me at 3 o’clock in the morning when the child at the center of this court cannot sleep. They don’t get up with me to make bottles or wipe down a high chair or change diapers or administer Children’s Tylenol or assuage vaccination fears or tell a child’s pediatrician that they respond better to medication that is flavored raspberry. The myriad social workers, attorneys, therapists, and doctors are not in my home when I rush this child to the emergency room. On the other side of the judicial process, mothers who cannot exist within middle-class standards of parenting are not only deemed “bad mothers” but because of that failure are further inferred to be “bad women.” Their inability to function outside what has happened to them renders them solely inefficient and therefore without value, specifically as women.

We are both flattened into resources; we are what we can and cannot do for others.

**NEITHER OF US** is fully realized but rather dimly sketched out into hollow binaries that echo back in court records. I’m the “good woman” who fosters children; she is the “bad woman” who abuses them. We are cast as inverses, constructed purely as fearmongering lore to our counterpart.

By the state’s procedure and assessment, motherhood can be added and subtracted: the placement of my dish soap. The number of her clean diapers. The child locks on my washer and dryer. Emergency numbers on a fridge and no visible dishes in the sink. A fridge full of “healthy” snacks. A robust number of age-appropriate toys scattered about in a way that is not obstructive in case of an emergency. A child

who appears clean, but perhaps isn't.

And yet there is no interrogation as to why my sink is clean and hers is not. Why she has struggled with addiction and I have not. Why I have the transportation to secure more baby food and she does not. There are deep generational reasons why I have the capability to parent in ways that state power can quantify, list, and spell out in a report for a judge. And there are even more deeply generational reasons why she cannot.

But where motherhood is dictated by the state, this crucial background is not evoked or analyzed. It doesn't even exist. This is further evidenced in court orders: in addition to being assessed and punished as an individual, she is now required to change her circumstances as an individual. She will be tasked with creating an entirely different life, potentially with government assistance but without a magic wand, in a truncated period of time. A number of months of sobriety. A number of completed classes on domestic violence. A steady job. A place to live. An entirely separate life from her abuser.

Not only does this directive fail to recognize the monumental scope of what has consumed her, but the state falsely infuses her with the agency to change what has historically marred her mother, her grandmother, and her great-grandmother. Those ghosts aren't here, and that's the problem. The simple directive to construct a relationship that isn't abusive has nowhere to take root when abusive relationships are all you've ever known. If you've struggled with addiction for half your life, long-term sobriety will take time. The state isn't with her either as she applies for jobs, counts the days of her sobriety, or moves back in with the person who violates her. And yet her child is presented at the end of this elaborate obstacle course like the perfect motivation, inducing the mythology that a "mother's love" will somehow triumph over tactile reality.

The impact of this individualistic approach to family repair yields a court room of gendered folklore. A good mother takes her children to the park. A good mother attends doctor appointments. A good mother cares about their children's performance in school. I hear these comments uttered in an official capacity and see only cartoons of women, not real ones. I see artifice propagated as standard and then exported in vintage advertisements for soap.

The entire respective worlds of two women summoned before state power are diminished.

And then the judge tells us that we will reconvene in six months time.

NOTES

1. Contreras, Russell. “End of *Roe v. Wade* may overwhelm foster care systems,” *Axios*. July 5, 2022. <https://www.axios.com/2022/07/05/roe-wade-abortion-foster-care-children.s>

2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, AFCARS Report. 22: Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, September 18, 2015. Online, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcarsreport22.pdf>; Conway, Tiffany, and Hutson, Rutledge Q. “Is Kinship Care Good for Kids?” Center for Law and Social Policy. March 2, 2007. <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/files/0347.pdf>.