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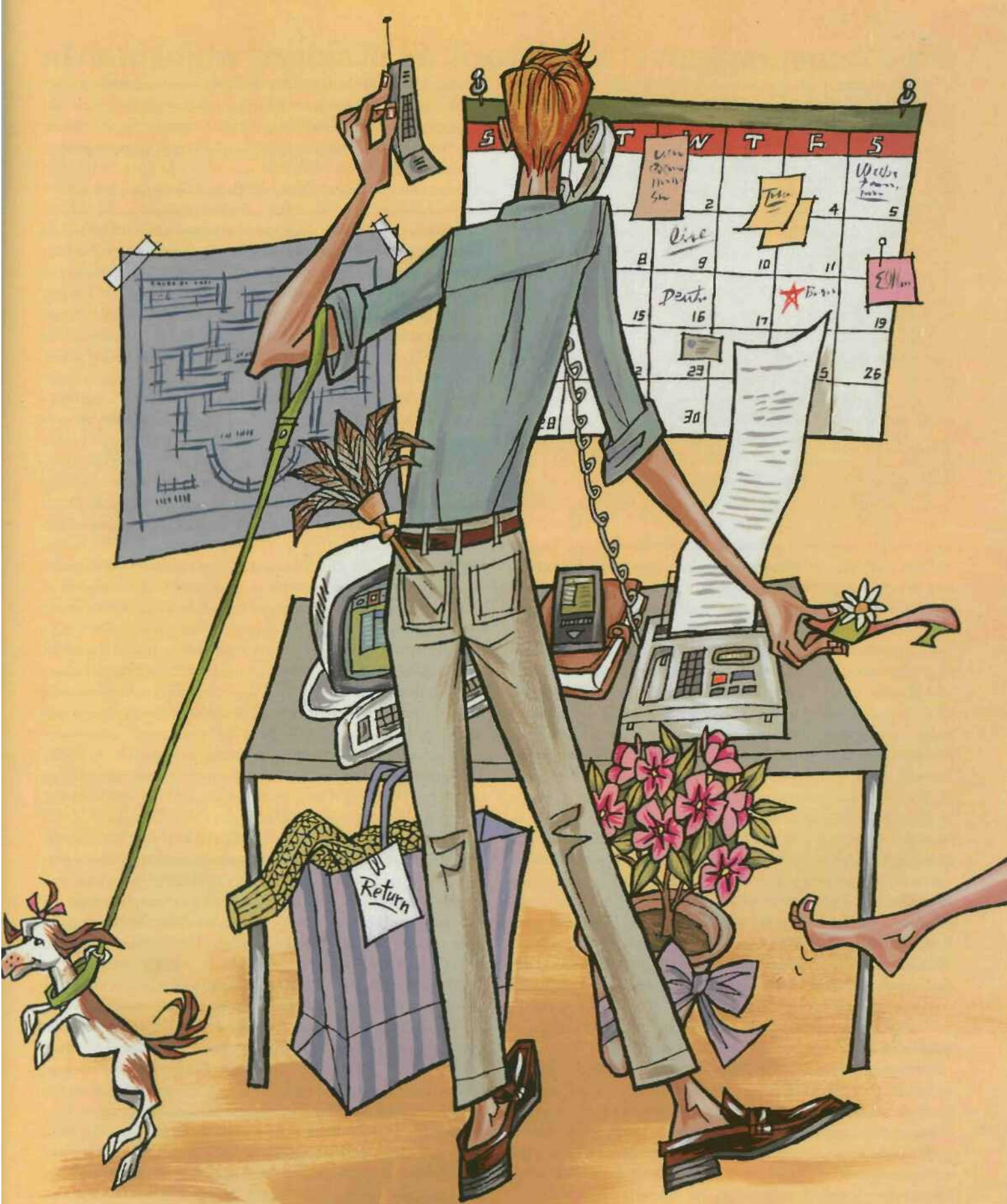
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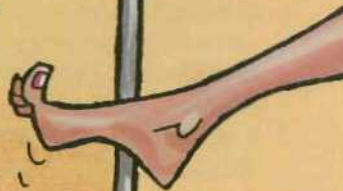
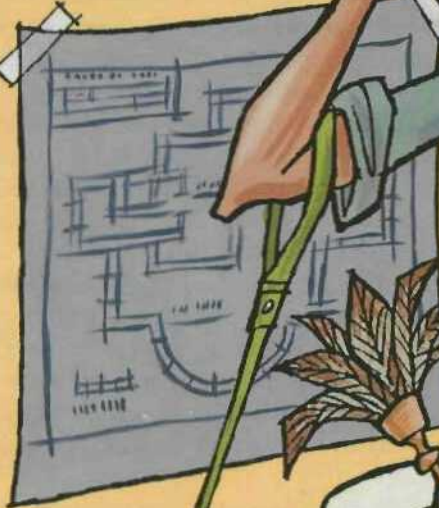
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get the cat spayed
organize luncheon for 200
dust Oscar
rebead gown
gas up the Gulfstream
hire the entertainment
change lightbulbs
take diving lessons
write checks for camp
fire the nanny
put tealights in pool
get Jag waxed
explain sex to the children
select the flatware
recharge cell phones
coordinate Palm Pilots
call insurance agent
polish riding boots
open Hamptons house
book tennis lessons
sew name tags on camp clothes
call art consultant
find better florist
reorganize shoe closet
take calligraphy class
add phone line to pool house
call Ian Schrager
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reschedule dog shampoo
return Mom's birthday present
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reorder stationery
pick up Prozac...

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S	T	W	T	F	S
		1 <i>Dine</i>	2	3 <i>Dance</i>	4 <i>Wedding</i>
5	6	7	8 <i>Dine</i>	9	10 <i>Dance</i>
11	12	13	14	15	16 <i>Dance</i>
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On a corner of Sunset Boulevard, a tall skinny white man in

a black shirt and thick-rimmed, geek-chic eyeglasses is waiting with a shopping bag full of glamour, slightly used. Dean Johnson is 37 years old, has an M.B.A., and was formerly director of marketing for a South Carolina health care company. But he has given up all that. "No more blue suit and maroon tie," he says. "No more corporate protocol." Instead, he waits on a street corner for \$30 an hour (if the clock were running) for some feckless stylist to turn up and collect this damned bag. It contains a designer dress and jewelry, all together worth about \$10,000, lent to his employer for Emmy Awards night. He knows the stylist is going to be a no-show for the third time. "So here I am," he says, resigned and yet happy.

Johnson is a personal assistant, a peculiar kind of polymath cum broom pusher whose function is to live life for people who no longer have time to live it for themselves. No. That's not quite fair. A personal assistant's job, bordering at times on sacred calling, is to take care of life's tiresome little details—the grocery shopping, the flight plans, construction of the new house in the Hamptons, the phone call from Mom ("He hasn't called in a week. I could be dead!")—so the boss has time to focus on finer things. JaNiece Rush, president of Sterling Domestics in New York City, puts it this way: "All the stuff that you and I have to do for ourselves, and wreck our weekends, these people do."

Rush picks up a client sheet at random and starts to read the job description: "Must be able to scrub the floor if the maid is out, fax correspondence, answer mail, buy tampons, oversee stuff, return stuff to Bergdorf's, etc., etc., everything." *Stuff* and *everything* are essential vocabulary in this world, as is *now*. Rush says 80 percent of her clients have assets of \$5 million or more, and of those, 10 to 15 percent are billionaires. But ordinary mortals—doctors, lawyers, upwardly mobile executives, former presidents—also hire personal assistants. For many such people, the line between workday and personal life has evaporated because of home offices, e-mail, fax machines, and cell phones. A merely digital personal assistant no longer suffices. It takes a flesh-and-blood organizational genius at the center of it all to hold the world at bay and pull together the tangled strands of a lifestyle. In some cases, the personal assistant is just a glorified secretary or gatekeeper. But other clients demand weirdly special skills: a personal assistant with scuba credentials, for instance, on the off chance that some guest might drop his Breitling over the taffrail while cruising in shark-infested waters off Barbuda. (The frogman personal assistant has yet to make his first on-the-job dive, Rush says. But he keeps busy managing a staff of 20 at four different homes.)

The term *personal assistant* apparently originated in Hollywood and still carries an unfortunate hint of glitz (when what one wants, my dear, is patina). But other traditional job titles no longer fit this varied bill. *Valet* rings false in a country where Jeeves is best known as an Internet search engine. *Butler* suggests livery and also murder. Moreover, standard butler know-how—"Should the dinner be Russian service, sir, or French?"—is a tad arcane to the average American millionaire. The word *butler* also carries the unpalatable suggestion that the individual is a...servant. Many personal assistants have degrees—even licenses to

practice law—and they shudder at the thought. Some employers call this essential individual a personal assistant/chef, a household manager, or even a majordomo. "People who are less starstruck call them assistants," Rush says. The pay ranges from as little as \$15 an hour up to \$150,000 a year.

Dave House, currently chief of Allegro Networks, a telecommunications-equipment start-up, first heard about personal assistants while heli-skiing with some Silicon Valley pals. One of those pals later hired an assistant for 10 hours a week to pay bills and run errands, and told House it was saving him one day out of every weekend. House also had a lot going on in his life. He had spent most of his career at Intel, where he developed the "Intel Inside" marketing campaign, and was soon to become president of Nortel Networks. At the same time, he was building a new house and going through a divorce.

House decided he could not afford to "give up bandwidth" for things such as getting the oil changed or paying bills: "Everybody gets 24 hours a day, seven days a week, no matter whether you're the president or a homeless person," he says by telephone. "The more you've got going on, the more you have to manage time. You're always trading off money for time. That's what organizations are about, so why not carry that over into your personal life?"

A good question. One reason not to carry it over, an acquaintance suggests, is that you risk contact with the stuff of ordinary human life, like former President Bush not knowing what a bar code scanner was. House concedes that he has been times since hiring an assistant when he's missed the casual interactions of life. But not often. In fact, his assistant, Gwen, happens to be out that day, and House is already suffering severe home-office-bandwidth overload. Somebody is installing a safe in one room, and somebody else is delivering a new washer and dryer downstairs—interactions he would gladly forgo: "Anybody Who's managed a large organization understands that you give up the things that don't need your personal touch and keep the things that do need a personal touch."

His new wife, Karla, was uncomfortable at first because she didn't like having another woman around the house. But a personal assistant is the sort of thing, House says, to which one quickly becomes accustomed; "Karla will go through a magazine and find something she wants and tear it out and leave a note on Gwen's desk. I buy a new piece of art, and Gwen makes sure to get it on my insurance policy. It does make life a helluva lot easier."

Because of the highly personal nature of the work, finding a suitable assistant can be almost as difficult as choosing a spouse. Rush, who bills her firm as "devoted exclusively to staffing the world's most discriminating homes," has few illusions about her clients or the people she finds to serve them. The subtle fear of competition colors many job descriptions: A top Washington lobbyist, for instance, seeks a female personal assistant to help arrange entertainment for senators and heads of state. She must be "a smooth operator...somebody who can totally be trusted with everything," though the possibilities of the job are not necessarily the ones that spring to mind. "Nobody who has political ambitions themselves," the client sternly warns. "No one who wants

to be out lobbying or partying with the principals themselves."

The work is personal and takes place in the home, so certain fair employment laws don't apply. Clients can be as discriminating as they choose: "Why would I send somebody who's fat to somebody who does not like fat people?" Rush asks. "If you go to a dating agency and tell them you want a big tall Swedish man, they aren't going to send you an Asian who's four-feet-seven. They send people who fit. It's almost like a dating relationship. You have to find somebody you click with."

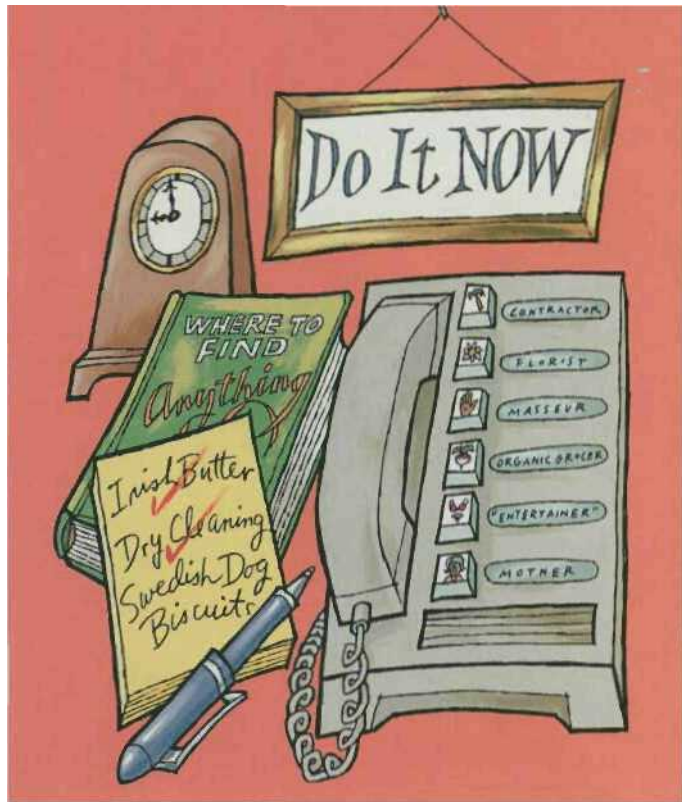
Derrell Harris, for instance, was born for the job. As a 13-year-old in Amarillo, Texas, he had charge accounts at three different florists. "I'm a giver," he says. "I love to give. I like to make people feel that they are loved." So much so that his sister had to pawn her stereo to help pay his bills. "My heart was so big. My budget wasn't big. That's who I am." Harris started as a caterer but now works 12-hour days for an unnamed employer in New York City. He earns \$80,000 a year, plus living expenses and his own studio apartment (no view) in a prime Manhattan neighborhood, plus frequent-flier miles, plus, plus, plus, for Christmas last year, a \$7,000 David Yurman watch. "I was like, 'Wow, so it does pay to serve.'"

His budget is now almost as big as his heart, and Harris exudes the personal assistant's characteristic need to please. "If somebody asks for it," he says, "I feel that it should be delivered immediately." One time, his employer asked him to convert another studio apartment in the building into a *workout* room on a week's notice. Harris found contractors (yes, in Manhattan) who had the place gutted, replastered, repainted, and recarpeted, with mirrors on the walls and the gym equipment in place five days later. "There are times when I just kill my-self to get it done. What did it

cost? Oh, I can't disclose that. A lot. It was great. He was all smiles. Whether he didn't use it for three months doesn't matter. He asked for it." Another time, given two days' notice that Tipper Gore would be coming for a fundraising party during the presidential campaign, Harris failed to find a contractor to refinish the deck. So he and the family driver cleaned and restained all 1,500 square feet themselves. "Sometimes you have to roll up your sleeves and do the job," he says.

Harris learned his craft at Starkey International, a training and placement agency in Denver, where they refer to such dedication as having "a service heart." "People with a service heart will go the distance, they'll do what the principal needs," says Bill Bennett, who runs the training program there. The holy mission at Starkey is to professionalize household service. Given the

One employer with houses in London and New York described the job of a personal assistant: "I don't ever want to have to walk into my home and think about it"



budget and the staff of the average wealthy home, Bennett suggests, the job is equivalent to running a small company. So Starkey always talks about household managers, not butlers or personal assistants; "Household managers are down and dirty. They're commandos; Get in and get the job done." Downstairs in the Starkey building, a 1901 Georgian Revival mansion, Bennett is leading a half dozen household managers through basic training. They're a mixed group by age, race, and gender, but all are dressed in mansion-commando attire—blue blazers, khaki slacks, and brown leather shoes. Most of them already have jobs and are here brushing up their skills. They volunteer the sorts of things their bosses routinely expect them to get done: "Check and replace lightbulbs daily," says one.

"Oooh," Bennett says. "Big one. No burned-out bulbs. Major, major, major."

The idea is to make the household function flawlessly, invisibly, as if by magic. Or as David Athey, a personal assistant/butler in New York City puts it, the employer "should never have to ask for the toothpaste. That should just be there. I know he likes Diet Coke, so I'm sure to have it in the refrigerator." A former employer with houses in London and New York City once told him, "I don't ever want to have to walk into my home and think about it."

Not having to think about it is, of course, liberating. It can also be disabling. One personal assistant got a call at 4 A.M. at home in New York City from her boss who'd run out of toilet paper in his London hotel and wanted her to do something about it. This is an odd twist on history: The old aristocracy in places such as England and India grew up with servants and practiced being incompetent from birth; now the aristocrats are out in the marketplace desperately trying to prove they can cut it as meritocrats. The meritocrats, meanwhile, need to display real skill to get to the

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PERSONAL ASSISTANTS

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top, where they then achieve helplessness as the reward for former know-how. "They used to be able to pour themselves a cup of coffee," one assistant says. "But they're not able to do that anymore."

Helplessness can extend at times to the employer's love life. "You spend a lot of time together," says a personal assistant, over dinner one night in Los Angeles, "You see them not just in the office but in the middle of the night. So it is personal." "And it is highly confidential," says her friend, who adds that her former boss was too rich to go out cruising nightspots for romance. "He once offered me a \$1,000-a-month raise to get him a date with a woman at a firm down the hall." The relationship lasted three months. "He also offered me \$10,000 to get him a date with Sigourney Weaver. We offered her a part in a commercial that didn't exist." Some other assistant wisely screened that call.

Bimbo control figures largely in the lives of other personal assistants, such as one who works for an NBA star: "She arranges abortions, sets up dates, goes to Bloomingdale's and buys these little gifts," says JaNiece Rush, who got her the job. The assistant describes herself as "the only woman in his life that he doesn't try to sleep with."

But when personal assistants get together to commiserate, it's not about sex. It's about things like Irish butter—whipped, not salted. LeeAnn Heck, who now runs a Los Angeles business called Consider It Done, used to be a personal assistant to a leading actress who developed a life-or-death whipped-not-salted need. Her dietician said she could not eat her potato without it. "Five people worked on it for three days," Heck says. "We called every place from San Diego to Santa Barbara. 'Where's the butter?' it became like checking on a sick pet or a child. This is somebody who has so much to do. It was amazing that it took over her life." They eventually found the stuff—personal assistants hate to fail—but it made Heck think: "When you make your first million, you're grateful. When you make your second...ooh."

Another personal assistant had a boss who wanted seedless organic raisins. "They looked like pennies that had been run over on the railroad track," says the assistant, who tracked them down after phoning almost

every major health food store in the nation. "I put them in the pantry, and they went untouched for two months. The day they're opened, the client hasn't had his breakfast and he has low blood sugar, so he's in a bad mood to start with. So I hear my name. 'These are the worst fucking raisins I've ever eaten,' and he throws the raisins at me. He throws the whole pack."

So why do they do it? Connections and opportunity clearly count. Six years of working for Sally Jessy Raphael helped one personal assistant catch on as a production coordinator for a Court TV program, and a man who spent eight years as a personal assistant to Isaac Stern now works as a production manager at Lincoln Center. Terry Putz, a former assistant to Orson Welles, runs a business that turns Arturo Puento and Havana Honey cigar boxes into high-priced purses, which she sells under the label Orson's Place. But cashing in on the aura of a past employer's celebrity is a tricky business. Along with competence, the other essential for personal assistants is *omerta*, the code of silence. A West Coast assistant says a tabloid once offered her \$50,000 for dirt on a former boss. But all the connections and opportunities vanish after a breach of trust. So it's more lucrative, in the long run, to make friends and keep your mouth shut. When he thinks about a life beyond, one personal assistant dreams in his service heart that his rich and famous friends will someday become paying clients at a nice bed-and-breakfast in the Caribbean.

On the other hand, plenty of assistants just love the work and mean to stick with it. One evening, Bonnie Kramen is teaching a class called "Become a Celebrity Assistant" at the Learning Annex in New York City. Kramen, an enthusiastic 40-year-old blond woman in a pant suit and black suspenders, is president of New York Celebrity Assistants, an association for those who have already made the grade. On a table nearby, she displays copies of useful books (*Where to Find It, Buy It, Eat It in New York*) and head shots of Olympia Dukakis ("She flew away to Vancouver this morning for her next movie") and husband Louis Zorich ("You may know him from the show *Mad About You*—he played Paul Reiser's father"), her employers for the past 15 years. They happen, she tells the class, to be "two terrific people" who have not entered the ranks of the disabled

rich. Once, when Kramen took her caretaking a step too far, Dukakis dryly remarked, "You know, I've been putting on my snow-suit by myself for a long time."

The thrill of the job, Kramen tells her class, is, of course, partly about being in "the celebrity environment." Assistants fly first class, stay in five-star hotels, serve (and sometimes sip) fine wines, and meet the sort of people who also have personal assistants. Kramen once attended the People's Choice Awards and recalls sitting at a table with Jack Nicholson, Michael Keaton, Jane Fonda, Raquel Welch, Edward James Olmos, and Meryl Streep. "One of the coolest things," she tells the class, "was that I could see Nicholson trying to figure out who I was." Moreover, personal assistants make a difference in this world. By getting to know the right people and by judiciously dropping the right name, they can get an Amtrak train held up, arrange a police escort out of a traffic jam, book a room at the Bel Air during the Democratic convention on two days' notice. "You're like Nancy Drew," says another assistant in the audience. "Someone asks you to do something and you say, 'Oh, I know how to do that.'"

What they give up, on the other hand, often includes a life of their own. Few personal assistants have children. Plenty end up single. They are on call around the clock. And if they happen to *meet* an attractive stranger, they often cannot say what they do for a living. "The minute they say they work for a celebrity," says a veteran of that world, "the person wants to know about the celebrity and not the assistant. So most of them say, 'I'm a secretary.'"

The danger, of course, is that they can become subsumed in their employer's identity, like Mrs. Danvers in *Rebecca*, and find satisfaction only in meeting the employer's needs, "When I go to bed at night," says one personal assistant (the same guy who got pelted with seedless organic raisins), "my last thought is, What have I done today to make your life better? And my first thought in the morning is, What can I do to make your life easier today? And the only tiling I want in return is to be treated kindly and humanely." ■

Richard Conniff's last article for Worth was "The Natural History of the Rich" in the December/January 2000 issue. He is at work on a book for W.W. Norton about wealth and human behavior.