

Let Nanny Sleep

Lillian was born in Sussex in January 1928. Both her parents were in service. She was named after the actress Lillian Hall-Davis whom they had seen as the housekeeper in Hitchcock's *The Farmer's Wife*. They hoped that their daughter would move up out of service into a more glamorous occupation. However, years later after various undertakings that had not quite worked out, she found a position with Mrs. Benton. It was 1952 and Mrs. Benton's daughter Sarah was two years old.

Mrs. Benton had already employed three nannies, none of whom she thought of as very satisfactory, and she was very clear about her requirements. "You will be here by eight in the morning and help cook. Sarah is good in the morning and will not need much attention until nine, after which you will need to be with her full-time. She is to be given her own tea and dinner and put to bed by eight. You may leave anytime after that. It's good that your bedsit is nearby." No mention was made of holidays or when she herself would find time to eat.

However, Sarah was a delightful girl and Lillie never begrudged her the hard work or long hours. Sarah was enchanted by story time. Before her afternoon nap and at bedtime, Lillie would read her a book. Her favorite, from the series *It's Nap Time*, was "Father Needs to Nap." Lillie speculated that Sarah hardly ever saw Mr. Benton but kept her thoughts to herself. Mrs. Benton ruled the household with a firm hand and sharp tongue.

Mrs. Benton was always complaining. "If it's not one thing, it's another." She sternly scolded her for eating along with Sarah. "You may mistakenly offer her food from your plate that can be too big for her to chew or swallow. I'm sure there are many moments in between when you can grab a bite to eat." In addition, many times she remanded Lillie for being idle. "While Sarah naps there are her clothes to put away and her room always needs straightening."

In truth, Lillie was worked to exhaustion. Once, and it was only that once, she fell asleep kneeling next to Sarah's bed as she finished reading one of the *Nap Time* books. From that point on, Mrs. Benton warned her each Monday, "I didn't employ a nanny to have her sleep on the job."

Lillie continued in employment for five years. In September 1957, Sarah started first grade in Mrs. Mottelson's Academy, an exclusive private school for girls. Mrs. Benton spoke to Lillie a week after school had begun. "I really don't need a personal maid," which was how Lillie filled the day, "and Sarah is little bother now that she is in school all day. She's old enough now to take her meals with us." With that, she offered Lillie next week's remittance and her best wishes for finding another position. Her parting words, said with her chins pulled up and shoulders thrown back were, "I don't think you should ask for a reference since you fell asleep on the job."

Lillie was forced to move back home with her mother. The only employment she could find at that point was as a clerk part-time in a general goods store. She missed working with little children. Luckily, the following summer a Mrs. Fuller stopped in by chance and glancing over a post-board of cards saw Lillie's seeking a position as a nanny. Mrs. Fuller was new money and had a three-year-old daughter Kendril. She arranged to meet Lillie at a teashop and was delighted with her find when she learned that Lillie was willing to help prepare meals. "I think this will work out splendidly for us both. Kendril hardly ever causes any problems."

Her hours were set at nine to seven. "We eat at six sharply. Mr. Fuller is an American and never could adapt to our English dining hours. You can eat with us, Mr. Fuller insists; he's so egalitarian, but you'll have to help with the cleanup. He also wishes to put Kendril to bed."

Mrs. Fuller was often out during the day. With her newfound wealth, she was determined to do “good works” and sat on several committees. Lillie asked if she would buy some of the books in the *Nap Time* series. “My previous charge was delighted by the stories.” Two days later Mr. Fuller came home with the complete set. There were two new volumes.

Occasionally Mrs. Fuller would have an early-morning meeting and would ask Lillie to come in at eight. “Mr. Fuller says to tell you to keep track of the extra hours and we can either pay you extra or you could take, as the Americans would say, ‘comp-time,’ and leave early one afternoon.” After one long morning meeting she came home after lunch just as Lillie was putting Kendril down to nap. She collapsed in an easy chair in a corner of the bedroom, kicked her shoes off, and exclaimed, “Mommy is so tired, Kendril, I need to rest. Come give me a kiss.”

After the kiss and, “I need to go potty again,” Kendril climbed up on her bed. Lillie pulled the comforter back, smiled, and started reading *Mother Needs to Rest* by Houston Stoughton, L.E.D. “Once upon a time...” Two minutes later Kendril was asleep and Lillie gently helped Mrs. Fuller into her own bedroom, where with her belt loosened and a cotton blanket spread on top, she went back to sleep. Snores followed Lillie as she went to the kitchen to start preparations for their supper.

One morning Mrs. Fuller joined Lillie as she walked with Kendril to the neighborhood park. The little girl was delighted to hold both their hands. The grownup conversation floated unheeded above her head.

“Kendril will be five in another month. I do so have to think about her schooling.”

Lillie volunteered that her former employer sent her daughter to Mottelson’s Academy. “It’s an old school, girls only, but it’s well thought of. You could call Mrs. Benton if you wish. I must still have her number somewhere.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary. I’m sure I can find their number in the directory. Perhaps they have a kindergarten and Kendril could start in the fall. Mr. Fuller is always saying how important an education is and you can never learn enough. Is it far from here?”

“No, I think it may be less than a mile, especially if you’re walking and cut through the park. Why in a year or so, I can most likely walk Kendril there myself if the weather is nice.”

Mrs. Fuller made her inquiries and enrolled her daughter in half-day kindergarten. Most days Lillie used the stroller to take her and picked her up three hours later.

Ever since she had left service with the Bentons, Lillie had sent birthday and Christmas cards to Sarah. Mr. Benton sorted the mail when he came home in the evening and always put them on his daughter’s nightstand when he went up to kiss her goodnight.

The second time Lillie brought Kendril to school, she saw Sarah in the playground and waved. Sarah waved back, explained to the teacher on duty that this was her old nanny, and ran up to hug her. Lillie introduced her to young Kendril. Sarah promised, “I have only two more years to go and will keep a good eye on her just as you did for me *all* those years ago.”

When Kendril started first grade and was in school full-time, Mrs. Fuller became even more active in her good causes. She asked Lillie if she would be willing to take on more of the household duties. “If you’d be willing to do the cleaning and laundry I wouldn’t need Emma to come in twice a week. Otherwise, well, you can see there’s not that much for you to do now that Kendril is in school all day. And we do like your cooking.” Sarah hesitated. “And Mr. Fuller says we should give you a nice raise especially since Kendril likes you so much.”

In truth, Kendril was moody and preferred playing by herself. When she was five and a half she told Lillie, “The nap books are boring, even *The Princess Lies Down*. And by now I

know them all by heart.” Kendril thought of herself as a princess and claimed she no longer needed to nap with or without peas under her mattress.

In 1964, Mr. Fuller’s business took a loss. He came home early one Friday and talked with Lillie.

“We’re so sorry, but I’m afraid we can no longer afford help, even part-time, and will have to let you go. Perhaps you can work another week while I explain this to Kendril and she has a chance to say goodbye. You’re almost like family to her. We’ll be able to give you two weeks’ severance and a strong letter of recommendation. I’m sure you’ll have little trouble finding a new position with a nice family.”

There were not many calls for nannies in 1964, especially if you weren’t willing to go to America. Lillie moved back home again. The most difficult part of her termination was not being able to chat with Sarah when she walked Kendril to and from school.

Happily, Lillian found a position five months later as a woman’s companion with Mrs. Hoepfel-Witz. It was March 1965. She served her faithfully for the next eight years, accompanying her to spas and on biennial trips to the south of France where her employer had distant relatives. Finally, Mrs. Hoepfel-Witz health gave out, requiring the attention of a trained nurse. Lillie was retained on a part-time basis for the next six months. When Mrs. Hoepfel-Witz’s condition further worsened she was moved into a special facility, Lillie was given two months wages as severance.

Again, she moved back in with her mother. However, she was quick to say, “Old money is always so gracious. I just wish there was more I could do for Mrs. Hoepfel-Witz.” She visited her at the nursing home the first Sunday of every month until she passed. Two weeks later a package arrived for Lillie. It contained the afghan that she had often placed on Mrs. Hoepfel-

Witz's lap when she had felt a little chill. Lillie had commented once that it was indeed a distinguished afghan.

A note came along with it in the nurse's handwriting. "I know how much you admired this all the years you were so helpful. I think of you fondly and hope you will remember me in kind." There were two shaky letters at the bottom: H – W. Lillie proudly put it over an arm of the couch in her mother's sitting room saying, "See, being in service with the proper people is not that bad."

Unfortunately, three months later Lillie's mother started doing poorly. At first, they put it down to old age. Lillie acted as both companion and nurse. The intimacy gave them time to talk openly. Her mother expressed her regrets that Lillian had never married. "It would have been nice for you to have a family of your own."

Lillie said she didn't mind. "Everything works out for the best. Now I have time to be with you."

Late at night Lillie would recall how shy she was as a girl and how she had flinched when the older children, finding out that her parents were in service, would tease, "Silly, little Lillie, nobody cares/your mommy washes others' underwear," hissing the esses at the end of others'. By the time her mother's cancer was discovered it was too late. She died before the early tulip blooms came up in their window box. Lillie went back to clerking part-time.

She was glad she had kept in touch with Sarah, who had married Mr. Fernshaw in June 1972. Three years later, almost to the day, she gave birth to a daughter. Lillie waited two weeks before coming by with a small gift for the baby. She suggested they bundle up the baby and sit with her in the back garden. They caught up, whispering to each other while Lillie gently rocked the carriage. Sarah expressed her condolences on learning of her mother's death. She went on to

say she planned to stay home from her job with the baby full-time while she nursed. She didn't think a moment and asked, "Would you like to be Joan's nanny once I go back to work. Just think – this will be your *second* generation with us!"

A big smile, a joyous laugh, and a quick, "Of course I'd be delighted!" Then a small furrow moved across Lillie's brow and she asked, "And how is your mother, Mrs. Benton."

"Oh, mother is much the same. I don't think she has much use for babies and I know none at all for dirty nappies, even if it's all part of life. However, she and father are doing well. He has slowed down a bit. They still stop in every other Sunday. Dad's always saying, 'Don't wish to be a bother. Here, we've brought some scones to go along with tea.'"

Seven months later Sarah returned to work part-time. Lillie came in four days a week. Unfortunately, Sarah became ill and the doctors prescribed bed-rest for a month. Lillie was asked to move in. Mrs. Benton argued with her daughter that having live-in help was not proper, "Men being what they are." But she herself was of little help. So Mr. Fernshaw arranged for Lillie to move in with them. She had two rooms in their attic and her own bathroom. Whatever she no longer needed from her mother's apartment was donated to Oxfam.

Sarah never fully recovered her strength from before her confinement. Now Lillie's employment was more than full-time but since Joanie was much like her mother, an appreciative baby, Lillie never begrudged the extra effort. She always arranged to be out when the Bentons visited but Mrs. Benton continued to remark how "*That nanny* was spoiling her granddaughter silly. She's read that book, *Mommy Needs to Rest*, so often I dare say the girl has it memorized."

Soon they were celebrating Joanie's fifth birthday. Arrangements were made to enroll her in a new private school, Mottelson's Academy having closed its doors the year before Joan was born. She started school that fall. Much to everyone's surprise Sarah announced that she was

pregnant shortly after the New Year, 1981. She gave birth to a son at the end of June. Byron was a healthy 7 lbs. 8 oz. Lillie doted on the new baby as if he were her own.

Mr. Benton was now semi-retired and complained of health problems. They now visited only on the first Sunday of every month. Mrs. Benton explained that he was too weak to make the extra stop for scones. Lillie made sure to bake fresh ones before she went out. Mr. Benton passed in early April 1983. The estate was settled before the summer was out and Mrs. Benton moved to the English “colony” in southern Spain. She wrote Sarah that she was welcome to come with the children any time. “We have good help here. They know their place.” She underscored “place.”

Lillie was now treated as one of the family and stayed on even after Byron started school. However, she agreed to eat with them only on Easter and Christmas and still insisted on clearing after dinner. Officially, she was now a general companion to Sarah, who was often confined to bed.

In 1993 little Joanie went on to U and insisted that she now be called Sylvia, the name of her paternal grandmother. “Sylvia has so much more *gravitas* than Joan.” She graduated with honors and joined an old London firm. Three years later in 2002, she married one of the junior partners, the honorable Mr. Isaac Samuelson. The Fernshaws were happy with their new son-in-law even if he was of the Jewish faith.

Mrs. Benton said she was not strong enough to make the trip back for the wedding. Indeed, she passed suddenly in 2003, leaving instructions that she be cremated and her ashes buried on English soil, “There is no finer,” were the last words in her testament.

Lillie visited her mother’s grave and told her that she had celebrated her 75th birthday quietly by herself in a very nice tearoom. “I wore one of the pretty hats that Sarah had given

me.” When she returned home to the Fernshaws, she asked if they would be willing to help her write her will and final instructions. They agreed. Mr. Fernshaw said he would ask someone in his firm to work with her. “I think it is better that way. She will keep the matter confidential. There should never be a question of undue influence.”

Sylvia gave birth to a baby boy the following year and named him Winston. Sarah conferred with Lillie, who agreed to help with the new baby during the day. Sarah rummaged in the attic for a week and found the box with the books from the series *It's Nap Time*, bringing the books the next time she left Lillie for the day. That very afternoon, Lillie dusted them off and began reading to him.

The years had caught up with Lillie and by the end of the month, she begged off coming every day. She joked with Sarah, “Honestly, some mornings I feel as if I could also use a woman’s companion.” However, she still made the effort to come once a week to help so she could continue reading to the baby. She was delighted one day when she found several new volumes on the bureau in the baby’s room. Sylvia explained, “My father-in-law was glad you are reading to young Winston. He went out and bought these new volumes. He told me, ‘Jews are called people of the Book.’”

For the next three years, Lillie tried to come at least once a week to read to Winston. However, age continued to take its toll; she tired easily and her eyes began to fail. Infrequently, when Sarah would visit, Lillie would accompany her and spend an hour or so with the little boy. By this time, if she struggled with a word, Winston would laugh and fill in the blanks. It became a game.

Shortly after Winston’s fifth birthday, Lillie suffered several small strokes. She could no longer care for herself even in a limited sense. Sarah, as much as she would have liked to help,

couldn't. They explained that they had found a nursing home for her. They would move her personal effects and some of the furniture. "Don't fret. We will all be sure to visit you frequently."

On Sunday either Sarah or Sylvia would come by, sometimes together and sometimes with Winston. Winston would insist that they bring along one of the *Nap Time* books. "I can read to Nanna Lillie." When Lillie found the strength, they would bring her into the sitting room and make her comfortable in a recliner with her afghan spread across her lap.

Once or twice when Sylvia came with Winston, Lillie looked from one to the other, smiled, and said, "Sarah, how nice of you to come with little Joanie."

Winston was puzzled until his mother explained that when she was little, Nanny Lillie used to call her 'Little Joanie.' "She's confused and thinks I'm your Grandmother Sarah and you are I. Her eyes are not that good."

Winston said, "That's funny," and went along with the joke. When they left after the next visit he asked, "Mommy, were you also read *Nap Time* stories?"

"Yes, sweetie, Nanna started reading these to Grandma Sarah years and years ago."

"That's lot of years, isn't it?"

"Yes, a lot of years."

Six months later, Lillie suffered another stroke. The home called and said they thought the end was near. "She sleeps on and off all day."

Both families came and were told that Lillie had indicated that she wished to sit up. They had brought her into the parlor. She was dozing in the recliner, the afghan pulled up across her chest. She sensed their presence, opened her eyes, and smiled. Without saying a word, Winston

moved to her side and opened the book he had hugged to his chest on the ride over. He opened it and began reading, “Let Nanny sleep. It’s been a long day and she’s tired.”