

A PORTRAIT OF NANNY

*Jack Sprat could eat no fat, his wife could eat no lean.
So between them both, you see,
They licked the platter clean.*

Mother Goose

Kentucky has always been known for its gently rolling hills where Derby horses feed on the bluegrass and, where once a year, gentrified horsemen gather for the Great Race. In our family, it is also known as the birthplace of our "Pink Nanny."

Nanny, Nell Hooge Phillips, was my maternal grandmother. Besides Kentucky, she and the horses had one other thing in common—good breeding. The words of my mother often come back to me, "One thing you can always say about Nanny, she was well-bred. She was from a *very* aristocratic family."

Imagine...my Pink Nanny, soft and plump with rosy cheeks, just like a summer plum...an aristocrat!

On the wall, high up where there might be attic space in most houses, high up in my mother's bedroom with the cathedral ceilings, hung her other ancestral aristocrats. From two dark portraits, set in antique gold frames, stared great, great, great, great Uncle Samuel Carpenter, Jr., an attorney, and his father, The Honorable Samuel Carpenter, Sr., judge, both of Louisville, Kentucky. The father and son wore tall, starched collars, and black topcoats and ties beneath lofty cheekbones and hollowed faces. The short, cropped beard of Samuel Jr. made him a close likeness of Abraham Lincoln.

"Don't you think he looks distinctive?" my mother queried when she moved him from Nanny's attic to the bedroom gallery alongside his father.

Nanny stood four-feet eleven-inches tall and about four-feet around. The only time I remember seeing her high cheekbones was once after a particularly rigorous diet

reinforced by diuretics given to her by a “quack” doctor. I have a photograph to remind me. Her usually soft, silvery hair is piled a bit stiffly on her head. Her rouge and powder accentuate those cheekbones while a thin belt accentuates her waist. Her early nineteen hundred’s bust line, ample, is still in place. So is a floral print dress of lavender and blue. Nanny always did like violets.

No one knew how to diet quite like Nanny. She was always on one, but it was easy to forget, given her hundred and sixty-plus pounds and a recipe box full of Queen of Kentucky pudding, Mama’s jam pie, and Grandma Elliot’s fruit cake.

Right next to Uncle T. Ray, Jr.’s favorite, I recently came across this recipe:

Kentucky Burgoo—Toast of the Bluegrass State

800 lbs. soup meat	15 bushels Irish potatoes
4 dozen squirrels if in season	60 gallons canned tomatoes
24 gallons canned corn	6 gallons tomato puree
4 bushels onions	4 gallons canned carrots or
240 lbs. fat hens or roosters	2 bushels raw carrots
	200 lbs. cabbage

I remember one Sunday after church when we stopped by to invite Nanny out for lunch. She hesitated momentarily, then picked up her purse, “Well, I guess I can eat out since I’ve had my SEGO.” (SEGO was the brand name of the latest liquid diet.) As long as she had consumed her SEGO, every other food item was on Nanny’ hit list.

As an adult, whenever I visited my five-foot, one-inch, hundred and two-pound mother, and I was about to enjoy some peppermint ice cream, she would warn me, “You better watch out. You’ll end up just like Nanny.”

Both a threat and a promise.

Nanny’s “good-breeding” surfaced in many of my mother’s timely quotations. “Where’s the party at?” one of us would yell. “Just before the ‘at,’” was the inevitable reply. My mother and Nanny were proud guardians of the King’s English.

“Birds of a feather flock together,” for those times when you brought home a friend of a “different background.”

"Always wear clean underwear in case you're in an accident," which went well with, "Never wash your dirty linens in public." I don't know how the underwear always stayed clean, but I never saw any dirty linens in Nanny's house.

And my personal favorite, one that haunts me every time I am tempted to refer to my children as "kids" was, "If I'm a kid, you're a goat, and all the slop goes down your throat." Somehow the irony of someone named "Nanny" correcting with that quotation cannot escape me. But if we ever challenged Mother's proclamations, she quickly countered, "Who do you think taught *me* these things?"

Her mother, I supposed, but her mother was now my Pink Nanny.

Next to eating, the activity that Nanny enjoyed most in the world was talking. Actually, she probably enjoyed it more. She was the communication hub of the family. With three children, thirteen grandchildren, and several great-grandchildren before her death at age seventy-seven, she had plenty to keep her busy, and talking, and busy talking.

She also did her share of listening. Even with thirteen grandchildren, she managed to make each one feel they were the only one. When anyone went off to summer camp, they wrote to Nanny, and whenever anyone came home from college, Nanny was the first family member they went to see.

I remember one such visit by my brother Bill during Christmas of his freshman year of college in the late sixties. Nanny inquired, "Well, Bill, what do you plan to do with your education?"

He didn't hesitate, "I'm thinking about majoring in religion and running for God."

My eyes nearly popped out of my head waiting for her response to such a blasphemous remark. Unmoved and unprovoked, she calmly replied, "Now, I think that's funny, Bill, but don't you dare say that to your mother."

My poor mother. She spent endless hours on the phone when we were growing up. And it was always the same person on the other end of the line. Nanny called two to three times a day and talked for up to four hours. Whenever I came down the back hall and into the kitchen, Mother would be perched on the kitchen stool, phone clenched between her collarbone and ear, writing out a grocery list, peeling potatoes, or planning

other tasks that she would most likely not complete that day. Sometimes she would leave the phone on the desk for a few minutes while she quickly *Cometed* the sink or blitzed the bathroom. Nanny never noticed Mother's absence and Mother had no trouble hearing Nanny's drone clear across the room.

In a desperate moment, Mother would motion for one of us to ring the back doorbell. Then she'd say, "Mother, I really hate to go, but there's someone at the door." After ten more minutes, she might be able to hang up.

If Nanny was not talking to Mother, she was talking to one of her "friends." The milkman, the laundryman, and the postman all thought she was so amusing, but I'm sure they had to add an extra thirty minutes to their routes on the days she managed to engage them. The laundryman of twenty years must have been her favorite—he made it into her will.

Speaking of which, Nanny's will was handwritten, and if it had not been a notarized document, you'd have thought she was still talking directly to you over coffee and pie.

"To Gordon Street [my father] I leave a thousand dollars for a horse because he always had time for me when nobody else did..."

"To Nell [my mother] I leave the dining room table, but I'm leaving the dining room chairs to Sue Nell because Nell never did like them anyway."

There were two parts to Nanny's house. They overlapped spatially, but in terms of time, they were past and present.

From the past, and by the front door, stood a stately mahogany secretary with a sterling silver letter opener. On the tables rested lead crystal paper weights with the busts of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and the recently assassinated John F. Kennedy. The bookcases held biographies of royalty and gentry, Mary Queen of Scots and Marie Antoinette among them.

By the side door rested a short and heavy sewing chest of indistinct ancestral background. In it waited a black, round tin of unmatched buttons and another tin for licorice and lemon drops. The licorice drops were for my dad. I always tried one and I

always spit it out. The lemon drops were for me. Nanny filled the tin each time I came to spend the night, at least twice a month for twelve years.

When I spent the night at Nanny's, I slept in the double bed with plump, round finials in Nanny's room. Nanny slept beside me. Before we went to sleep I would pull her toes to help her arthritis.

When I woke up, Nanny was already busy in the kitchen. I would lie in bed, trying to follow the maze of blossoms linked by vines on the water-stained wallpaper. They reminded me more of strawberry runners with plump berries than flowers. Maybe that was because Nanny and Papa always fed me "Stwaberries!" for breakfast when I came to visit. They piled them high in a bowl around a mound of powdered sugar. The stems were left on so I could dip the strawberries in the sugar, then bite them off—all at once or a little at a time.

Also in Nanny's bedroom stood a large vanity with a tall, framed mirror. Handmade valentines decorated the frame, along with a letter or crayon drawing sent by a grandchild. Under the glass on the vanity top, Nanny kept yellowed excerpts from "Emily Post" or "Ann Landers." I found this one glued inside the lid to her recipe box:

"O God, give me the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what can be, and the wisdom to know one from the other."

Nanny was an Episcopalian. One of the drawers of her vanity guarded the veiled, velvety hats that she wore to church. Fortunately, the church was right across the street because Nanny never strayed too far or too often from her house. I never knew her to have a friend, outside of the deliverymen (though there are lots of recipes in her recipe box from a "Mrs. Kneeland"). I've often wondered why.

She did go to the grocery store. When she arrived home, she promptly checked off each and every item on the cash register tape to make sure she had not been mischarged. Nanny was far from miserly, but she was thorough and orderly. Maybe that's why she was Episcopalian.

When I got married, my mother gave me a copy of *Joy of Cooking* and a handwritten grocery list that Nanny had stuck inside Mother's copy when she married in 1939. The list included, among other things:

matches—two boxes
salt—Morton's
French's mustard—one jar
toilet paper, facial soap, and cleanser—two cans

She noted at the bottom, "I've given you a list of things necessary to start housekeeping. You should try to have \$10 extra this first month for supplies as you are starting from scratch. Afterwards, \$30 will be sufficient. Have as much fruit as possible for dessert." Advice she overlooked herself.

My parent's house burned down in 1980, and with it, the two portraits, high up on the wall. Gone are the great uncles, gone most of the family pictures. (A firefighter salvaged a few soggy prints and returned them after drying them on her living room floor.)

In his hallway, however, my brother Bill has a portrait of Nanny at about the age of twelve. The wooden oval frame encircles a little girl with bobbed hair and a bow larger than she. Striped tights disappear into black-laced leather shoes, on the bottom, and under a starched pinafore, on top. She is pretty and only slightly plump.

I have two pictures of Nanny. The one mentioned earlier with the high cheekbones in the blue and lavender dress. The other is soft, round, and powdery pink. I always have it with me. It's hung low in the hallway of my heart.