



Ann Warn Pegg's story of

Phyllis



When she was a young girl, my mother, Phyllis Kathleen Vine dreamed of becoming a dancer. In rare moments my normally reserved mother would extend her arms and pose in the most graceful of ways. Whenever she did this, I couldn't help but smile, picturing her as a young girl in the exact same pose. Being one of a large family, this never happened for her.

I've been told that my mother actually had a wonderful sense of humor and was a real "cut up" after a couple of "tasty beverages." This must be true, as somewhere along the way she was given the otherwise uncharacteristic nickname "Fifi". This Fifi-side of Mom's personality was hidden during most of my childhood, and along with other parts of her personality, remains quite mysterious. Instead, I remember my mother being rather demure: a petite lady, who wore hats and gloves on special occasions, dressed snappily, used "Marcelles Golden Hair Wash" on her short head of curls, had a peaches-and-cream complexion, and worked very hard to support her family.

Phyllis was born at Grace Hospital, in Vancouver, on November 10, 1909. She was one of eight children. Her sister Nora died at ten years of age from influenza. Mom and her other siblings—Dorothy (Dot), Jack, Renie, Violet (Vi), and Dave—all lived to a good age, and Aunt Fran (Francis) a retired minister, is still alive in Pasadena, California.

My mother was from a long line of Oxford- and Cambridge-educated vicars and published writers. Not wanting to become a "man of the cloth" Grandpa Vine was sort of the black sheep of the family who left England and came to Canada, settling in Calgary where he and his English wife opened a couple of shops. Grandpa Vine brought up his large family with the same conservative values he was raised with. His children had to be very polite and proper, in a typically English way. Speak when spoken to. Children are to be seen and not heard. Keep a stiff upper lip, that kind of thing.

My mother was nineteen when she married Jack Warn, a successful commercial artist. They settled in a beautiful house on Larch Street in Kitsilano. They had a beautiful baby boy, born at full term, a "blue baby" who didn't make it through delivery. The umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck. Today he would have made it, but not in 1931.

Phyllis was told not to have any more children. Five years later, she gave birth to the first of four more. First came Val, then Jack, Sally, and finally, ten years after Val, me—Ann. My mother was 37 when I was born. I was certainly not planned and arrived at a bad time in her life. Her mother was ill and passed away shortly before I was born, then her husband left her. My Mother never discussed the reasons my Dad left, but in later years I did find out he was involved with other woman after he left her and had a drinking problem. I was told later that his drinking problem started after their first son was born dead. Dad had painted the nursery walls with darling animals and gardens. To top things off, she underwent thyroid surgery shortly after I was born. For the first several months of my life, I lived with my dad's brother and his wife, while my sisters and brother stayed with our Aunt Vi, Mothers sister, and Uncle Earl, and their children, on a farm in the Fraser Valley. This must have been a very difficult, painful time for her. When my mother recovered, we were reunited, and also moved in with Aunt Vi and Uncle Earl at the farm.

Because of how she was raised, my mother was not one to talk about her feelings and never complained. I do remember seeing her once having a "crying jag" as I was told, but did not ask about it. She never once said a bad word about our dad, although she had plenty of reason to. And she was rarely demonstrative, though very loving in her own way. Although as a child I only saw the "cut up Fifi" once, with her arms above her head and dancers hands wagging while she would point with her tiny foot to the music and telling jokes I didn't understand, I remember moments of humor. From time to time during

meals, Mother would quote little tidbits, passed down from her dad, like “If I should return during my absence, keep me here till I get back!” And when things got rather loud and scrappy around the dinner table, she would also say, “No personalities at the table!” and “I’m glad I ate when I did, I’m not hungry now!”

Mostly, I remember her then as a grand dame who worked very hard to keep her brood going. We were always moving from place to place, living in whatever small suites she could afford on the East side of Vancouver. She worked in a bakery, and later became a favorite product demonstrator for Vancouver-grocery mogul, Mr. Oppenheimer in his Safeway stores. I never had the sense that she wasn’t around, or remember a feeling of lacking. We always had food on the table, a proper Sunday dinner, and presents at Christmas and on our birthdays. I never recall a harsh word, and never received a hand in anger.

On the contrary, if anything, I was always aware of trying not to do anything to upset or offend my mother. She was a lady, and you just didn’t mess with her, or want to cause her distress. She always let us decide our own choices of what was right or wrong, and we almost always did what was right.

After many years’ hard years, my mother was persuaded to join my sister Val’s bowling team. This is where she met William Alexander, an equally hard-working Scotsman and widower with two grown sons. I was fourteen at the time. My father, whom I met only a few times and then usually only for a few minutes, had passed away. Bill Alexander was a good egg, who worked hard to woo me along with my mother. He included me on dates to TODA-O movies and meals at the White Spot afterwards. He was all right!

And so it came to be, that when I was fourteen we moved into my first real home, and for the first time in my mother and I didn’t have to share a bedroom. Bill Alexander had built this home with his own hands, and he also helped build the life my mother always deserved. She had the white-and-turquoise kitchen with the contrasting red-and-chrome table that she had always wanted, a sundeck, and beautiful garden of her own design. She still cooked her Sunday roast beef and Yorkshire pudding; Bill loved a good standing rib roast the best so that’s what we had. All that marbled fat for flavor, mmmmm!) And the rest of the week created wonders with her pressure cooker; delicious stews served up with dumplings, and the best home-made biscuits of anyone in our large, extended family.

It was one of the best times in her life. Now in her fifties, she didn’t have to work and she and Bill would go off exploring in his camper. After she died, I found drawings and poetry she wrote about her travels with Bill in the Queen Charlotte Islands. I never realized she loved nature until I read her poems.

Mother and Bill also liked to go visit her closest sibling, Dot, and her husband Art, in Lakota, Washington. In fact, Auntie Dot and Uncle Art, and Mom and Bill, would often travel together and visit each other’s homes. During these visits, Uncle Art and Bill would talk and have a few drinks, while Mom and Auntie Dot would sit on the bed and talk about family gossip and how their lives were going. You would hear them giggling for hours.

And then there was this! My mother was very closed mouthed, but in later years, when we traveled south together, I witnessed a different side of her come out—what you might call the “Fifi” side of her personality.

My cousin, Shirlee Teabo, is a well-known psychic, and for a while lived with Auntie Dot. For fun, Auntie Dot and Mom would read her clients tea leaves for them while they were waiting to see Shirlee. I was also startled to learn that my mom once laid hands on someone who was in pain, and she said Mom healed her! Apparently our grandmother, the one who died shortly before my birth, also had psychic abilities,

but as you didn't talk about those things back then, this aspect of my sweet little mother's life remains a mystery to me as well.

My mother never really had the time or the energy to get interested in my love of music and performing, but she did. She bought a player piano in the basement of our new home, but by then I was too busy with drama, singing and art to take lessons. I regret not taking advantage of this opportunity now. My mother would always be there when I won awards or praise at school, or for the productions I did outside of school. She didn't live long enough to see me get back into performing after my children were older or any of the films, series, or movies of the week I later acted in.

There was one time she did see me perform before she passed and I know it thrilled her. When I was a young mother with our first child, my then-husband Tim and I took our first trip to Hawaii to meet up with Auntie Dot, Uncle Art, Mom, and Bill. One night we went to see Mr. "Tiny Bubbles" himself, Don Ho. When we were newly married, Tim and I had done a musical together called "The Fantastiks." When Don Ho came around in the audience shoving the mic in everyone's face and getting them to sing with him, he was shocked when he heard we both could really sing. He then proceeded to invite us up on stage and asked us to sing something. After brief discussions with the band leader, we sang "Soon It's Gonna Rain" from the "Fantastiks," with all the harmonies in place. It went over very well. Mom, Bill, Auntie Dot, and Uncle Art were thrilled. My mom beamed and gave me a huge hug. It became a moment they relived among themselves for years, and each time they told the story, I felt so much love.

Bill Alexander passed away on his eightieth birthday, stubbornly making it to the wee hours of that morning, despite rapidly deteriorating from lung cancer. Mom passed away exactly five weeks later on February 7, 1988 leaving four children and 10 grandchildren. I admire her for her strength, love, respect and tenacity. "Fifi was surrounded by all her love ones the night before she passed on.

When I was a young girl, my mother would always come in our bedroom to say "Goodnight, Dear". One time, she came in and just said "Goodnight."

"Mom, you didn't say 'Goodnight, Dear!'" I said indignantly.

"Goodnight, Dear."

"Goodnight, Mom, I love you."