

# ✕ Memoir



## Mother knew best

DESPITE LOSING HER AT A YOUNG AGE, **JENNIFER ALLFORD** CANNOT FORGET HER MOM'S WORDS OF WISDOM — EXPLETIVES INCLUDED

**M**y mom has been dead for more than half my life. She died in 1985 when I was 22. She was there for all the bedtime stories, most of the skinned knees and every minute of the know-it-all adolescent eye rolling. She was there for the rise and fall of my first big love (she dubbed him “Vince the Prince”), the university degree and part of the postgraduate degree. She completely missed the career, the husband and the babies. And I sure missed her.

Jean Louise was only 58 when she died. Her marriage had blown up 14 years earlier and, at 46, the single mom of four kids age eight to 14 went back to university to become a teacher. But before you could say “reinvention,” she was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a mastectomy. At 50, she dozed off at the wheel (no wonder, really) and had a head-on collision. My mom spent six weeks in intensive care with tubes down her throat writing us garbled notes on yellow sheets of paper, and six months in the hospital.

A year before she died, my mom came to visit me in Toronto and joined me in the little patch of dirt that passed for a garden at my big student-filled house. Her prosthesis kept falling out of her bra as she bent over to plant marigolds and finally, fed up, she tossed the bag of gel to my horrified girlfriend to safeguard while we finished up the gardening.

My sister and I call each other every year on the anniversary of Jean’s death. For the first few years we’d talk

about her last few months wasting away from cancer. On the 20th anniversary, we had a long talk about mammograms as I had been called back for a second test and was terrified. “Don’t you hate it when that happens?” said my sister, instantly reassuring me that it would be okay (and it was). As the years passed, instead of talking about how our mom died, we started wondering what she’d be like if she were alive.

When the four of her kids get together, we inevitably start giggling about our teenage years; the time my mom wagged a badly rolled joint she’d found and said, “I know this is your joint! Your brother knows how to roll one!” We each have our favourite Jean stories and share them with the spouses and grandchildren who never met her.

My siblings and I see her in one another to varying degrees and on various occasions. Take paper towels: My sister and I use them sparingly because our mom thought they were wasteful. We still don’t understand how the people we live with — who escaped Jean’s indoctrination on the topic — can go through rolls of the stuff without guilt. Three out of four of Jean’s kids (one of the four is a rebel) faithfully rinse out and reuse plastic bags, and recycle like maniacs. She hated whining, phony people and throwing out food. And so do her kids.

I hear my mother’s voice when the phone rings at dinner: “Take a message, we’re eating!” And it surprised me the first time her words came out of my mouth — after tripping on my son’s dainty size 13s: “Move your dancing slippers!” I/she said.

All of her children inherited her strength and good humour, but only two of us wound up with her potty

mouth (uh, that'd be me and the rebel). Although "piss on it" was one of her favourite sayings, she had some others that have been more helpful over the years. In fact, I find myself quoting my mom all the time (and not just the F-bombs).

*"Housework is an insult to my intelligence."*

I have always wanted this phrase in needlepoint hanging in my kitchen, but alas, I have never learned how to needlepoint. I don't think my mom knew how to either, but she loved to knit. One of my favourite pictures of her is a snapshot taken in our basement maybe five years before she died. She's knitting a scarf, her eyes focused on the Oilers game on TV. There's a vacuum sprawled out in front of her where it had likely sat for days — maybe weeks — and an A&W Great Root Bear poster hanging askew from one thumbtack on the wall behind her. There she sits in her long denim skirt with the embroidered flowers, either oblivious to the chaos around her or just too tired to care.

*"You don't have to tell everything you know."*

I have always kept other people's secrets but I blame blabbing about my own ("kissing and telling on yourself," my mom called it) on group therapy when we were kids. For a while, as our parents were trying to salvage their marriage, a nice psychiatrist would come over once a week and we'd all sit around the living room and talk about what was troubling us. I remember panicking a couple of times because I had nothing to say. Despite the hours with the nice psychiatrist (and making up grievances when I had none), my parents' marriage ended and my mom promptly went back to her maiden name so as not to be known as his ex.

She had the utmost respect for privacy. When our friends would come over to talk to her — not an uncommon event — she'd shoo us away and would never reveal what was discussed. She enjoyed most of our friends and had an open door policy for kids in her house, even the ones she didn't like and especially the ones she didn't trust.

*"You can't blame someone for walking all over you if you lie down and say 'I'm a doormat.'"*

Like Jean, I learned this one the hard way and I think it's my most oft-quoted phrase. Friends, men, kids, colleagues, even your dog; this is an all-purpose momism.

*"Actions speak louder than words."*

This is the foundation for judging anyone's character and a handy touchstone for the eternal question: "Does he like me?"

I remember my mom sitting in the living room, arms crossed over her chest, telling my 17-year-old sister to sit down and wait. Her sweet-talking boyfriend had driven up in his yellow Mach II and was honking the horn for her to come out. "You're not leaving until he

comes to the door," she said. And that was that. That guy didn't last. My sister's next boyfriend not only came to the door, but he often brought me FudgeeOs. She married him.

*"A strong, smart, attractive woman will scare the pants off half the men in the room before she opens her mouth."*

My mom scared her share of boys. There's a black-and-white picture of her from her university days at McGill; it's a headshot, in profile. Her long, shimmering hair is framing her high cheekbones and shy smile. Her beautiful eyes are looking ahead at her future.

A D-cup, she never burned her bra, but she understood that despite "women's lib," it is very much a man's world (she also knew the double standard for sexual behaviour would never go away: "The sexual revolution just made it easier for men to get laid," she'd proclaim).

But my mom adored men and enjoyed their company: family friends; her brothers; her sons; maybe, hopefully, some others she never mentioned. She loved M\*A\*S\*H and wouldn't answer the phone when it was on. We never discussed it, but I am pretty sure she liked Hawkeye more than Trapper.

*"The universe will unfold as it should."*

And so it did. My mom died two years shy of 60. Had the universe unfolded differently, she would be 82 this year. I watch my friends cope with their elderly moms with their broken bones, deafness and dementia. Well, I got all that out of the way early, I think to myself.

**"You can't blame someone for walking all over you if you lie down and say 'I'm a doormat.'"  
Like my mother, I learned this one the hard way.**

Even though my mom's been dead for more than two decades, she is still with me every day. My university degrees are hung where she hung hers, above the washing machine. My daughter is named for her and I plant her favourite annual, marigolds, every spring. At dinner recently I launched into "As my mother used to say..." and my 16-year-old son spewed out a chain of momisms, ending with: "Is there a raccoon on my feet?" (a question she asked on her deathbed hallucinating on meds). Jean would have loved that.

If she were still alive, she'd have a very hard time getting around. The car accident left her with a new hip and smashed-up knees. She'd probably still smoke and drink too much and clear her throat when she was nervous. But I like to think she'd still throw her head back and have a big laugh at least once a day. **M**