

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)

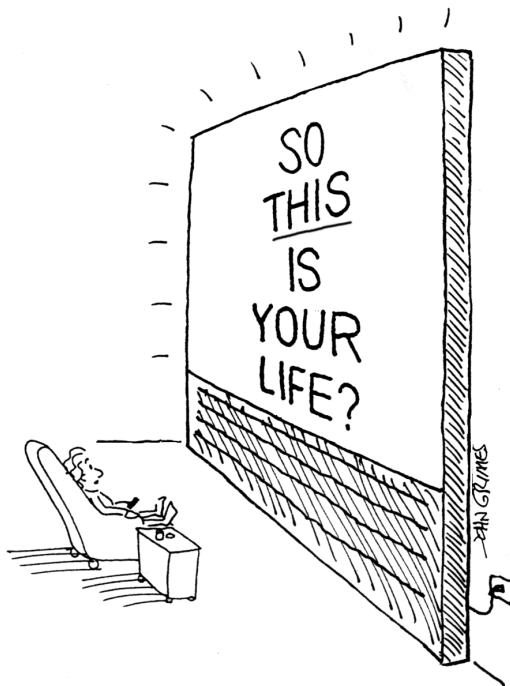
We are simply four women whom destiny threw together more than a decade ago. Collectively, we have experienced the extreme joys and deep sorrows that life offers up. From mundane moments to the dramatic and surreal, we have a history of six marriages, ten children, four stepchildren, six dogs, two miscarriages, 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.

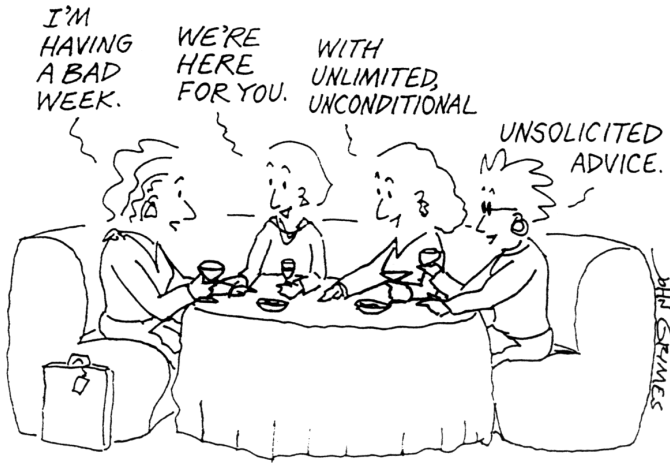
We Gave Our Group a Name

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.

Deborah Collins Stephens
Michealene Cristini Risley
Jackie Speier
Jan Yanehiro
San Francisco, California
October 2006