

Jean

She was born in 1916, the daughter of a divorced suffragette-turned-playwright. At seventeen, she landed the ingénue role in a movie starring W.C. Fields and in the next six years appeared in eleven films. After marrying a screenwriter in the late 1930s, Jean turned her talents to radio acting and raising a family in Hollywood. Her career was about to take off. Then she and her husband were blacklisted because of their presumed association with the Communist Party. Suddenly unemployable, she and her husband packed up their four children and left the country to avoid being served with a subpoena by the FBI.

Living in exile in Mexico, Jean continued to write short stories, gave birth to two more children and collaborated with her husband on three screenplays. The stories and screenplays generated enough income for the family to get by, and after thirteen years abroad – the blacklist no longer enforced – the family returned to the United States. A short time later, her husband was diagnosed with an untreatable brain disease and died at age fifty-two.

Over the next thirty years, this matriarch was a staff writer for daytime TV dramas, and between TV assignments, she taught a writing course at USC and published seven books.

“How did you endure the hand-to-mouth childhood, raised by the vinegary tandem of a spinster aunt and dominating mother? How did your vision stay clear and unembittered?”

At the gravesite of your first child, you crushed a sprig of rosemary as an offering, and that scent even now to me is the perfume of life. Three decades later we were living, from my point of view on divergent tracks, in different worlds. Mine was dark, directionless. ‘It’s not who you are that counts,’ you said. ‘It’s what you contribute to society.’

Can it be that your concept of love has always had its roots in the real world, the world of results? My five sisters and I have never heard you complain. I know we could not have asked for a more powerful example. Our hearts are full, and if there were a sprig of rosemary here, I’d crush it for its scent, and give it back to you.”

Michael, Your 72-Year-Old Son



Jean – Blacklisted

“They destroyed friendships, marriages and careers, but I would not let them take my dignity.”