



The Flip Side

By Bette-Jane Raphael

The Sitter Syndrome

At one time I thought that a baby sitter was someone who came to your house and looked after your children when, for one reason or another, you couldn't do so yourself. This has proved to be as naïve a notion as my now-discarded belief that a reasonably smart man can be taught to use a vacuum cleaner. A succession of teenage caregivers has taught me that baby sitters usually come to your house to do jobs unrelated to looking after children.

Some, for instance, show up as undercover agents for the local utility companies. Their real occupation is to make sure that your phone and electric bills resemble those received each month by the Pentagon. I'm convinced this was true in the case of 14-year-old Kenny, since whenever my mate and I left him with our son, we would return to find that he had turned on every available light both inside and outside the house, effectively making our home indistinguishable from a national monument.

Some baby sitters seem to be budding engineers who come around in order to test your home for signs of structural stress. For instance, whenever 13-year-old Dolores showed up, I couldn't be sure whether her hair would fit through our front door. I used to think that the amazing breadth of her coiffure was the result of her hair follicles being traumatized by the blast of punk rock from her Walkman. But I realize now that the hairdo was in reality a cunning device that allowed her unobtrusively to test the strength of our doorjamb. The first thing she did after entering was to drop a huge bag containing the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on the floor. I'm sure she brought these books not to help her study, but to check the soundness of our floorboards. She must have known what she was doing. Today our house is still standing and Dolores is a freshman at M.I.T.

Jonathan was obviously heading toward a career in the carting business and practiced his future trade by clearing our shelves of excess

Bette-Jane Raphael really likes teenagers.



Rule No. 1: Never hire a teenager with a boyfriend in Hawaii.

food staples. He needed less than three hours to divest us of every morsel in the house, including frozen dinners, which, not having the time to thaw properly, he apparently ate like Popsicles. Once we came home to find nothing left in the cupboards but a packet of yeast. Jonathan taught us a valuable lesson: If you enlist a 14-year-old football player to baby-sit, shop for breakfast on your way home.

Come to think of it, I've learned a lot of lessons from my baby sitters. From the phone bills that followed 15-year-old Tracy's tenure, I learned the imprudence of hiring a baby sitter whose boyfriend goes to school in another state—Hawaii. From the trail of candy wrappers left behind by Holly, I learned about the infinite tolerance that 12-year-olds have for partially hydrogenated palm oil. And from 16-year-old Stephanie, I learned that my mate and I look for different qualifications in a baby sitter. He liked

Stephanie, who arrived at our house for a baby-sitting interview wearing a halter and a micro mini. ("She looks nice.") I liked her younger cousin, Emily, who exhibited a weight problem and an enthusiasm for playing "Go Fish." My judgment prevailed only after I reminded my partner that we were hiring a sitter, not re-making *Lolita*.

My 8-year-old son has also learned a lot from his baby sitters. He can recognize the difference between heavy metal and punk. He understands the fine distinctions among hair gels—and last week asked me to buy him a tube. And, oh yes, he knows the area code for Hawaii. ■