

This Is Not the Life I Ordered

50 ways to keep your head
above water when life
keeps dragging you down

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*If one woman sees another woman as successful, that woman
will never fail, never feel alone. . . .*

— **Florence Scovel Shinn, writer (1871–1940)**

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preface

Slightly Less Than Worst-Case Scenarios

Whether one is twenty, forty, or sixty; whether one has succeeded, failed, or just muddled along; whether yesterday was full of sun or storm, or one of those dull days with no weather at all, life begins again each morning in the heart of a woman.

—Leigh Mitchell Hodges, poet (1876–1954)

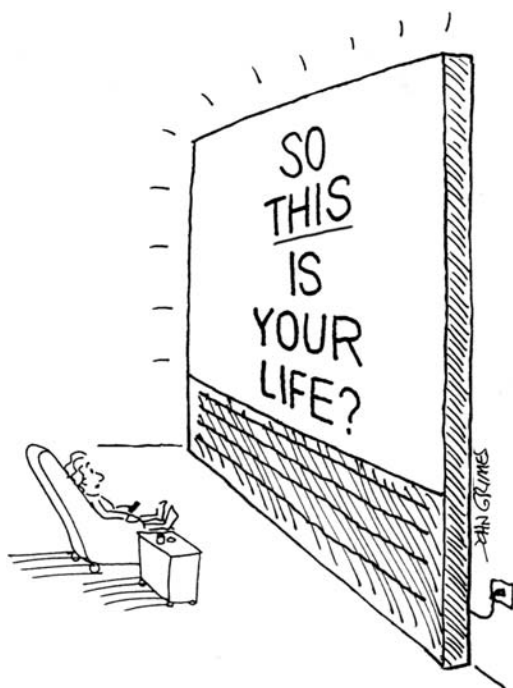
We are simply four women whom destiny threw together more than a decade ago. Collectively, we have experienced the extreme joys and deep sorrows that life offers up. From mundane moments to the dramatic and surreal, we have a history of six marriages, ten children, four stepchildren, six dogs, two miscarriages, two cats, twelve koi fish, a failed adoption, widowhood, and foster parenthood. We have built companies, lost companies, and sold companies. One of us was shot and left for dead on a tarmac in South America, and two of us have lived through the deaths of spouses.

We're raising babies and teenagers and are still alive to talk about it. We've had our hearts broken by affairs and mended through our friendships. We've known celebrity and loneliness along with self-doubt and near financial ruin. We've been caregivers to those who faced terminal illnesses and friends to those who lost loved ones.

We grew up in less-than-wealthy families, where living paycheck to paycheck was the norm. We've known more wealth than our parents could ever imagine, and we've lost more money than they ever made! Forced to be creative, we have raised families on bare budgets and at times have been the sole breadwinners and bakers when our spouses were unemployed, seriously ill, or dying.

We have won and lost elections and Emmys, starred on television, written books, and graced the covers of magazines. In our fast-paced

careers, we've often been the only woman at the table in deals made Silicon Valley style. We have taken risks that have bet the company, bet the election, and—in some cases—bet the house!



(A COLLECTION OF MISFORTUNATE EVENTS)

When Bad Things Happen to Smart Women

There are two ways of meeting difficulties: you alter the difficulties or you alter yourself meeting them.

—Phyllis Bottome, English writer (1884–1963)

A reporter once jokingly referred to our collection of misfortunate events as the female version of the book of Job, almost expecting a

hoard of locusts ready to descend in our midst at any moment! Yet, we do not view our lives with sadness or remorse. We see them as gifts, filled with events that have helped us develop a razor-sharp sense of what counts and what simply doesn't. Time and again, we have learned to reinvent ourselves. The process of reinvention, we've learned, is best managed with humor, friendship, optimism, and a long-lasting high-beam flashlight to see the light at the end of every tunnel.

Meeting monthly, we've shared our lives with one another and encouraged one another. Our kitchen table conversations were always therapeutic. Inspiring and supportive, our conversations gave us hope and inner strength. We knew that together, as friends, we would never walk alone in our life's journey. Yet, as individuals, we could not be more different. We share a common ground, though: the transitions we've faced as women. All women will face such transitions at some point in their lives.

Kitchen Table Friends

It's the friend you call up at four o'clock in the morning that really matters.

—Marlene Dietrich, German actress (1901–1992)

Word spread about our kitchen table conversations. We were asked to speak at the Professional and Business Women's Conference, at the California Governor's Conference, and even by *Inc.* magazine. We titled our talk "Survive and Thrive: Ten Turbo Charged Tips for Women in Transition" and guessed that maybe, if we were lucky, thirty people might show up for the conversation.

Over four hundred women came to our first session, forcing the fire marshals to lock the doors! We told our stories that day. Women lined up to talk with us. They shared their own personal versions of "survive and thrive" lives. Weeks later, we were encouraged to write

a book. More conference organizers asked us to speak. We used the idea of writing a book as an excuse to continue our monthly meetings, yet we never wrote a single word.

We Gave Our Group a Name

Expect trouble as an inevitable part of life and repeat to yourself the most comforting words of all: this too shall pass.

—Ann Landers, newspaper columnist (1918–2002)

We continued to meet for over a decade before we put one word onto paper for that imaginary book we told everyone we were writing! We talked about losing businesses, losing husbands, and wanting to lose husbands. We talked about building careers, building families, and building on our fragile networking skills. We talked about finding our self-esteem, finding our path, even finding new mates. We talked about taking on challenges, taking risks, and taking a chance on love again. We talked candidly about near financial ruin, actual financial ruin, and avoiding financial ruin. We talked about high moments, low moments, and defining moments. We talked about personal events that had shaped our lives and, in some cases, rocked our lives. We talked about our children, our coworkers, our colleagues, and our sex lives. No topic in our lives was left unexplored!

We encouraged one another through the numerous transitions we were experiencing. We even gave ourselves a name—Women in Transition, “WIT” for short—noting that we would truly need our collective wit to navigate through these tricky times. Interestingly enough, our “meetings” took the form of what we envisioned as an 1800s ladies quilting club in the Wild West. Yet the fabric we brought to our meetings was the fabric of our lives.



We learned an important lesson in our decade-long friendships. We learned that we had been fooled. We had convinced ourselves that if we could manage our schedules, break through the glass ceiling, spend quality time with our families, bring home the bacon (and fry it up in a pan) while bouncing children on our hips and creating warm and loving relationships with our husbands, in-laws, and colleagues, somehow, some way, we would be rewarded with the problem-free lives that had, up until then, eluded us. We were wrong.

Nike for Some, Nine West for Others

I never lose an opportunity of urging a practical beginning, however small, for it is wonderful how often the mustard seed germinates and roots itself to greatness.

—Florence Nightingale, English nurse (1820–1910)

From kitchen conversations to the thousands of conversations we've had with women from all over the world, we learned that the problem-free life we sought was more than an illusion. It had become

a myth to which too many women had fallen victim. A woman's life is much more than success, having it all, or the elusive balance we all seek. It is more than seeking perfection or conquering the world (although you might). It is more than gritting your teeth and making it through. It is about surviving and thriving.

For us, surviving and thriving meant reinventing, rebuilding, and realizing that success was never final and failure was never fatal. It meant putting our best foot forward (Nike for some, Nine West for others) no matter what, and walking. Walking forward looking like a pillar of success on the outside while that tiny voice inside reminded us that our teenagers were out of control, our job could end tomorrow, and our spouses, colleagues, and bosses had been untruthful, selfish, unfaithful, or just plain stupid.

Surviving and thriving meant taking what life offered up and looking for the opportunities, the joy, and the compassion in less-than-pleasant or less-than-perfect circumstances. It meant cultivating the collective willpower to move up and move on, or move out, even when the process broke our hearts. It meant recruiting support and building the confidence to trust that when life's legendary curveballs were thrown, we would have the willpower, support, and courage to move forward. The phrase "survive and thrive" became a perfect descriptor of our journeys as friends. Together we would navigate through some tricky times.

So, How's Your Life?

Anybody singing the blues is in a deep pit yelling for help.

—Mahalia Jackson, gospel singer (1911–1972)

Our collective lives have been filled with more transitions and life changes than we would have ever thought possible. Transitions are an important part of the fabric of every woman's life. They affect

us individually but also have a ripple effect that we witness in our families and communities.

Transitions can build our character and turn us into wise women, or they can leave us feeling depressed and alone. Successful transitions can make us strong—ready to extend a hand to other women who will join us—or they can make us fearful of what lies ahead.



You might be thinking, who are these women and what are their credentials? Well, we are not psychologists (although we have seen a few). We are not self-help experts (although we have read the books). We don't profess to have discovered any ultimate truths. We are

simply four women who have banded together and helped each other get through our lives.

Construct a “Wit Kit”

The way I see it, if you want a rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain.

—Dolly Parton, singer (1946–)

This book is a road map of sorts for life’s transitions. It contains the many lessons we’ve learned on how to maneuver the tidal waves of change that threatened our stability.

Along the way, we have been honored to meet and interview many magnificent women. We’ve included their stories of challenge, resilience, and triumph. This book is a literary kitchen table, where we invite you to pull up a chair and join us so you don’t have to go through life alone. We hope this inspiring circle of women gives you the hope, insight, and inspiration to deal with your own challenges and changes.

We agree with Thomas à Kempis, who said, “The object of education isn’t knowledge; it’s action.” With that in mind, each section in this book ends with suggested action plans and exercises. We call this section the WIT Kit. We hope you’ll find the insights we’ve shared interesting. Even more important, we hope you’ll be motivated to take the time to adapt and apply them in your life, where they can produce real-world results.

We know you’re busy. We know you’re probably running from the minute you wake up to the minute you go to bed. What we’ve learned, though, is that taking the time to follow up on the recommendations in the WIT Kit has made the difference between merely

surviving what life has thrown at us and thriving despite what life has thrown at us.

Some of the suggested steps in the WIT Kit take only a few minutes. Some involve more time and planning. All of them can help. If you feel as though life is dragging you down, these actions can help you keep your head above water. They can help you create a higher quality of life for yourself and your loved ones now, not someday.

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San Francisco, California
October 2006

chapter one

*Managing Misfortunate
Events*



1. Convene a gathering of kitchen table friends.

If I had to characterize one quality as the genius of female thought, culture, and action, it would be the connectivity.

—Robin Morgan, writer (1941–)

Find One Safe Place to Tell Your Story

You are the storyteller of your own life and you can create the legend or not.

—Isabel Allende, Chilean-American writer (1942–)

For over ten years, the four of us gathered round a kitchen table and told our stories. We looked forward to our gatherings because we knew that it was the one place in our lives where we would be heard. It was a place where other women would listen intently without judgment. We can state without one ounce of doubt that being able to tell our story to another woman saved our sanity and, in some cases, saved our lives.

We believe that every woman needs to create for herself a safe place where her story can be heard. A place and time convened with women friends who care about her well-being. We know from our own experience that staying connected with each other has made all the difference in our ability to cope with the challenges we've faced over the years. Our first and most important way to keep your head above water when life threatens to drag you down is to convene a gathering of kitchen table friends. Form this group so you have an ongoing source of support.

Think you don't have time for your women friends? We encourage you to think again. If you're thinking, "I don't feel up to doing this right now," that's precisely why you ought to do this. If your energy is low, it's because you're trying to do everything by yourself.

You're running on empty, and you need to fill up your emotional tank with support and input from women who care about you. Kitchen table groups will feed your soul. You can get started today with seven simple steps. Following these steps can help you create a wonderful network of women friends.

Seven Steps for Forming a Kitchen Table Group

A friend walks in when the rest of the world walks out.

—Anonymous

1. No matter how bad your life might be right now, plan a get-together with women you admire. They do not need to be famous, rich, or fabulously accomplished. You do not need to know them well; although they do need to be women you respect and who share similar values and priorities—women with integrity who will be willing to listen, encourage others, and be honest.

Many women feel as isolated as you do. Now is the perfect time to ask that mom who shares car pool duties with you. What about the woman at work with whom you have only a nodding acquaintance but have always felt a spark of connection? Perhaps there's someone on a fundraising committee you've admired in action, someone who always can be counted on to do what she says she's going to do.

2. Pick a meeting place that has comfortable surroundings and that gives you privacy. It could be the corner of a local coffee shop, the back table at a favorite restaurant, or the living room of your home. The kitchen tables in our different homes have worked well for us all these years.

3. You don't have to do anything fancy. Just pick up the phone, send an e-mail, or ask the women in person. Tell them up front that you know they're busy, that the purpose of this meeting is to create a support network that meets regularly where women can talk out what's going on in their lives in a confidential setting. Participants are welcome to talk about their jobs (or lack of a job), their families, their health, and their finances—whatever is on their minds and in their hearts. Give your group a name and commit to meetings (every other week, or at least monthly). In our own group we met monthly but often convened our kitchen table group more often when one of our members was in the midst of a crisis.

4. The first few meetings of your kitchen table group can probably benefit from some sort of structure. In our group meetings, we always begin with some illuminating questions:

- So, how's your life?
- How can we help?
- Who do we know who can help?
- What are you happy about right now in your life?
- What is there to laugh about?
- When we leave here today, what three things are we committing to each other that we will do for ourselves?

5. Do not allow your kitchen table groups to turn into a "pity party." Pity parties rob you of your spirit and do nothing to empower you. The purpose of this gathering is not simply to complain . . . and stop there. Go ahead and get what's bothering you, worrying you, or hurting you off your chest, and then

ask for advice. Brainstorm possible solutions and strategies for the issues you're facing. Have fun, cry, and laugh out loud.

6. Use the WIT Kit found at the end of each part in this book as a focus for your meetings. We purposely created the WIT Kit with exercises that you can work through as a group in your own kitchen table meetings. Discuss the topics and questions among your group.
7. Visit our website www.thisisnothelifeinorder.com for more resources on kitchen table groups. Also, let us know about your group and tell us your stories.

The Stories We've Told

If there is a secret about how to make a woman's circle it is that the women in the circle know each other's personal stories, know about each other's journeys, know what is of consequence, where the challenges and difficulties are that matter . . .

—Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D., psychiatrist and writer

Our kitchen table group met for over ten years and during that time we told many stories, solved many problems, and mended many broken hearts. We begin by introducing you to our stories and the defining moments that brought us together as lifelong friends.

2. Transcend misfortunate events.

"Surely, things shall get better," she said. I wanted to know just one thing. Who the hell was "Shirley," and why should I believe her?

—Jane Curtin, comedian (1947–)

Silly Thoughts

Although there may be tragedy in your life, there's always a possibility to triumph. It doesn't matter who you are, where you come from. The ability to triumph begins with you. Always.

— Oprah Winfrey, television host (1954–)

Nightmares. They still invade my sleep twenty-seven years later. The nightmares remind me that life is a precious resource to be used up, enjoyed, lived.

I am Jackie Speier, and my nightmares take me back to a fateful day in November nearly three decades ago.

I was twenty-eight at the time, getting ready to purchase my first home. As a single professional woman, legislative counsel to a U.S. congressman, I had it all. But I had a strong premonition that the trip I was arranging to South America could be one from which I might not return. “Silly thoughts,” my friend Katy assured me. “After all, you will be traveling with the press corps and a U.S. congressman. What could possibly happen?”

Holed up in a congressional office for hours at a time, I was reading State Department briefings on a religious community created by the Reverend Jim Jones. We were investigating numerous allegations from relatives and friends that their family members were being held against their will in a jungle hideaway known as the People’s Temple. As we reviewed taped interviews with defectors, I had an ominous feeling—a feeling I could not put out of my mind. One former member had told us that people were being forced to act out suicides in an exercise Jim Jones called “The White Night.”

Congressman Leo Ryan, my boss, had heard enough. He decided to see for himself, firsthand, the plight of these U.S. citizens in Guyana, South America. Even after the CIA and the State Department cleared the trip for safety, I still had doubts.

Conversations in a Jungle

I postpone death by living, by suffering, by error, by risking, by loving.

—Anais Nin, French writer (1903–1977)

Flying into Guyana's capital, Georgetown, we changed planes and continued on to Port Kaituma—a remote airstrip deep inside the South American jungle. Several convoy trucks drove us to the Jonestown encampment. We entered a clearing in the jungle, where I saw an outdoor amphitheatre surrounded by small cabins. You couldn't help but be impressed by the settlement. In less than two years, a community had been carved out. During our first and only night at the People's Temple, the members entertained us with music and singing. I remember looking into the eyes of Jim Jones. I saw madness there. He was no longer the charismatic leader who had lured more than 900 people to a remote commune in the jungle; he was a man possessed.

The congressman and I randomly selected people to interview to determine whether they were being held against their will. We hand-delivered letters to those whose families back home were worried. Many of the individuals were young—eighteen or nineteen years old—while others were senior citizens. One by one, they told us that they loved living in the People's Temple. It was almost as though they had been coached to answer my questions. As the night drew to a close, NBC news correspondent Don Harris walked off alone to smoke a cigarette. In the darkness, two people approached him and put notes into his hand. The correspondent gave the notes to Congressman Ryan and me. I held in my hands evidence of what I had sensed all along: people were indeed being held against their will in the jungles of South America.

Morning broke, and I interviewed the two people who had sent notes saying they wanted to leave. Word of the opportunity to leave

had gotten out. More people started coming forward, stating they too wished to depart. Suddenly a couple of men with guns appeared. Chaos ensued as more people approached us, wanting to leave. Jim Jones started ranting and screaming. Larry Layton, one of Jones's closest assistants, said, "Don't get the wrong idea. We are all very happy here. You see the beauty of this special place." One hour later, Larry Layton had become one of the defectors, asking to escape the jungle compound.

3. When left on the tarmac, begin to walk.

Through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and fight restored.

—Helen Keller, writer (1880–1968)

Pretending to Die

The world is round and the place which may seem like the end may also be only the beginning.

—Ivy Baker Priest, former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury
(1905–1975)

People were screaming and crying in the jungle compound. The tiny commune had become emotionally charged. Parents were in a tug-of-war with their children, one parent wanting to go and the other wanting to stay. So many had decided to escape the People's Temple that we had to order another plane.

We left for the airstrip. Dressed in an oversized yellow poncho, Larry Layton was eager to board the cargo plane. I distrusted him and asked that he be searched before boarding. A journalist patted him down but did not find the gun Layton had hidden under his

poncho. Thinking back, I now realize we were helpless. Here we were—a congressman, congressional aides, journalists, and cameramen—not one among us a police officer or military escort. We had nothing to protect us other than the imagined shield of infallibility of a U.S. congressman and members of the U.S. press corps.

Suddenly we heard a scream. Seconds later, I heard an unfamiliar noise. I saw people running into the bushes and realized that the noise was gunshot. I dropped to the ground and curled up around a wheel of the plane, pretending to be dead. I heard footsteps. I felt my body twitch as someone pumped bullets into me at point blank range. I was shot five times.

The gunmen continued to walk around the tarmac, shooting innocent people. Soon it was quiet. I opened my eyes and looked down at my body. It was ravaged. A bone was sticking out of my arm, and blood was everywhere. I remember thinking, “My God, I am twenty-eight years old and I am about to die.” I yelled out for Congressman Ryan, calling his name several times. There was no answer.

The plane’s engine was still revving, and I thought that if I could just get to the cargo hatch, I could escape this place. I crawled toward the opening, dragging my body as close as I could to the baggage compartment. A reporter from the *Washington Post* picked me up and put me into the cargo hold. I remember saying to him, “Could you give me something to stop my bleeding?” He gave me his shirt. I was losing so much blood that the shirt was soaked in seconds.

The plane was filled with bullet holes, and we soon realized this would not be our flight out of this hell on earth. Someone pulled me out of the plane and placed me back on the airstrip. Accidentally, they had laid my head upon an anthill, and ants started crawling all over me. Lying next to me was a reporter’s tape recorder. I taped a last message to my parents and brother. I told them that I loved them.

Supposedly, the Guyanese Army was going to secure the airstrip and rescue us, so I held on tightly to the belief that the army would come. It grew dark, and we continued to wait. Although I was in excruciating pain, I clung to life.

In the middle of the night, word had gotten back to us that there had been a mass suicide at the People's Temple. At one o'clock the next day, twenty hours after the shootings, the Guyanese Air Force arrived. Their arrival coincided with a message to the world that more than 900 people, including a U.S. congressman and members of his delegation, were dead. The headlines called it the worst mass suicide in history. To this day, I still refer to the events at Jonestown as a mass murder.

Three Minutes from Death

Sometimes it takes years to really grasp what has happened to your life.

—Wilma Rudolph, Olympic gold medal winner (1940–1994)

The Guyanese Air Force transported the survivors to a waiting U.S. Air Force Medivac plane in Georgetown. Etched in my memory is how I felt that very moment—as though someone had wrapped me in the American flag. I was so grateful.

Loaded with survivors, the Air Force plane set off for the United States. As we taxied down the runway, I recall glancing down at my body. It seemed so surreal, as though the mangled lump of flesh belonged to someone other than me. Months later, I was told that the medical technician who had tended to me during the flight had said that I was three minutes from death.

We finally arrived at Andrews Air Force Base, where I was immediately taken into surgery. I had developed gangrene, and surgeons

debated whether to amputate my leg. After four hours of surgery, the nurse wheeled me out of the surgical ward, and there stood my mother, who had traveled from San Francisco to meet me. They told my mother that they needed to transfer me to the Baltimore Shock/Trauma Center to attempt to stem the spread of gangrene. I begged my mother and the doctors to please take me by ambulance, fearing I would die on another plane flight.

The shock/trauma center was lit with incredibly bright lights. Numerous IVs were hooked up to me. I remember asking the nurse, “How many calories are in all that stuff flowing into my body?”

“Three thousand,” she replied.

I said, “Oh, my God, I am going to get so fat!” Interesting, isn’t it, how we can lose perspective in the middle of trauma?

After yet another surgery, I was returned to my hospital room. The surgeons had repaired my body, but my hair was still matted with dried blood, Guyanese dirt, and dead ants. In an act of love I will never forget, my brother tenderly washed my hair.

The doctors remained very concerned about the gangrene in my wounds. In a last-ditch effort, they began a series of hyperbaric treatments that required me to be placed into a chamber filled with antibacterial microbes and oxygen. The chamber resembled an iron lung. Each time they removed me from the chamber, I vomited violently. Unfortunately, they had to repeat this process several times over the next few days.

Confident they had gotten rid of the gangrene, they transferred me back to Arlington Hospital. I was also placed under twenty-four-hour protection, with security guards posted outside my door, because threats had been made against my life. Some individuals associated with the People’s Temple blamed our congressional investigation for the mass deaths in Guyana and wanted to retaliate.

One Step Forward, One Day at a Time

Challenges make you discover things about yourself that you never really knew. They're what make the instrument stretch—what make you go beyond the norm.

—Cicely Tyson, actress (1933–)

The surgeons performed skin grafts on my legs. The gunshots had blown apart my right arm, and a steel dowel had been inserted to hold together what remained. The radial nerve in my arm was damaged, and I could not use my fingers or lift my arm. The first time they tried to get me on my feet to walk, I fainted. Hospitalized for nearly two months and having endured ten surgeries, I was finally discharged and was able to fly back to San Francisco.

The days ahead were a flurry of interviews about the Jonestown massacre. I was not allowed to stay in my home because of the death threats, so I lived with a friend. I still carried two bullets in my body, which the doctors had deemed too risky to remove. I never appeared in public without layers of clothes to cover what I had begun to believe was my hideous, disfigured body. In the following years, I would endure months of physical therapy to regain the use of my arm.

I was twenty-eight, a single woman who could hardly feed herself and whose body was maimed and scarred. One day I realized that if I was going to get over this, if I was ever going to go forward, I had to figure out a way not to wallow in self-pity.

The exact moment I came to terms with what had happened in Guyana occurred years later, on a crowded beach in Hawaii. The disfigured body I walked in was mine. The joy I felt at just being alive had become greater than my insecurities. I had come to realize that a person's body was irrelevant in the big picture of life, physical beauty a shallow concern. I was disabled, but I did not believe that a dis-

ability of any kind prevented me from living a full and wonderful life. If anything, my disfigurement had opened my eyes to the bias often harbored toward those who are different.

I put on a bathing suit that day and walked across the Hawaiian beach as people stared at the remnant scars of my gunshot wounds. I kept walking, and I learned with every step that, as difficult as it is, one *must* take the next step. Often you have to force yourself to do it. In the jungle in South America on that November day, it was not my turn to die, but certainly now was my time to live.

Life Gives No Guarantees

Inspiration is disturbing. She does not believe in guarantees or insurance or strict schedules. Yet, she will be there when you need her, but you have to take it on trust. She knows when you need her better than you do.

—J. Ruth Gendler, artist (1954—)

I survived the massacre in Guyana and went on to marry an emergency room physician. I was also elected to serve in the California legislature. We had our first child, and life was turning out to be just as I had dreamed. We tried for more children, but after two miscarriages, a failed adoption, and fertility treatments, Steve and I decided to give up on our dream of another child. I launched a statewide campaign in California to be elected secretary of state. Miraculously, three months later, I found myself pregnant in what doctors termed a high-risk pregnancy. I promptly withdrew from the campaign to focus on the health of our unborn child.

On a rainy January day, three months into my pregnancy, I was en route to Sacramento. My secretary tracked me down, as police had informed her that Steve had been in a car accident. I immediately phoned the emergency room and talked with the attending physician.

I could tell by his voice that my husband's injuries were severe. I was an hour away, and as I rushed back to the Bay Area, I feared the worst.

Once I got to the hospital, it seemed like hours before they would let me see Steve. When I finally got to see him in the ICU, he had a shunt in his head and was on a respirator. His body was warm, but the machines indicated he had no brain function. I kissed him. I held him. I told him I loved him, even though I knew he couldn't hear me.

I couldn't believe the nightmare that was unfolding in front of me. I later learned that an uninsured driver with faulty brakes had careened through a stop sign, broadsiding Steve's car. His carelessness had killed this talented, caring, vital man. I was now a pregnant widow with a young son.

The loss of my husband was traumatic. I no longer even wanted to get out of bed. Yet, I really had no choice. I was the sole supporter of two children, one yet unborn. Because we didn't have life insurance on Steve, I was financially destroyed. I had to sell everything, including my home. I spent the next eight years as a single mother raising two children.

Today, eleven years later, I am fortunate to live with great joy and happiness. I am married to a wonderful man, Barry Dennis. I met Barry on a blind date; he was a confirmed bachelor. Five months later, we were engaged!

I want women to remember that when life leaves them alone on the tarmac—whether it be the devastating loss of a loved one, the shattering of a lifelong dream, the loss of a job, or events that turn the world upside down—women can always learn to walk again. I am living proof that women can reinvent and rebuild their lives, no matter what hardships they have faced.

4. *When life is not what you ordered, begin again.*

I've learned that no matter what happens, or how bad it seems today that life does go on, and it will be better tomorrow. This I am certain.

—Dr. Maya Angelou, writer and poet (1928–)

I'll Beat Those Odds, Even on a Radiation Diet

Someone once described me as a swan. I look so smooth going across the lake, but underneath, I'm paddling like crazy.

—Shelly Lazarus, CEO, Ogilvy and Mather (1947–)

“You must be mistaken,” I said, clearly and assertively informing the doctor of his error. “Stanley, I’d like a second opinion. I’d like the best radiologist to take another X-ray.”

I am Jan Yanehiro, and those were my brave-sounding words. But that’s all they were—just words—simply a front for the fear and jumbled thoughts inside me. I had just been told that my husband had a brain tumor.

I remember walking into the room to view the X-rays. I never expected to see the tumor so clearly. It was round, the size of a golf ball, surrounded by a blurry mass of tissue the size of a fist. “I see it . . .” I said quietly. It was obvious no second opinion would be needed.

My husband, John Zimmerman, was forty-five years old and solidly built—220 pounds on a light day with the wind blowing, I always kidded. “Can you believe this?” John asked me. “A brain tumor?!”

The words—that condition—how foreign. It just didn’t belong in our family. “No, I don’t believe it,” I said. And I vaguely remember thinking that John was going to be the miracle, the survivor of this ugly thing, and I was going to do a television story on it. Such wishful, silly thinking.

John was operated on the day after the X-ray diagnosis. The surgeon called me after the four-hour operation. "It's not a good tumor." I remember thinking, "Is any tumor good?" They got as much of the tumor as they could, but they could not get all of it. The mass was located behind his right eye. In simple terms, John was given a right frontal lobotomy. In removing the tumor, they had also removed the "silent" portion of his brain, the portion that governs emotion and behavior.

John's tumor had a name. It was called a *Glioblastoma multiforma*, stage 4. I could barely pronounce it at the time, let alone spell it. Today, I know all about it. Glioblastoma is a malignant tumor. There are four "grades" or "stages"—4 is tops, the most aggressive of the tumors. I kidded John that it was very appropriate that he have this type of tumor, being a "Type A" personality. You know the type: they work hard, they play hard, they live, challenge, and enjoy every aspect of life. John fought bravely. "Don't worry," he would say, "I'm going to beat this thing."

Our daughters sent get-well notes to their dad in the hospital. Jaelyn, twelve, wrote, "You have to get better, because I want you to meet your grandchildren one day!" Jenna, ten, wrote, "Daddy, I want you to get better, because you have to walk me down the aisle at my wedding." There followed seven weeks of daily radiation, second opinions, the recommendation of another operation, chemotherapy pills, anger, pain, and even humor. He lost seventy pounds on his radiation diet—a diet, he would joke, that he just couldn't recommend.

Just three days shy of six months, John lost the battle and his personal war. He was forty-six years old when he died at our home. Our children were twelve, ten, and six years young. It was raw. That's the word that keeps coming up again and again to describe John's dying.

Clinging to the Tiniest Speck of Hope

I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it without knowing what's going to happen next.

—Gilda Radner, comedian (1946–1989)

Just when I had thought all was great with the universe and everything was looking pretty darn good—*wham!*—death interfered. Looking back, the signs were all there. We just didn't know it. John had always had headaches. We just didn't pay attention when they began to get worse. He crashed his car, an accident. He would get up at 2 A.M. and take four Tylenol tablets because his headaches were so bad. He had a cold that lasted for months and months. Stress, we thought. He had always had a temper, but it had gotten shorter and shorter. And he had always had a big laugh. We just never noticed that we heard it less and less. Life was just so full, with three kids, careers, travel, family, and friends.

When John was operated on, the surgeon said the tumor had been growing for at least a year, possibly longer. Odd thing about living with someone you know is dying—you cling to the tiniest bit of hope. If John was having a lucid moment, I thought, “Aha! He's beating the odds.” The doctor said at one point that the tumor hadn't grown and the radiation seemed to be working. Break out the champagne!

In his last week, John lay dying on a rented hospital bed in the family room of our home. He wore diapers, was given morphine to dull the excruciating pain, and was fed applesauce by a nurse's aide. He never got up from the bed. On the last night of his life, our twelve-year-old daughter was at her seventh grade school dance. We had to pick her up early, because we knew John's death was imminent. Her friends all cried.

Relief is the word that describes how I felt when he died—relief to know John’s agony was over, relief to know that my kids, our family, could once again find a “new” normal routine. And I never had a doubt in my mind that the lives of my children would go on. In fact, during John’s last moments, I whispered to him that I would make sure that our children’s lives would go on, and that I would do my best to make sure of this. This was my promise to him.

After six months of anger, fear, disbelief, chemotherapy, radiation, and uncertainty, I felt strangely calm. *Acceptance* is another word that comes to mind. At John’s memorial service, we celebrated his life. I asked special friends to say only funny things about John. I insisted on a closed casket. The John who suffered from this brain tumor was not the John I chose to remember. He had become emaciated. To this day, I refuse to look at pictures of him when he battled cancer. On top of his casket, I placed all his favorite things: chocolate chip brownies by Mrs. Fields Cookies, poker chips because he loved the game, a picture of him deep sea fishing. His secretary sang the Tina Turner song “Simply the Best.” John was gone.

You’ve heard that old cliché, “Time heals all.” I don’t think time heals. But months, years later, the grief and the sharp edges of John’s death are softer.

In the months following John’s death, I was faced with four lawsuits. John did not have enough life insurance. (He always felt he could do more with the money himself than if he paid for some life insurance policy.) He had half a million dollars in life insurance; he also had half a million dollars in an outstanding line of credit at a bank that had to be paid. I did not have a job. The television contract I had ended two months before John died. Now I was not only a widow but also an unemployed one.

In a strange way, the learning I had to do to resolve the lawsuits and my career was empowering. It took me years, lots of attorneys,

and thousands of dollars to clean up the financial mess. More than one friend asked if I was angry with John for leaving me in such a state. No, I can't say I was ever angry, because John didn't want to die, and he never intended to leave me with lawsuits or a financial tangle.

Today, many years later, I am remarried and have five children in what some might call a ready-made family created with my husband, Robert Eves. Many people call my new family "The Brady Bunch." While that was a terrific television show, our real life is very different. We have weathered family counseling, family trips, family arguments, family disappointments, and new family traditions. We have seen our kids through high school, drug rehab, and college.

I live what I deem to be an adventurous, challenging life, one that proves that even in the darkest of circumstances, when life is not what you ordered, you can learn to begin again.

5. Learn the secrets of the blue-haired lady.

Honor wears different coats to different eyes.

—Barbara Tuchman, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer (1912–1989)

Her Hair Was Always Blue on Fridays

I was so far from the seat of power, but my naïveté worked to my advantage. When I was told that the studio passed on my first pilot, I thought that was a good thing—you know, like "passed" in college.

—Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, TV producer and writer (1947–)

I wondered if he noticed her blue hair. He concealed all knowledge of the fact that the elderly woman sitting across from him in his opulent banker's office had just about the bluest hair he had ever seen.

I am Deborah Stephens, and the blue-haired lady was my grandmother.

Her blue hair, combined with a matter-of-fact demeanor, penetrating eyes, and down-home Southern hospitality, left no doubt that he, Mr. Banker, was just a minor obstacle standing between her and what she wanted. She was there to obtain a loan. It never occurred to her that there were obstacles: her lack of collateral—her home wasn't in her name—no credit rating, and the fact that in those days (a mere thirty-two years ago), a woman could not even have a credit card in her own name. I knew Mr. Banker was no match for the blue-haired lady.

I had known her all my life, and I can swear that her silver mop of hair was always tinted blue on Fridays. It was her treat to herself—a tint, a curl, and a comb-out every Friday morning, no matter what. The whole process left her feeling beautiful, powerful, and bold. And so I came to love the blue hair almost as much as I loved her. I also grew up believing that all confident women of a certain age tinted their hair blue!

That day, in Mr. Banker's office, was a defining moment for me. Yes, my grandmother received the loan that day—a college student loan, for me. My grandmother's negotiation skills could blow the doors open in any corporate boardroom today. Yet she was uneducated and poor. Her wealth came in the form of deep religious beliefs and unconditional kindness. She also possessed the tenacity of a bulldog, as she never let the word "No" stand in her way.

What my grandmother lacked in cash she made up for in an overabundance of dreams. She had an unrelenting belief in me, greater than any belief I held about myself. No matter the circumstances or challenges, she was determined that I would go places in life that she and my mother had only dreamed about.

Thanks to the blue-haired lady's meeting with Mr. Banker, I was college bound. The first female in two generations to apply, I had

always seen college as an unattainable dream. Too big of a dream to imagine. Yet my grandmother *always* dealt in possibilities.

After college, I landed an exciting corporate job with a major publishing company, traveled the world, and made more money in a year than my mother had made in ten. Years later, I cofounded a management consulting firm and wrote six business books that were translated into eight different languages. Consulting with corporations and government, I worked with some of America's most powerful leaders. I was a faculty member in the prestigious executive development course at Stanford University and a guest lecturer. I lived in a part of the world that was closed to my grandmother and mother. Yet those two women were my inspiration and were most responsible for my success.

Every woman should have a blue-haired lady in her life. She is the woman who thinks you are terrific even when you don't feel terrific. The woman who always believes that anything is possible, no matter the odds. The one who continues to show you that life is a wondrous adventure even in the midst of great despair.

Defining Moments Are Possibilities Masquerading as Obstacles

One of the things I learned the hard way is that it doesn't pay to get discouraged.

—*Lucille Ball, actress and comedian (1911–1989)*

Obstacles and possibilities have often melded together to form defining moments in my life. My first defining moment occurred in the bank where I observed my grandmother negotiate a college loan for me. Defining moments also have a way of striking just when we think we have life figured out. Smartly compartmentalized lives can be turned upside down in a matter of moments.

Defining moment number two made its visit nearly seven years ago, and its subject was my husband of twenty-five years. A healthy, stocky, and robust man, Mike had always been full of life. One day, after playing a round of golf, he was unable to walk. The pain came in muscle spasms throughout his body. Thus, we began a multitude of journeys to the University of California-San Francisco Medical Center to unravel the illness that was ravaging his body.

The medical detective work took six months. In that time, my husband had lost 50 percent of his lung capacity. There were days when his fingers and toes ached so badly that he would dunk them into buckets of ice water to numb the pain. Hospitalized for a lung biopsy, he ended up on life support in the ICU unit of the local hospital. His diagnosis began with the term “pulmonary fibrosis, caused by dermatomyositis and polymyositis”—words I could neither pronounce nor understand. We were told that the median survival rate was 5.5 years. The doctors recommended he consider a lung transplant.

I remember sitting in the fourteenth-floor waiting room while my husband was being examined by an entire team of doctors. Looking out the large window, I saw the Golden Gate Bridge. As I looked at the bridge, enrapt in its breathtaking beauty, I wondered if there was some way for me to escape all the medicine, the doctors, the tests, the daily battles with the insurance company, and this illness.

Tears rolled down my face. Why couldn't I just have a normal life? How do you even prepare yourself or your family for the prospect of a lung transplant? The ring of my cell phone interrupted my thoughts. It was my daughter's kindergarten teacher. Could I please come pick her up, as she and fifteen of her classmates had head lice? Head lice! I'm talking to surgeons about lung transplants, and we haven't even figured out how to rid the world of head lice! “What would the blue-haired lady do? How would she manage all of this?” I wondered.

Today, Mike has lived longer than anyone expected him to. As he battles the odds, his spirit reminds me of my grandmother's. When you live with someone who wages war against a life-threatening illness, even the most ordinary of days become special. Illness teaches many lessons—lessons in love, faith, courage, optimism, and hope. The experience has also taught me much about the role of patience and the mysteries inherent in life.



*DEBORAH CHECKED AGAIN, BUT
THERE WERE NO EASY ANSWERS.*

Before Mike's illness, I was quite an impatient person, always pushing and striving to make things happen as quickly and succinctly as possible. Surrounded by to-do lists and calendars and planners, I believed that I could control and manage everything that life threw my way. I've learned now that control is an illusion and that patience is the virtue your mother always told you it was. The things we think

we have control over in life often have a sneaky way of showing us our lack of control. For, in just one moment, entire lives can change forever. Yet I am proof that those changes—the defining moments—hold the opportunities to live a life filled with purpose. They are the lessons the blue-haired lady taught me.

6. *When you are standing at the edge of the pool, jump in.*

I read and walked for miles at night along the beach, writing bad verse and searching endlessly for someone wonderful who would step out of the darkness and change my life. It never crossed my mind that person could be me.

—Anna Quindlen, writer (1953–)

Hide and Seek

The willingness to accept responsibility for one's own life is the source from which self-respect springs.

—Joan Didion, writer (1934–)

As a child, and into adulthood, I learned to hide my light from others so that no one would notice and hurt me. Perhaps it came from being sexually abused, and learning that people can take very special parts of you without your permission. As a result of this abuse, I developed a fear that someone would take that very special part of me and destroy it. I decided to hide it.

I am Michealene Cristini Risley, and I became an expert at hide and seek. The childhood game followed me into adulthood. I became so good at hiding myself; it took so much of my energy that it stopped me from focusing on what I wanted in life. I hid my talents

because I did not want people to notice and hurt me or take away those gifts. Little did I know that this was impossible. I would work my way through life, getting close to all of the things that I dreamed of but avoided or had fallen short of. I had wanted to write and direct movies since I was a kid. I can remember the day, I was probably twelve, when I told my mother that I was going to be a writer, and promptly went out to the corner store and purchased a notepad.

In my career, I took jobs that circled around those desires, but never let me touch them—to get directly into that role. I stared longingly from the edge, hoping for what seemed so out of my reach. The experience was like having your swimsuit on at the edge of the pool but never having the courage to jump in. I secretly hoped that someone would grab my hand and help me into the water. What I needed most was for someone to tell me that it was okay to want those things, it was okay to dream and be—and that I wasn't a child anymore. That as an adult, no one could take those gifts away from me. My fantasy was always that this person would grab me by the hand and nurture those talents, while protecting me. My own inner voices were hard to conquer. How dare I hope for things in my life? How dare I dream so large? And yet, my own voices did not stop success. I was very successful. Friends and family would look at my career and marvel at how happy and successful I was. I was the only one that knew the truth. I was still standing at the edge waiting to jump in.

A Family Full of Secrets

Find out what you don't want to know about yourself, what you're afraid of, and then face it head on.

—Linda Evans, actress (1942–)

In 1968 the Detroit Tigers won the World Series, and my dad lost his father. Death was always part of my childhood. When Grandfather

Dominic passed away, I was eight. I remember the funeral service. The priest kept ringing the mass bell, and my cousin, thinking it was the ice cream man, kept asking for a strawberry push-up. We tried not to snicker as her voice got louder and more demanding. Somehow along the way, I came to believe that if you told your parents bad things, it would cause their deaths. It was a difficult belief to have inside a family already full of secrets. Imagine having such a secret, that you thought would kill your parents—it immobilizes you. Forget the pool, you don't even walk outside.

It was when I was facing life and death at the same time that I finally did walk outside. I gave birth to my first child the same day that my father had a brain tumor removed. Life and death. They seem always to be intertwined. I couldn't travel to see my dad, and I didn't know if he would make it out of surgery alive. I had to try to find a way to celebrate the gift I was receiving: a healthy baby boy. It was bittersweet.

Three weeks after the birth of my first son, I had the chance to see my father alive, and he got to see his eleventh grandson. I studied my father's face. It lit up with joy at his first glimpse of my son. It dawned on me that my dad's life would end soon. We spent an evening playing skit-skat together while he was in the ICU. His room smelled of antiseptic. It was a quiet night after a day of indignities that my father had handled with patience and dignity. We played for keeps that night. When I won, I took a cigarette from his pack, hoping that it would slow the speed with which he would die. If he won, he got a cigarette to add to his pile. Even with aphasia, he could count faster than I could. He knew when I cheated. We shared laughter.

Later that evening, I stood at the foot of the bed as he turned to me and called out the name "Mary Jane." This was my childhood friend's name. I froze. Yes, I had always wanted to confront my father, but could this possibly be the moment? I spent years rehearsing this

conversation. Not now, not when he was dying. Yet, here he was trying to talk about it. I agonized over what I should do. I wanted to run for the nearest exit.

All The Rage of Mount St. Helens

You can stand tall without standing on someone. You can be a victor without having victims.

—Harriet Beecher Stowe, activist and writer (1811–1896)

Standing in the intensive care unit, I felt transported back in time. There was the puke-green tile that framed the large mirror on the kitchen wall. I could hear the crackle of the olive oil heating up in the frying pan. I felt terror engulf me as I approached my mother. With her hands deep in the sudsy water and her back to me, she whirled around as I said, “Mom, Mary Jane says Dad put his hand down her pants.”

My mother exploded with all the rage of Mount St. Helens and glared down at me. “How could you ever think that your father would do something like that?”

I stopped. How could I think that? What was wrong with me? If Mom did not believe that Dad had done that to Mary Jane, how would she ever believe what he had done to me? I felt great big waves of nothing crashing over me like tons of needles pricking through my body, making me numb. I was still standing, but my mind had gone away.

The memories of those moments in the kitchen seared my mind as I stood at the foot of my dad’s deathbed. I looked closely at my father. Did I have the courage? Did he have the strength? Was this fair for me to do now, or ever? Here was my chance, and I had become that young girl again, waiting for someone to take my hand, unable to string a coherent word together. Afraid. The opportunity passed.

In the last few days of my dad’s life, his six children alternated visits, keeping him company. At my turn, I sat in a chair next to him

reading from the bible. It was a passage that I knew well. Not because I read the Bible frequently, but because my father had a humorous poster of these words hung in his office for years. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of death, I shall fear no evil.” I added the words that he had on the bottom of his poster: “For I am the meanest son of a bitch in the valley!” Can someone chuckle without any movement? I think so.

Each of us took time to say good-bye. Even though he was in a coma, the nurses told us he would be able to hear until the end. When it was my turn, I curled up on the bed next to him and whispered in his ear, “Dad, we both made mistakes, and I am sorry for that. I forgive you.” I felt the tension leave his body.

I wasn’t in the room when my father died, but his spirit was still there when I arrived. I could feel it. I reached into my back pocket for the lottery tickets I had purchased. My older sister took one and I took the other. I felt the familiar recognition of his flat fingernail as I took his hand. We both stood holding his thumbs and had him scratch the tickets. His body was still warm. I could hear my father’s silent laugh echo through the room—both tickets were winners.

It was within these last few days; with stark clarity I realized that I was no longer that abused child. I had made a choice some time ago to hide myself, and by continuing to hide into adulthood, I became the abuser . . . of myself. Through my father’s struggle with death and becoming a mother, I realized that those actions were no longer how I defined myself. I remember thinking that these were events that happened and they no longer define who I am or how much I deserve in life. Enough. It was in that moment of clarity I was able to break free of the past and to fully jump into my life without fear.

Today, I am happily married and have three young boys. I am proof that women can endure, can turn obstacles and heartbreak into opportunities that can lead to a wondrous life. In 2003, I resur-

rected a lifelong dream to write and direct my first short film called *Flashcards*. It is a film about child sexual abuse, much of it is my own story, the story of a young girl who is sexually molested and afraid to talk about it. My depiction of sexual abuse, a huge epidemic in our country, concerns the fear of repercussions mingled with the love and the shame and confusion. It is a story that is repeated throughout seemingly “normal” homes. Child sexual abuse is the least reported form of abuse. The statistic is understandable, given the confusion about the perpetrators, many of whom are relatives or friends. My message to women who may have similar life experiences as mine: Go ahead, hold your nose, close your eyes, and simply jump forward into your life!

The WIT Kit

Exercises and Tools for Managing Misfortunate Events

*You can clutch your past so tightly to your chest that
it leaves your arms too full to embrace the present.*

—Jan Glidewell, journalist

1. Find yourself a beautiful journal and label it “My WIT Kit.” Now grab a favorite pen and open to the first page. Write down three things you want to experience or accomplish in your lifetime. You may be thinking, “Right now, I just want to get through the day.” We understand. But this is your place to dream, your opportunity to think big. Consider this a gift to yourself. In your WIT Kit journal you have the freedom to look ahead instead of being bogged down in the present. Please don’t censor yourself. You can be as frivolous or as idealistic as you’d like.

2. Think of just one thing you can do this week to make progress on one of those three dreams. If you want to go back to college and get your degree, maybe you can pick up the phone and ask your local college to mail you registration requirements and a course catalog. If you want to travel to Europe, you can go online and check out available deals on travel Web sites. If you want to ride horses, you can visit a local stable and ask about their lessons or trail rides. If you want to open your own store, you can order the free booklets that are available from the Small Business Administration. Write your idea down.

No matter how overwhelmed you are right now, doing one thing to make progress on those three dreams will help move you out of any depressing mood. Every Sunday, review your three dreams and the action steps you have taken. Report in to your kitchen table group. If you got overloaded this week and didn't follow up on your intentions, just ask yourself what one specific action you're going to take this week.

3. Get into the habit of writing in your WIT Kit journal every day, even if you only scribble a few lines. It's easiest to make it a habit if you choose a time of day to write. Maybe while you're sipping your morning tea, or for ten minutes before bed.

Believe us—this investment will pay off for you in many ways. Writing in your journal is a gift you give yourself—a way to release doubts and fears onto the page, to avoid losing sight of your hopes and dreams. Your WIT Kit journal is a place to express yourself so that you don't bottle up emotions. You will be able to note progress and have a visible record of where you are now and where you were a short while ago.