

Royal Roots





Royal Roots

Reimagining a Life
through Humor, a Castle,
and the US Navy



Patricia Wynn Brown

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Design by Sara T. Sauers

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Variations of “Butter Knives” and the Patti LaBelle tale appear in Regina Barreca’s anthologies *Fast Fierce Women* and *Fast Funny Women*, Woodhall Press.

Excerpts from the *Virginian-Pilot* (Kimberlin 2012) reprinted with permission.

Cover photograph by Richard L. Wynn, 1955.

Frontispiece photograph of Gwydir Castle and its courtyard Knot Garden by Judy Corbett.

Published 2024

Printed in the United States of America by
Biblio Publishing, Columbus, Ohio, 43212

ISBN: 978-1-62249-699-0

—For Steve, the knight in shining armor

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It's never too late in fiction or in life to revise.

—BONNIE FRIEDMAN

A textbook case of the eldest child, a leader, a doer,
a convincing veneer of personality and confidence
atop a bottomless pit of insecurity and need.

—ANNA QUINDLEN

If you make them cry then you make them laugh,
then you've done your job.

—JACKIE GLEASON



“King” Richard Wynn, also, my dad, Richard Leo Wynn,
with his rifle and two squirrels he bagged.

Prologue

WHEN I saw Gregory Peck standing there with Sophia Loren, as other people milled around in front of the stage in the auditorium at the Oscar rehearsal in 1991, I did this; I walked up slowly and just stood with them as if I were part of their conversation. They continued chatting. I was drawn to them like a magnetic force. I stood beside them directly in front of the massive stage, on the floor with the poster-sized picture placards of the stars to attend, sitting on the chairs like paper dolls. I smiled and nodded, me, the add-on. They did something extraordinary. They let me stand there with them. I existed in their orbit.

I had my moment with that wonderful movie dad, Atticus Finch, and the most gorgeous woman I had ever seen in real life, Sophia Loren. I stood with greatness. They could not know my mission to, for a moment in time, exist in this celestial galaxy. Or do stars have extra sensory mission-of-need detectors? Particularly those stars with actual talents?

Seeing Peck as Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* revealed the unattainable father I always wanted, and here he was in the flesh. Fantasy stood close to reality. At that moment, in my mind, they were one.

I attended the Oscars at the invitation of my cousin Debbie, who worked on the show. Sophia Loren, Peck's dear friend, was being given a special award. I stood with Hollywood royalty. Destiny had been decreed by association, I decided. Dreams could bestow treasures. My dad was not at all like Atticus, and it seemed, as I look back, that Dad may have been the one most disappointed by this fact. He was well aware of falling short of greatness in character and deeds. He displayed his Big Fish bravado as a shield. I always thought Dad could have been an Atticus, with his humor, talents, and people skills, and something went wrong even before I was born in 1951, but what? Answering that question has plagued me my entire life.

Where Atticus was predictable, Dad was volatile. Where Atticus took time to explain things to his children, my dad would blow a gasket. Where Atticus attended children's events, my dad would be with



At that Academy Awards® rehearsal in 1991 on the stage with Cousin Debbie Williams (right). Debbie comes from my mother's side of the family and worked on specials and live shows as a stage manager. We decided to give ourselves the Oscar for Best Cousins.

his drinking buddies. Where Atticus would reason, Dad would yell, threaten, and, on several occasions, spank and belt me. Movie Atticus was present and ruled benevolently. Dad was often absent either at the Veteran's Hospital or on his getaways at "the union hall" or beer joint. Dad's reign rivaled Henry VIII: heads rolled.

The one thing Dad and Atticus had in common was compassion for people suffering through rough spots in life, which in Dad's case did not necessarily include his own family. Dad was more of an outside-the-home-base empath.

Some people realize very early in life that essential choices need to be made, or else the furies of hell will burst through their personal protective portcullis castle gate. I am one of those people. In my childhood, I found solace and hope in my imagination and show business. Throughout my life, I've built the capacity to fly away and soar above it all on the magic carpet ride of stories. Humor is my jet fuel. Dance is my engine. Performing is my jet stream.

Stories double as my salvation. They sustain me, and I employ them to nourish and entertain others as a performer and writer. Rather than simply living through the random and uncontrollable events in the dizzying spin of the wheel of fate, I frame my life experiences in stories because they help me see meaning and purpose in my existence. Stories pull all the fragments of my life together into a stained-glass window of colors and light instead of scattered slivers of piercing pain. They build

a moat around my daily life castle, allowing me to dwell unharmed and free. With storytelling, I garner renewal, redemption, and restitution.

Stories have been part of my life since babyhood: my mother read *Wynken, Blynken, and Nod* to me at bedtime and sang that sad song of departure, “Danny Boy.” When Mom sang the other song in her two-song repertoire, Doris Day’s hit, “Que Sera, Sera,” and the musical question lyric “What will I be?” would arise, I gave this much thought. I must have been three years old.

While growing up in our house, where chaos reigned between all too brief bouts of calm (and those peaceful times would remain suspect, held out at a distance like a not-quite-dead mouse in a trap that required vigilance and possible murderous action), a girl needed to stay on her toes and develop some protective battle armor. Images of Joan of Arc were helpful in times of distress. Safety and security were a foreign land of desire for us Wynns.

In our house, our lives swirled around the eye of the storm, Dad. He did not go to work like the other dads. We could be peacefully sleeping one minute, then abruptly awakened by the six-foot-long brass medieval buisine trumpet blast of his nightmares. Mom would attempt to



This is the Wynns of Wales’s coat of arms. My imagination also has me claiming royal roots, as the Wynns were the kings and princes of Wales in the 1500s and 1600s. I learned of this not so many years ago.

calm him down with, “Rich, Rich, you’re having a nightmare. Wake up, Rich!” as Dad flailed and yelled about explosions.

One family dinner ended abruptly with a plate of steak thrown at my head as Dad became upset by something I said, and by that time, in my teen years of the 1960s, I was expressing a lot of my frustration and anger. My mom called me “Miss Smart Mouth.” She labeled my blond and agreeable younger sister “The Pretty One.” There was a permanent dent in the wall above Miss Smart Mouth’s head, just behind my place at the table, caused by that very dish. I had had it with Dad by then, fighting with our mom and with us kids, physically and emotionally. I mouthed off.

Dad’s depression and psychosis set the scene for our days and nights. If I walked into the living room and he was grunting his dissatisfaction at the world at large and settled glumly in His Chair, or I saw him pacing and looking out the windows, unable to still himself, or heard Mom and Dad quarreling and coming to shoves, I eventually learned in my teens to find the safest place in our house, my room, a.k.a. “the keep” of my castle. Marauders dared not enter. I do not know why it was a respected, safe, demilitarized zone. Could the lingering smog of Aqua Net hairspray for my bouffant teenage hair have been my protective Kryptonite?

Dad had been honorably medically discharged after seven years in the Navy in 1944. What I was told was that when he returned from the war, he worked for a while at General Motors as an inspector of layouts but frequently broke down mentally and eventually went on total disability before I was even born. I never saw Dad go to work. I was never told what had happened to Dad in the war other than this from Mom, “there was some explosion on his Navy base at Norfolk.” That’s all any of our nuclear family knew until very recently.

I researched and discovered what happened while writing this. Grandma Aggie, an excellent storyteller, knew the truth, but it was the darkest story she had never told.

When I saw *To Kill a Mockingbird* on television for the first time, so many revelations came to me. There! That Man! Atticus! That’s who I wished Dad to be. It pressed on me that Dad was incapable of Atticus’ qualities. Why? I wondered. Why can’t Dad make his and our



Dad in the Navy.



Two of my three siblings. I have Scout hair, center. Grandma Aggie made my bikini from cottage curtain fabric.

lives easier by being like Atticus? And there was Scout, a tomboy like me. She loved her father. I did, too, when I was very little. Scout rode inside a big black tractor tire down the street. I wanted to do that. I could use a friend like Scout, and when I went to her house, her dad would be there.

Boo Radley's character, though, made me feel uneasy. He had a mental illness like my dad did. The kids made fun of Boo as some kids made fun of my dad, and that part of the story makes my stomach churn even now. Boo had his kind side but could not act like other people. As I watched the movie, I realized my dad could not be Atticus because his problems were more in Boo's camp. Of the town's people, it was Atticus who understood Boo and showed him kindness and compassion. The scene at the end, when Boo has protected Scout and Atticus speaks of Boo's heroics, affording Boo the dignity he deserves, dissolves me into tears every time I see it.

Standing beside Gregory Peck for that brief time at the Oscars had me silenced in radiant, healing awe. Had we had a conversation, and I explained my adoration for Atticus, he would have said that many people have shared those exact feelings with him about the Atticus character.

I invite you to sail off with me "into a sea of dew," like in the fairy tale poem Mom read me when I was just a little thing, "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod." Allow me to tell you my stories of getting through. By our journey's end, the mystery of what initially and what finally happened to Dad is revealed, at long last. Like a Maypole dance, my days and nights weave in and out of the stories, with Dad always at their core. He held reign. Many decades later, I reclaimed *my* throne of identity.

It's all in how you look at it.

But first, what about my mom?

There is a country song called "Mama Tried" about how the singer's father left her a heavy load. My mom carried that load and more.

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PART I



Shining a Light in the Darkness



Candle glowing at Gwydir Castle, Wales, the Wynn ancient ancestral home. Photo: Judy Corbett of Gwydir Castle, Wales.



My mom, Dorothy Mary Cavanaugh Wynn.
Before kids. A time of smoother sailing.

Chapter 1

The Unsinkable Dorothy Wynn

MY MOM, Dorothy Mary Cavanaugh Wynn, waged a daily battle of survival on the high seas of marriage to a mentally ill World War II vet with her children close aboard. But that hadn't been the lookout from the beginning. It wasn't until a couple of years into their marriage that the tide turned.

Mom and Dad spoke of alleged halcyon days in the peaceful waters of dating. Not long after their marriage, it seems, things fell apart. The nasty riptides of Dad's mental illness rolled in. My mother's previously stable life changed. *Did Mom know this from the start? Was Dad in an exceptional mental health period when they courted and married?* All I know is that when I was about three or four years old, as far back as I can remember, their physical shoving fights and the yelling already had me taking cover.

Money issues were Mom's never-ending advancing war front. Survival does not mean constant victories; it means not being conquered.

Mom performed the duties of daily survival like a nimble grenadier guard by shielding each dollar in our meager treasury, paying what she could on bills in a near shell game, handling Dad's ins and outs of our home for extended stays for his psychiatric treatments, keeping up appearances (a major task employing smoke, mirrors, and a sublime sense of humor), getting us four kids schooled, and echoing strict warnings to us about right and wrong.

Her number one ideology: the worst thing her two daughters could become were tramps. (The two boys were considered princes above the law and denunciations of any nature.)

But our mom-directed battle plan/credo also included respecting and caring for our family elders, adoring the Blessed Virgin, and attending weekly Mass. Obey the nuns whether they are right or wrong. Protect our siblings from others (but they were free game at home because

Mom only had two hands), and never ever speak of the troubles in or outside our home about Dad. Belly aching and whining were exempt from family protocol. If anyone broke ranks and wept from exhaustion from the winds of in-family-country war, a quick retort from Mom of “If you wanna’ cry, I will give you something to cry about” blew our boo-hoos out to sea.

Some adults to whom she was beholden for assistance in *Dad Gone Wild Days* were saints on earth and helped keep us afloat: The neighbors who stepped in when the roof blew off from the screaming, bringing calm and humor. Our aunt Cornie, my mother’s sister, would not let us sink into the depths of poverty. A few family friends gave our strife an air of normalcy and laughter. The Blessed Virgin Mary seemed to be Mom’s chief of staff and her comfort. Allies are essential for victory over life’s struggles.

There was the good Doctor Forrester, our family doctor, who would have been paid in chickens if we had any chickens (excluding the dyed pastel-colored chicks we found one year frolicking and chirping all over our candy in our Easter baskets). Instead, Dr. Forrester gave our family excellent care without consideration of our frequently delinquent account. He made house calls. He always treated us with dignity and never condescended to our situation. I distinctly remember his mint gum breath, a cover-up for his smoking, which he did at his desk during office visits.

Many decades after his death, I ran into his wife, who managed his office in the 1950s, when she was in the same nursing home as my Uncle Tom. I told her of her husband’s help for our family, and it touched her, but it was no surprise. She did his books.

Food budgeting prevailed. Soda pop at home was a luxury, only for special occasions, like the second coming of Christ. Mom hid some chocolate for herself in her bedroom, but sleuth *Swamp Fox* that I am, I could find it for a stolen nibble. Mom’s budgeting employed alchemical skills. With all this abracadabra Wizard Merlin allocating and earmarking, and the ongoing mental health crises with Dad’s dips into depression, risings into mania, and swoops into rages ignited by the slighted spark, Mom grimly sailed the waves like a seasoned sea captain, though always with carefully painted fingernails.

Her orders about falling into line were *sui generis*: “If you think you’re going to wear that, you have another think a-comin.” Misbehavior was met with this proclamation, “You are flirtin’ with the undertaker.” And who can forget the time check when the hammer would come down on us with, “Get in here faster than Billy be gone,” which we would learn meant that when mystery boy Billy flees, he flees fast.

Thespian Mom would often fake call the “orphanage” and ask them to come and get us. Other times, at the end of her rope, she said she would send us away to the “island of Pago Pago,” wherever that was (Mom had her own language and geography). Dr. Spock’s child-rearing practices were not part of her navigation of a troubled life. She leaned more towards General Patton’s side of discipline. “Because I said so” would do the trick.

A scene facsimile from an *I Love Lucy* episode would be Mom trying to reprimand me by chasing me, pushing her Hoover vacuum cleaner (to suck me up?). She would inevitably be defeated as I would run to the bathroom, close the door, and pull out the top drawer to barricade me in until she cooled off. I could tell the coast was clear when the Hoover became silent.



We three older kids attended Catholic school, which involved tuition payments that I would carry to the office in a small, sealed white envelope. My sister was the first to drop out of parochial school early on because she required the availability of a special reading teacher in public school. She went on to become a voracious reader. My brother made it to high school, but when Sister Clarette demanded he play five-year-old Winthrop in *The Music Man* school musical, which he did with great skill, that kind of nun-tyranny was too much for him. He went over to the Protestants, a.k.a. public school.

My other brother, the youngest, never began Catholic school. I, the eldest child, continued in Catholic school through high school graduation, working two jobs during my junior and senior years to help with costs. This education became another arrow in my quiver of success.

While growing up, new clothes were few and far between, so wearing a uniform to school shielded me from potential mean-girl social rebuke.

Our Christmas and Easter holidays and various gatherings were spent with Mom's side of the family, the Cavanaughs. My abundance of aunts, uncles, and cousins buoyed me up. We were a tribe.

When it came to Easter in the 1950s and 1960s, Mom managed (a deal with the Bunny?) to pull out all the stops with bonnets, purses, white gloves, and crinolines for the girls, accompanied by new and stiff shiny black patent leather shoes with straps. The boys had little suits that made them look like midget undertakers for some years, while in other years, they wore jaunty caps and looked like they were going to the track to bet the ponies.



Crying scenes of distress at the kitchen table mark my memories, a table that now resides in my kitchen. It should be able to float from Mom's sodden, desperate hours when hope seemed as far away as your fondest dream dashed. Even women warriors of true grit sometimes must take a knee.

Dad, in a manic state, during which times he becomes bravado-laden Richard the Lionhearted, bought our second house, which he could ill afford, on a whim. Mom was pregnant with the last sibling, Robert, a "surprise baby." The house was on a big hill in the new Holiday Hills development. Dad christened our "estate" Wynndy Knoll and commissioned a white wooden sign declaring such, which he hung from a big hickory tree in the front yard, as though we were neighbors of Downton Abbey or around the corner from Scarlett O'Hara's Tara.

We joined a new working-class neighborhood with enough kids on the street for two baseball or football teams. We spent much of our time down at the creek catching tadpoles or swinging on tree vines like Tarzan. Our summers included the area swimming pool, where I also worked, and I did swim team and the synchronized swimming shows. We Wynn kids now had lives outside of our house, and we gravitated to them most of the day.

The riches and treats would flow if Mom won at Bingo that week. Bingo was to Mom what candy is to a toddler. She needed the R and R thrill of gambling. The treasures of that heavily Catholic-supported game where erupting white balls did a path to riches lead, once did spill



Some of the Cavanaugh clan, my mother's side of the family. Eventually, there would be eighteen cousins. Mom and Dad are center, back row. I am in the second row, second from the right.



Left: My pre-patent leather shoe Easter rebellion circa 1954. My cowboy-boots-on-Easter era arrived a couple of years later.

Right: Dad was having a bad day that Easter; you can see it on his face. Circa 1963.



My niece
Michelle Wynn
now has the
Wynndy Knoll
sign perfectly
set in her pretty
garden.

bountifully when Mom won a thousand dollars at the St. Agnes Church Bingo in the mid-1950s. She bought each of us a bicycle. Like many of her fellow Bingo participants, she spread out about four hundred cards in front of her and mastered them all with the efficiency of an ace air traffic controller.

Dad's disability checks disappeared into the tides as quickly as they arrived. He had a penchant for throwing money into the wind with careless spending and a taste for fashion, including derbies, a deer skin coat, motorcycle boots, and, during one style era, neckerchiefs. There was also that fanciful-fronted white shirt that would have suited a Mexican warlord.

I remember a "Sure Fire Lobster Deal" that immediately fell through. His bar buddies always seemed to see an easy mark in Dad with their bogus schemes. Dad budgeted in guns and rifles, of which he had many. And, at the Keg Room, drinks were on him!

Mom struggled to continue a "loaves and fishes" approach to home finances. Eventually, it necessitated her return to work at the phone company, in the billing department where she had worked before marriage. That return to her job required daycare for us since Dad was unreliable as a parent and, at that time, once again hospitalized at the Veteran's Hospital in Chillicothe, Ohio, about an hour or so from our house.

Into our house came Shirley, our new babysitter. Though recruited into our troubled crew, she proved unseaworthy. This was in the 1950s; we kids were about seven, five, and three years old. A fourth child, brother Rob, was yet to be born. We Wynn kids were sometimes as undomesticated as feral alley cats despite Mom's commands from on high. Our reputations preceded us.

(Later, in high school, I met my classmate's mother, Mrs. Marsili. She recalled that once, when I was a tiny child, I had run up to a casket in the church at a funeral and knocked over the big burning candles on golden stands surrounding it. Mrs. Marsili told this story, shaking her head and tsking. It was clear she had never recovered from the Requiem Mass incident.)

The new babysitter, Shirley, was the quiet type. She was a large-boned country girl with long, straggly hair. She dressed as though she were in *The Grapes of Wrath* and had a Southern accent, just like in the film. I do not know where my parents found her or why they thought this reserved and introverted young woman could be a match for their often airborne-from-dressers "Flying Wallenda" children. When Shirley arrived, I immediately knew the fit was just like too-tight Easter patent leather shoes.

For starters, Shirley was not enamored of our playful aerodynamics or our to-the-death wrestling matches. Add to that mix the chivalrous jousts with the clothesline wooden props in the backyard. Forget about my acting out scenes, with volume up, from the Mickey Mouse Club shows as if I were Annette Funicello, pretend tap dancing on any hard surface, ground level or elevated.

These activities did not peacefully co-exist with Shirley's day-long Bible reading from a living room chair, her fixed perch. Yet, interestingly, our behavior probably matched many of the Bible stories, such as those in Revelations about the apocalypse or the vicious murder of John the Baptist.

Babysitter/Theologian Shirley lasted a very short time and quit after her punitive hell term with us. We kids celebrated. But who would care for us? Who would dare?



I have thought about this one terrible day so often over the decades, but there are gaps in my memory. *Does childhood trauma play a role in forgetting essential facts?* It seemed we three little kids were home alone, *but how could that be?* We were about the same age as I described: seven, five, and three. *Was this post-Shirley? Did Mom leave us there unattended to go to work out of dire need?* I remember Mom coming home just as the horrific drama unfolded, and she was in a dark, floral work dress with makeup, including her red lipstick, which we were not to kiss directly.

What happened was this: My brother, Rick, and I were in the living room by the front door with our neighbors, the two Gordon boys, who were about our ages. They were on the other side of the storm door window, outside on the front porch. We were playing and pushing on the glass at each other. *We were not allowed out, and they were not allowed in.* I do not recall any adults in our house.

Suddenly, the plate glass window broke, and sharp and deadly sheets of it came sailing down on us, a dangerous feature of that type of glass. The shattering sound rings in my ears even now. Shards cut my brother on his wrists and head, so severely slicing him that he started bleeding like a rolling river. The Gordon boys had rivulets of blood running from lacerations on their lips and faces. I had jumped back from the waterfall of glass and was not injured. I had not one clue what to do.

We all started screaming. Blood was everywhere. Then I saw my mother running toward our house, and my bloody brother was running down the street the other way . . . *to escape?* It appeared to me he did not want to get in trouble for breaking our glass door. *Was Mom coming from the bus stop where she would ride to and from work? I do not know.*

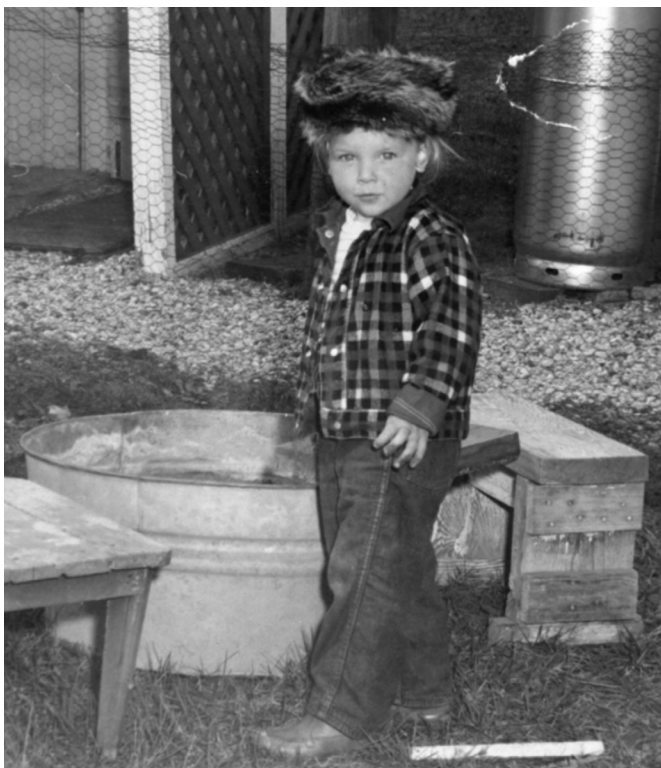
Now, Mom was screaming, too. Our neighbor George, who worked from home for a Las Vegas business, flew out of his house next door. He was the father of my best friend, Stevie. George started treating my brother by pressing cloth on his wounds, and he, Mom, and my brother all dashed away in George's car to the hospital. *Or was there an ambulance?* The Gordon kids, slightly injured, went home to seek help.

I do not recall where my little sister was during all of this. I was sent next door to the Hatfield's house alone. Whether the Hatfields made me sit there or I chose to sit there, I stayed seated on their front porch

steps, waiting while they ate dinner. I sat there until my mother came home from the hospital and fetched me. My brother was alive but had many stitches, she told me, and he was bandaged on his head and wrist. His scars remain to this day.

As for our life and limbs, which Dad's out-of-control tirades of foul words, bodily threats, and physical aggressions attacked just like shards of slicing plate glass, we were at the mercy of the gods. I failed to save my brother from the accident caused by us kids horsing around with the glass door. Very early on, though, I saw it as my honor-bound duty, as eldest, to keep our family alive, as aspirational and delusional as that seems now.

The constant family worry about money pushed me to build my coffers through summer and after-school jobs. Money would buy me safe passage to new lands. My vivid imagination would create charts to follow and scaffolds to cross the abyss that had no obvious bridge to the other side. I became a conquering conjurer with my trusted banner of hope unfurled.



My Davy Crockett-era.