



Marilyn Norry's story of

Jean



My mother is the Queen of non sequiturs, talks through my plays, takes photos of everything, sets a good table, rages against spilt milk, is stubbornly eccentric and a good person to have with you in an emergency. I feel like I'm her when I'm sitting up straight, pulling on a fingernail, watching the crowd with a half smile, unsure whether to join in or flee.

Jean Marie Davis was born on February 23, 1930 in Kingston, Ontario. Her parents, Clarence and Dorothy Davis, lived on land in Aldolphustown Township where the Davis family had farmed since the American Revolution. Clarence was Township Clerk as well as a farmer but it was Dorothy, her quiet mother, who kept the farm running as well as occasionally teaching primary school, playing piano at church, and being secretary of the local Women's Institute. My mother thought her mother's house chaotic and with three younger siblings and her father's mother living with them, it probably was. Jean found refuge down the road at her maternal grandparents, the Merritt's, until she was 12 and they were killed by a train.

When Jean was six her father declared she would attend university. It was the height of the depression, they had no money or traditions of higher education, so this was an odd goal but one my mother took as her destiny. She liked school, excelling at science and math but almost failed grade 9 typing and bookkeeping. She had to move into town, Napanee, to attend high school, there not being buses at the time, and she boarded with maiden relatives who lay in bed all day waiting for her to bring them their tea.

The government Home Economist would come to the Women's Institute meetings to show the farm wives the science of canning and gardening and Jean decided this looked like a good job, so in 1948 she went to the Macdonald Institute in Guelph for four years to study Home Economics. It was the first time they offered a degree program and she was annoyed how boys said she was going for her MRS degree.

In her fourth year, while she was Student Council President, another student whom she'd always found annoying began to look... not so bad. My father, Herb Norry, would tease her relentlessly. What with one thing and another Jean had to work hard to make sure she got passing marks that year. She did pass and got her job as Home Economist of three Niagara counties but her life didn't unfold in the way she expected.

My mother had listened to her grandmother tell stories of the suffragettes marching in England; she'd seen women running the country during the war; she fully intended to walk out of school, degree in hand, into a modern and exciting world where women were valued. Instead she slammed into the 1950s. She also slammed into the windshield of my father's car as he hit a truck on their way to graduation. Years later we would watch as she squeezed lost shards of glass from her forehead.

Since couples couldn't work together in government, and my father also got a job with the Department of Agriculture, he lived in one county, doing his work with farmers while she worked in the next county working with their wives. After they married and moved in together, they gave slide shows of their Bermuda honeymoon to the Junior Farmers and Women's Institutes ("here's a plane, here's New York, here's a beach"). My mother had thought she'd work for a few years before having kids but she got pregnant right away and so, when her contract was up in June, she left to start her new life as full time mother.

From 1954 to 1959 Jean had four blonde, blue eyed daughters: Millie, Margaret, Marilyn, Maryann. Her family had not moved for 150 years but from 1950 to 1960 my mother moved 7 times and painted, wallpapered and made the curtains for every home. When she was pregnant with me (Millie was 2, Margaret 6 months,) they rented a house in Peterborough as they were waiting for their new house to be built. But then the landlord wanted his house back, so 2 weeks after I was born, we moved into another

house for 3 months, then moved again into the new house. Then Mom got pregnant again, my father got another promotion, Maryann was born, and we moved again.

Around this time Mom started feeling she didn't have much control over her life. She was hospitalized for depression a couple of times but mainly just tried to cope. It was the 1960s, the Golden Age of Chemicals, so while my father recommended new and improved fertilizers to farmers, my mother was put on new and improved mood altering drugs, first amphetamines and then, in the '70s, lithium. It was never a good fit. And all the drug trials and experiments left her feeling more powerless than ever.

When Maryann started kindergarten, Mom went back to school, got her teaching degree and began teaching high school Home Economics. At first we had housekeepers who were, I only realize now, single, pregnant and only stayed 6 months, but then we got Miss McIntosh who stayed for years. Mom would make us Baked Alaska every night for a week as she experimented on all the wrong ways to make it so she could correct her students. We all learned about kitchen work triangles and mansard roofs as we helped her mark papers. She also sewed whole wardrobes, read voraciously, took us and the neighbourhood kids on nature hikes, belonged to the University Women's Club (she told me they were witches and the meetings were covens), the Red Cross, Jean Vanier Society, the United Empire Loyalists, and ran the Sunday School. She wouldn't buy us Barbies, not liking the look on their faces, but we had well organized camping trips. She colour coded our clothing to stop the fights, planned our meals weeks in advance and, when I was 10, started tracking the details of friends' weddings in preparation of our inevitable exodus.

I remember once she took me into Toronto to the tutorial of a poetry class held at someone's apartment. We all sat on the floor, except for the bearded guy who must have been the professor, and listened to everyone read tortured poems. I asked her later why she didn't go back and she said that although she liked the class and loved writing poetry, she felt like an outsider, just a suburban housewife.

In 1970, my father was promoted and we moved again to an even smaller town. It was a nightmare for mom – we called it the "town the 60's forgot". She tried to make it work, even learning how to curl, but when she left teaching she despaired at her lost identity. She became the Welcome Wagon Lady and started selling real estate. Sometimes she'd pack us in the car saying, "Come on, let's go and get lost!" and with maps and cameras we'd ponder the history and geography of the countryside while scouting for properties to list. She helped catalogue all the old houses in our historical town and delivered Meals on Wheels. We made field trips to all the universities we were considering, had a subscription to Ms magazine, and one Christmas my father was perplexed to see we all got power drills.

She was very funny, often laughing, but never happy. Did four daughters going through puberty while she went through menopause have something to do with it? We'd see her car pull up and someone would run to fill the kettle. Then, she would come in the house frazzled, raging until we said, "tea's on", and her shoulders would drop. But, sometimes they wouldn't and Mom would go looking for another doctor, another solution. None of their friends saw psychiatrists or talked about life being hard or wanting out. I look back on that time now and think maybe it wasn't so bad. Kids from our old neighbourhood now say our home was a model to them of a healthy family. Sure, my mother raged, but at times we all did. With everybody yelling there couldn't be any secrets and no one was ever vindictive. We fought to find solutions to problems because she couldn't let things be.

When my father's job took them to London Ont. and then offered him early retirement, Mom was relieved to be closer to school friends but still longed for a career that fulfilled her both financially and emotionally.

She became a supply teacher of Geography and English, volunteered in museums as she got her diploma in historical conservancy, developed an adult ed. course on renovating old houses, and struggled with my father's need for a typist and bookkeeper in his new business – the two courses she'd almost failed in high school.

When it was discovered at age 42 that Maryann, the baby, had a brain tumour Mom stayed with her, even running after the gurney that took Maryann for a biopsy so she could wash the bottoms of her feet. "What else could I do?" she asked. The next day when Maryann had seizures Mom called out for the nurses and got my father out of the way. Eighteen years earlier she'd been present when her mother has lapsed into a diabetic coma and this time she wanted to be ready for the heroic violence she knew the nurses must perform. She felt Maryann's spirit standing beside her as they watched medicine try its best to resuscitate the body and told the intern sharply 3 times not to turn off the machines until Maryann's husband had arrived. For all her insecurity in life she was a rock when it counted; the rest of us fell apart.

Today, she keeps renovating and decorating the house, always thinking of resale value, convinced they'll move any day, but they've been there for 26 years. My father keeps inviting people over for dinner, the night, the week, and I'm always surprised how my mother keeps up. Planning meals, centerpieces, and sleeping arrangements are always part of our conversations. And genealogy. My parents got a computer to keep track of their family trees and now they're in communication with people all over the world. They take trips to wander through foreign graveyards and find lost relations. Jean also keeps track of the neighbourhood cats but she's stopped canvassing for the Diabetes Society after falling flat on someone's front step. She's still involved in historical societies and finds great satisfaction writing articles for genealogy magazines. And getting paid.

About 15 years ago a new doctor said Jean had been on lithium long enough and gradually weaned her off. That and the diagnosis of hypoglycemia and getting her diet in order have transformed her. It's like she's been re-born. She was always concerned for others but was unable to endure intimacy. Now, she not only listens to people's troubles, she can respond with wisdom. She initiates the idea of parties now instead of just surviving them. She still rages, but it's more of a habit than a need. There are times when she is happy. The other day I called and she said, "All in all, life is pretty good" and I felt like crying. It is.