

CONNECTIONS

# PRANK YOU VERY MUCH

▶ Katherine Ellison gives a round of applause for her mother's devilishly clever April foolery.

A PARENT'S LOVE often mixes sunlight and shadow, creation and destruction. I've learned this the hard way, having always been my mother's target on her favorite day: April 1.

There was the note she sent on my accountant's letterhead, informing me that I owed \$13,000 in back taxes. And the email warning that our local electric utility planned to frack on my favorite hiking trail. And the time she cajoled my boss at a newspaper—they'd never met—into telling me my byline had been accidentally dropped from a series I'd labored on for weeks.

My mother's friends would be surprised by her wicked genius, which, like an exotic flower, blooms just one day each year. To the world, she's always been more June Cleaver than Cruella de Vil. She baked cookies she never ate herself, kept our home spotless, and played a cheery Ed McMahon to my dad's Johnny Carson.

I once asked her why, of all her four children, I merited her mischief. She replied: "You're so much fun to fool." Point taken. My mom and I are uncommonly close. For years, we've started each day with a phone call. What's more, I'm her youngest, and easily teased. I yelp; I guffaw; I tell everyone how brilliant she is. And she is, fiendishly so.

Like many mothers of her time, she never got to test her smarts in a career. She raised me, however, to believe I could do anything. Buoyed by her encouragement, I achieved

my dream of becoming a foreign correspondent. Maybe she felt I judged her choices—which I did. I scrupulously avoided the feminine conventions she embraced. I'm an abysmal cook. I delayed childbearing until the last conceivable minute. I never shared her way with a scarf, or her patience for high heels and manicures. Perhaps this left April Fools' Day as one of my mother's few opportunities to compete with me—and win.

Or were her pranks more of a way to keep me close? After all, they began in 1987, when I moved from my childhood home near San Francisco to head a newspaper bureau in Mexico City. I missed her so much that I soon came to relish her annual mischief. She wanted to be part of my life, however foreign it was to her, and give me only the kind of bad news that doesn't stay bad for long.

She understood that the best April foolery never incites too much fear or disappointment. It's not okay to pretend someone's won a million dollars or has a fatal disease.

For many years, I unfortunately failed to retaliate in kind. April Fools' jokes take time and energy, and I never seemed to have enough of either. But then, in 2013, my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Surgery and three rounds of chemo bought her time, but left her tired. "I'm getting too old for this," she said last March. In that moment, I resolved that I wouldn't let another April 1 go



From top: The author and her mother, in the early '90s; the wigged prankster herself, 2015.



by without paying my fair share of the weird currency of our love. I didn't want to think about starting my days without our morning phone call—much easier to think about pranks. And I already had one in mind.

The chemo had done its predictable damage, and we'd recently gone wig shopping. We found a gray bob that made my mother look like Jane Fonda. She doted on that wig, combing it on its stand and taking it in every two weeks to be cleaned. Luckily, when I approached the wig store owner in late March, she was game.

On April 1, she called my mother and, following the script, asked if she had experienced any recent itching. "Wig mites," she said woefully. "They're everywhere."

The magic of April Fools' Day is that it's different from real life, in which bad news often stays bad. I know my mother and her pranks can't last forever. But for a moment, she and I, and the wig store owner, shared something like closure. When I called her that day, she was still laughing.

"Oh, honey," she chortled, "I've created a legacy."

KATHERINE ELLISON is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, speaker, editor, and consultant.



She wanted to be part of my life, however foreign it was to her, and give me only the kind of bad news that doesn't stay bad for long.