

Mitchell Anderson
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People often ask me what my mother was like. I think the best way to describe her was that my mother lived like she drove: Straight-ahead, pretty fast, and not a lot of shoulder checking.

My mother loved driving. My brothers and I did not love her driving. We would often threaten to phone the Ministry of Transport to try and have her licence taken away. But well into her eighties, and to our horror, she used to drive herself from Ontario all the way to Prince Edward Island for summer vacations.

She loved to spend time with our dear relatives from PEI and to stay at our cottage on the beach. And while my mother was a very tough woman, she was a bit nervous being there by herself. Rural Prince Edward Island is hardly a hotbed of violent crime, but she felt somewhat uncomfortable being alone. And being my mother, she decided to do something about it.

So she went into the toolbox. She found some wire, nails, six feet of rope, a baseball bat, and an axe. Then she got a butcher knife. And then she went to work. Using the wire and nails, she strung a trip wire across the living room floor. Then she went into her bedroom to go sleep – with, again, the rope, baseball bat, axe, and butcher knife.

Here was the plan: If a murderer came through the door, he would trip on the wire and hit the floor. My mother, hearing this, would advance from her bedroom with either the bat or the axe, depending on her mood, and hit him on the head. If the assailant was still alive, she would tie him up with the rope. If none of that worked, there was always the butcher knife under her pillow.

And after all that she slept like a baby. That was my mother. She did not take life lying down. If there was something that needed changing, she changed it. If something needed doing, she did it.

And I'm very glad I didn't surprise her that night by showing up unannounced.

In 1994, I picked her up from the airport after she had returned from being an observer at the first free elections in South Africa. She was already well into her seventies and fought hard to be included in the contingent from Oxfam. She was beaming. She loved being in the centre of the action, and being in the townships of South Africa the year Nelson Mandela was elected president was, in her words, one of the greatest experiences of her life.

Issued only with a blue ball cap, her job was to venture out into the townships to prevent violence in the run up to the elections. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. She told me how once she was concealed by a local woman under the counter of a hamburger stand while a riot ensued.

When the voting day came, her role was to visit polling stations to observe. As many of you know, my mother was never particularly good at restricting her activities to observation. At that time, most people in South Africa had never had a chance to vote and had little idea how to run an election, or even what a ballot box was.

When she found several hundred people waiting outside a polling station to vote and the doors not even open yet, she told the people inside the polling station, and I quote, "Let's get this god-damn show on the road." Violating numerous rules of neutral observation, she showed the people in the polling station how to assemble a ballot box, how to fold ballots, how to move people through the voting booths.

That was my mother. She never sat on the sidelines. She waded into life, lived it, changed it. I was honoured to even know someone like that, let alone have her as my mother. Her spirit has been a huge inspiration to me. I love you, Mama.

Mitchell Anderson is a Vancouver-based researcher and writer. He worked for eight years as a staff scientist at Sierra Legal Defence Fund and has written extensively on environmental and social policy issues for a variety of national and international publications.

