

N for Nanny

I always hesitated when talking about my Nanny, qualifying it with an explanation, "she's really my great aunt". As a child, the only people who had Nannies were posh children in story books. I have a great deal to thank my Nanny for. Over the years she had become more and more disabled through rheumatoid arthritis; she blamed the hot damp atmosphere in the cotton mills where she worked from the age of 12. She had been a 'half timer' which meant she worked half the day and attended Gatefield school for the other half.

Nanny was born Ethel Wragg in February 1888. She had always lived on Turner Lane and when her brother Harry (my maternal grandfather) married in 1913, she was left to look after her father, George. When Harry's wife Bertha left home sometime around 1920, Ethel took in her brother and his two young children. Ethel, Harry and his two children George Harry and Elizabeth (my mother) were all together at 17 Turner Lane in the 1939 register.

Ethel continued to live there when her niece (my mother) married in 1945. Initially my mother lived with her new in-laws, the Copelands in Ney St Waterloo as my dad was still in the Army and had been posted to Germany. However, my parents moved back to Turner Lane when it became obvious that Nanny was too disabled to manage on her own. I was born there followed by my two brothers. Nanny was a constant presence in our lives, making pastry sitting at the table, pushing the pram down to Ashton Market, taking us to King George's Playing Fields to play on the swings or reading stories to us.

When we moved to Waterloo in 1954, Nanny came with us. By then she didn't go out very much unless someone could collect her by car. Not many people had cars then. So she was a fixture in our living room, always in the same chair. She told me stories about her family, many of which I have forgotten. She remembered when there were three George Wraggs at the same address so that when she answered the door and the person asked for George, she had to say 'which one?' She spoke of being sent to the Junction Inn at the top of Turner Lane with a jug to bring home beer to accompany her father's Sunday lunch. She used to be a regular at Alexandra Road Methodist church, always called 'Alec Road'.

My Nanny was my bolt-hole and my rock. Whenever I was in trouble with my mum, a regular occurrence, then I could confide in her and be assured that my confidences would not be betrayed. She used to like brushing my unruly locks and said my waves made me look like 'Veronica Lake'. We accepted the care that we had to provide to keep her with us at home. The fetching and carrying, the helping her on and off the commode, the making up the bed every night as she eventually had to sleep downstairs. As a teenager I would take time off work to look after her so that my parents could take a break. My mother shouldered the burden of care, of course, because she was at home all day.

Eventually we began to leave home....to go to college and university and the day was approaching when my parents would have no children still living at home. So when the pain became too much and she felt she was truly a burden to the family, my dear Nanny took her own life. I can still remember my poor father telephoning me at our flat in London. I was standing in the cold hallway using the shared payphone to hear the devastating news. The receiver slipped from my grasp and I called out in grief. It was only later that I found out my poor parents had to make statements to the police as Nanny had died in suspicious circumstances. The inquest that followed made it clear that she had taken her own life but the stress for my parents who had done so much for her must have been incredible.

Despite the sad end I have strong and happy memories of a very caring lady who did her best for her abandoned nephew and niece and was so much a part of my childhood.