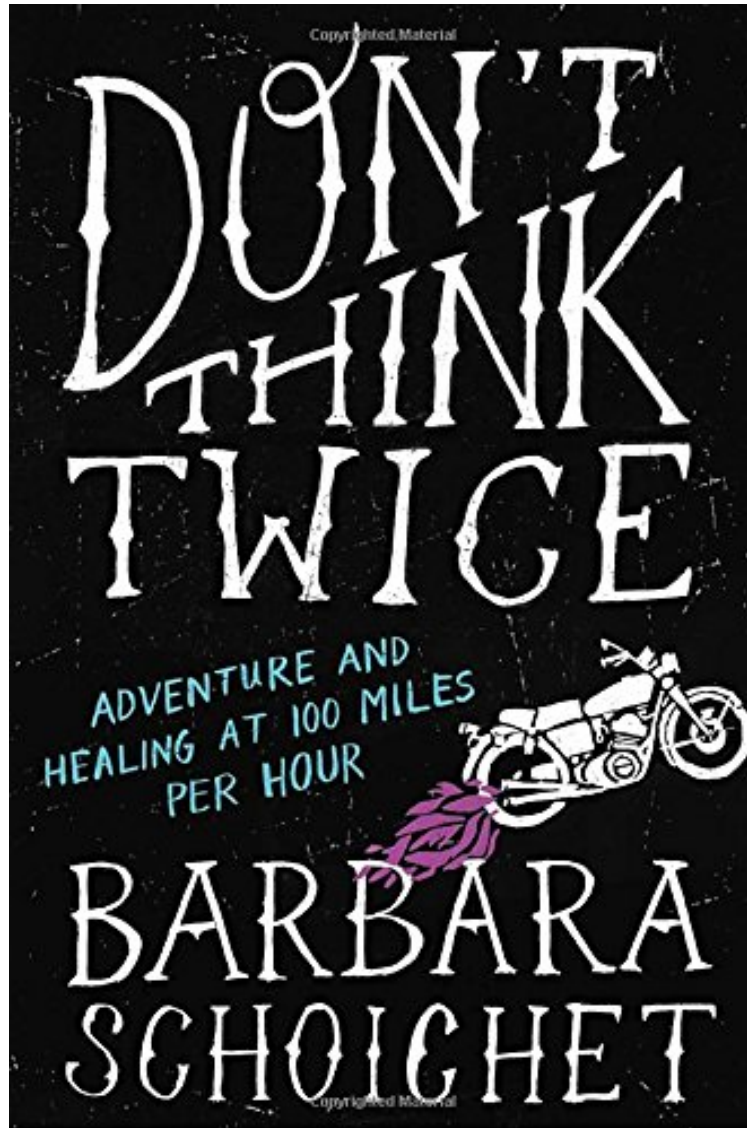


(Free and download) Don't Think Twice: Adventure and Healing at 100 Miles Per Hour

Don't Think Twice: Adventure and Healing at 100 Miles Per Hour

Barbara Schoichet

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#1234777 in Books Schoichet Barbara 2016-09-06 2016-09-06 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.28 x 1.13 x 6.241, .0 #File Name: 1101981806336 pages Don't Think Twice Adventure and Healing at 100 Miles Per Hour | File size: 44.Mb

Barbara Schoichet : Don't Think Twice: Adventure and Healing at 100 Miles Per Hour before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Don't Think Twice: Adventure and Healing at 100 Miles Per Hour:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Much More Than an Adventure Story By NatskyOne can read this book, "Don't Think Twice," for many reasons--for stories that run parallel to your own life, for adventure, for life's ups

and downs, and for advice on beating those dark days. Barbara Schoichet uses her experience and background to keep us turning the pages for fun and for help. One can also read this book to marvel at the author's superb writing ability. Page after page the stories zip along so smoothly, you feel like you are a fly on the wall watching the adventures. The author's metaphors are so well crafted that the reader can't help but feel many of the author's deep emotions. The reader is guaranteed to walk away with solid advice on handling some of life's difficulties. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Life happens @ 100 mph By Bay Brown + This book was well written and honest. A great read about Barbara's experience after losing her relationship, job and mother to cancer within a short period of time. Riding a motorcycle across country reaching 100 MPH daily was what worked for this author. I had the pleasure of attending a book club review where Barbara answered our questions and openly shared her experience. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Fantastic By Tweak Fantastic book. Great story, very well written, and way better than I could have imagined. Highly recommended to anyone into motorcycles, road trips, and trying to make sense of this life.

A late-in-life coming-of-age escapade told with humor and heart, *Don't Think Twice* is a moving and irreverent account of grief, growing up, and the healing power of adventure. Within six months, Barbara Schoichet lost everything: her job, her girlfriend of six years, and her mother to pancreatic cancer. Her life stripped bare, and armed with nothing but a death wish and a ton of attitude, Barbara pursues an unlikely method of coping. At the age of fifty she earns her motorcycle license, buys a Harley on eBay from two guys named Dave, and drives it alone from New York to Los Angeles on a circuitous trek loosely guided by her H.O.G. tour book and a whole lot of road whimsy. On the open highway where she daily takes her speed to a hundred Barbara battles physical limitations and inner demons on a journey that flows through the majestic Appalachian Mountains, the enchanting Turquoise Trail, and all along America's iconic Route 66. She is awed by the battlefields in Gettysburg, stunned by the decadence of Graceland, and amused by a Cadillac graveyard in the middle of nowhere. She meets kind strangers, odd strangers, and a guy who pulls a gun on her for cutting him off. She is vulnerable but sassy, broken but determined to heal . . . or die trying.

Praise for *Don't Think Twice* Often surprising, witty, and thoughtful, this is a bittersweet and entertaining read. Booklist The memoir stands as a monument to self-confidence and self-direction and to doing what you feel compelled to do, even when people cluck and you can't explain to yourself why you're doing it. Publishers Weekly An all-inclusive and honest account of how one woman used a motorcycle journey to come to grips with painful events in her life... Schoichet's account will resonate with bikers and with those who have always wondered what it feels like to go 100 miles per hour on a motorcycle. Kirkus s Finally, a road trip dangerous, exciting, and illuminating taken by a woman, and on a motorcycle! Yesss! This is inspiring to those of us who can't but who wish we could. Jane Juska, author of *A Round-Heeled Woman* and *Mrs. Bennet Has Her Say* Vivid and honest, *Don't Think Twice* is as fresh as the wind on your face. Reading this book will remind you that just when you think you've hit the end of the road, it's time to set out to discover a new path for your life. Diana Bletter, author of *The Mom Who Took Off On Her Motorcycle* and *A Remarkable Kindness* If you're yearning for a wild ride of an adventure, as well as a jolt of heartening life philosophies, don't think twice about making *Don't Think Twice* your next read. You will not regret it! Diana Nyad, world champion swimmer and author of *Find a Way* About the Author Barbara Schoichet has a Ph.D. in creative writing from Lancaster University in England. An avid biker, she's owned (and wrecked) several motorcycles and logged more than ten thousand miles, including the nearly four-thousand-mile journey chronicled in *Don't Think Twice*. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. ***This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected copy proof*** Copyright 2016 Barbara Schoichet One Motorcycle Therapy Bart Mange swaggered into the classroom reeking of cigarette smoke and scratching his head. He was a mutt of a man, middle-aged, kind of like Nick Nolte's mug shot come to life, except his hair was red and I don't think he was drunk. Good morning, lady . . . and gentlemen. He threw me a grin. Ill be your motorcycle instructor, and if I do my job right, you're all gonna live. He looked around the room, attitude up the wazoo, sneering at everyone. Anybody wanna leave? I sat there, the only woman in a room full of guys. They all looked like they'd just gotten out of jail, and I looked like their grandmother. We had nothing in common except a desire to learn how to ride and an instant fear of the Dirty Harry doppelganger who was supposed to teach us. At least he wasn't two or three decades younger than me. In fact, the tread marks on Bart Mange's face were proof he'd logged in lots of mileage on and off the road. Weathered like indoor furniture left outside, his skin was as leathery as the outfit he wore, and whatever age he was, he looked ten years older than that. I liked him immediately. He looked like he wanted to punish someone, and I didn't have to think twice to know I was in the right place. I was used to pain. Just a year ago, riding a bike meant sweating my ass off in a spinning class, but my life had gone awry since then, and I needed to go beyond my comfort zone to regain my equilibrium. I'm not sure why balancing atop a machine that could kill me seemed like a good way to stop wanting to die, but it was worth a try since everything else had failed to kindle my interest in living. Bart tapped his name on the chalkboard. My friends call me Bart Mange, but none of you will ever be my friend, so you can call me Mr. Mange or Sir. He ran his fingers through his hair and blinked like he was trying to stay awake. It was probably just nicotine withdrawal, since moments before class I'd seen him standing

outside sucking so hard on a cigarette I thought he might inhale it. Okay, the first thing I want you to do is look at how I'm dressed. He beat his chest. Leather jacket. He slapped his thigh. Leather chaps. He stamped his foot and clapped his hands. Leather boots and leather gloves. I smell like a cow, don't I? More like a Camel. One of the guys in the back snickered. Or a Marlboro. Bart pointed his stubbly chin at the guys chest, thick and muscled in his wife-beater undershirt. My friend thinks this is all a big joke, but I'm serious as the stomach flu. Anyone not wearing an extra layer of skin tomorrow doesn't get on a bike. I raised my hand to inform Mr. Mange that tomorrow's schedule said we wouldn't actually be on the motorcycles until after lunch. And your point is . . .? Well, it's supposed to be ninety-five tomorrow and this classroom isn't air conditioned. Uh, huh. He sat on the edge of his desk and crossed his arms. I was just saying. Look, lady. I'm a nice guy. I want you covered in cowhide to remind you that your own hide is vulnerable each and every time you're on a motorcycle. He slapped his butt and looked around the room. Got it? Got it! we all yelled, except for the guy next to me, who just popped his gum. Bart was on him like a crow on carrion. You the clown with the gum, you don't get it, do you? My name is John, Mr. Mange, and I definitely get it. Jawn will really get it when he doesn't wear a jacket and scrapes off an elbow! Everybody laughed nervously. You think that's funny? I knew a guy who wore tennis shoes one day and scraped off a toe. Funny, huh? Everyone gasped, and one person quietly left the room. One down . . . anyone else? Bart shook his head and chuckled. Man, I saw some idiot wearing flip-flops and shorts doing eighty up the coast the other day. I wanted to drive him into the ocean myself! He stared wistfully out the window as if the idea of killing someone was pleasing, then he clapped his hands and grinned. Okay, let's get real. You might start out one morning dressed in full gear, and you're warm and cozy because it's a little nippy out. But as you're riding along, all of a sudden the cool air disappears and the sun starts frying you like a chicken breast. What do you do? Whip off a layer! One of the gangbangers slouching two rows over called out. Okay, Aerosol Can over there would just peel himself like a banana, but what if you don't have saddlebags? Do you toss your leathers by the side of the road? He waited then screamed, You do nothing! You grow a set of balls; and you just keep on riding! I felt a disturbing twinge between my legs as I imagined how uncomfortable testicles must be. But what was even more disquieting was the unsettling itch Bart had ignited in me. For the first time in months, I was excited about something. I sat on the edge of my seat and listened to Bart like he was the Dalai Lama. Now keep in mind, children, even if you do have a place to stow your gear, sometimes the road is just too rough to ride without protection. You get my meaning? If you go down, it won't be clothes you'll scrape off. A bald guy with HAIR tattooed on his scalp called out, What if? There are no what ifs in motorcycling. If the road is smooth as a snake's belly, you wear leather. If you're afraid of helmet hair, you still wear a full-on brain bucket with a facemask. Those boys in Nazi beanies are just vegetables waiting to happen. Bart let the image sink in and then smiled. Listen, the truth is there are two kinds of biker: those who've had a wreck and those who are going to. You have a better chance of not turning into a piece of broccoli wearing protective gear, okay? I gulped hard. If Bart wasn't wearing a helmet and did a face-plant on the 405, he'd probably just leave a tobacco stain; if I did the same I'd wind up brain dead. I shook off the image then felt a strange wave of relief. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad . . . not feeling anything. I must have drifted off because suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder. You okay, Buttercup? Bart laid a workbook on my desk. You're looking a little green. I'm fine. I always look sick to my stomach when I'm excited. Well, don't get too excited. He gave me a gentle pat then grinned at the class. Okay, children, tomorrow we ride. Today we dissect the motorcycle like a guinea pig. For the next couple of hours Bart browbeat information into us. We learned the parts of a motorcycle from headlight to tailpipe. We learned which part of the road we were supposed to occupy in order to be more visible, and that most drivers wouldn't see us anyway. And despite describing every possible way we could wind up crushed beyond recognition, Bart also left us with the main reason why motorcycling was worth the risk. Freedom, he said with a huge grin. Freedom with a big, fat, fucking F.***As it turned out, there was a Harley dealership near my house, so after class, I raided the place with the help of a gnarly-looking saleswoman who could have been Bart's twin sister. She also smelled like a pack of cigarettes and looked like she'd just crawled out of bed. Her nametag said Proud Mary but she said I could call her PM. I call my old man AM cuz we're like night and day. She winked, coughed, and chuckled at the same time. His real name is Punk. I followed her around as she talked me into buying a lot more gear than I needed. She would have talked me into a bike, if my therapist Muriel hadn't called while I was eyeing a set of Harley-Davidson dinnerware. You wouldn't believe how cool all this shit is! I wrapped a scarf imprinted with tiny skulls around my neck. I swear, I look like Amelia Earhart! Take a deep breath and cut your credit card in half, Muriel said calmly. Are you still coming in to see me tonight? I told her I was, then I told PM to take the Harley shot glasses off my bill. The clothing was enough, and I wore everything out of the store, feeling more comfortable than I had in months. The jacket, the chaps, the boots, the gloves, and especially the helmet—they all seemed to contain me. They'd keep me focused on staying intact, on keeping it together, and on not falling apart. And best of all, they'd keep me covered. Two. The Catalyst. We've all had them—those unbelievably bad years in which one thing happens after another, and we begin to think that something greater than ourselves is trying to tell us something. In my case, it seemed like I was taunting disaster, because before my life went to hell, I was completely unaware I was heading for a storm. If it's true that God gives people exactly what they can handle, I used to say, then I guess I can't handle anything. That's how good I thought my life was before it wasn't. I had a great job writing publicity for a major studio, and even though juggling

egos was tough, I loved what I did. And I had a wonderful family that accepted my hellcat of a girlfriend. Wed been together for six years, and even though she was a bossy little thing, she was unbelievably cute and I adored her. I was blissfully unaware of the winds beginning to stir. And they were. Anyone couldve predicted what was coming by the songs on my iPod. It makes sense now that I got chills hearing A Hard Rains A-Gonna Fall or went hoarse yelling, Hey, You! Get Off My Cloud! But when asked why I chose songs portending doom or preaching defiance, I maintained I was just reliving high school trying to get it right. On weekends I slept till noon and buried my face in fiction. I was happy with my adequate life and clung to it like a toddler to a pants leg. I needed a kick in the pants, a potch in the tush, before Id open my eyes to anything happening or not happening around me. Then kick-potch, one of the head tyrants at the studio called me into her office and told me I was being sacrificed in a merger. This was code for a younger person is going to take your place. I went into my office, closed my door, and cried. People kept poking their heads in to see if I was okay, but all I wanted was to get to my girlfriends house so she could comfort me. I called her on the way over but got her voicemail, so I left a message saying I needed to see her right away. She called me three hours later. Holy shit, thats terrible, she said, and I feel just awful I cant be there for you tonight, but Ive already made dinner plans with Gayle. It was the third time that month that she and her hairdresser had gone out. Cant you cancel? I asked. I really need to see you tonight. Listen, Ill try to come over after dinner, okay? At midnight I called my friend Lynn. She is not having dinner! Lynn screamed. Leave her before she leaves you. Throughout the next week, I suffered through my unemployment alone. Then one day my girlfriend called to say she was coming over to give me my Christmas present. Christmas isnt for another week, I said. I havent gotten you anything yet. Dont worry about it. What time should I come over? What do you mean, dont worry about it? She sighed. Do you really want to do this over the phone? Do what? I was starting to feel the same way I did just before my boss told me Id been laid off. I gripped the phone. You cant be serious. You cant be thinking about what I think youre thinking about. She laughed. You are such a nutcase. I think thats why I love you, but . . . She took a deep breath. Please, cant I just come over? I was only forty-nine, not menopausal yet, but I felt such a rush of heat blast through me I was sure I was having a hot flash. Yeah, come over. I tried to keep my voice from shaking. Around seven. Ill pick up some Thai. She said she wasnt sure she could make it by seven, and though I told her not to worry about it, I worried about it . . . especially when she didnt ring the doorbell until after ten. Whats with the doorbell? I asked, standing before her sweating in my new suede jacket, the one Id just bought to wear to her house on Christmas Day. Why didnt you use your key? She walked in, sat on my couch, and handed me an Abercrombie and Fitch sweatshirt unwrapped in a paper bag. Merry Christmas, Happy Chanukah. She smiled weakly. Then she took my key off her keychain. Im sorry, honey. I sat next to her on the couch, a little drunk with nothing but a half-bottle of wine in me. Im guessing youve eaten, I said, trying not to sound bitter, trying not to slur. Theres ice cold Thai on the kitchen counter, help yourself. Im not hungry, but I could use a glass of wine. She grabbed my empty glass off the coffee table, went into my kitchen, and split what was left in the bottle between us. Why dont I fix you a plate? You really should eat something. I sat there holding my brand new sweatshirt to my chest and thinking of the beautifully wrapped present that was now under her pillow on my bed. I didnt have time to shop for a proper gift, pick up dinner, and shave my legs before seven, so Id slipped my diamond stud earrings into a silk pouch and tied it with a lace ribbon. No, thanks, I said. I think Ill just drink. Come on, Barb. She put a glass of wine and a plate of Thai on the coffee table in front of me. Then she took her place on the couch and squeezed my hand. I think we both know this has been over for awhile. The only thing I know is that youve got unbelievably bad timing. I took a gulp of wine. For fucks sake, I just lost my job. She didnt say a word. She just took the glass of wine out of my hand, grabbed her own glass, and headed for the bedroom. Youve got to be kidding, I said. Thats what you want to do now? She stopped halfway down the hall, turned, and gave me that look she always did when she was trying to get away with something. Come on, she said. Once more for old times sake? Oh, yeah . . . she got the earrings.* * * I got through Christmas by going to a friends party, drinking shots of tequila, and thinking seriously about going back to men. I got through New Years Eve by telling everyone I had a date, then bringing home lobster risotto from my favorite Italian restaurant and eating it in front of my TV with a bottle of expensive chardonnay. The risotto tasted like Elmers glue, the wine like water, and the white roses I sent to myself on Valentines Day made me laugh and cry at the same time. The card, which Id dictated to the salesperson over the phone, was sweet, pathetic, and stolen from Bob Dylan. You dont have to worry any more. Ill be your baby tonight. Over the next few weeks I changed the songs on my iPod to whiny country music like I Dont Know Whether to Kill Myself or Go Bowling and Sleeping Single in a Double Bed. I started wearing a cowboy hat to cover my unkempt hair, and when I wasnt howling like Patsy Cline, I was declaring to anyone who would listen that my life was going to change for the better. No corporation will vacuum my brain again, I informed the mailman. People are finding soulmates in their laptops, I told the kid who bagged my groceries. True love is just a mouse-click away. Inwardly I was a mess, but glass-half-full-of-Scotch woman that I was, I was handling things okay. I started getting up every morning at seven and made it my job to look for a job. I joined two online employment services and three dating sites, and I developed a true appreciation for casual sex. Then one day I was surfing from careers.com to match.com when my doorbell rang. I scrambled into the bathroom to brush my teeth and then opened the door to a city building inspector who informed me that the guesthouse Id converted my garage into was illegal. Are you aware your neighborhood isnt zoned for rentals

and that theres a fine for creating unsafe housing?I told him I was not aware. He peered past me as if my illegal guesthouse were in my living room. Im sorry, but you have thirty days to kick out your tenant and turn that unit back into a garage.Look, I just lost my job and I need that income to get by. Besides, theres a nice guy living back there who would lose his home. I tightened the sash on my robe. What if I decide to fight this? He looked up from his clipboard. Your fines will build up . . . and youll lose.You wouldnt consider takingHe held up his hand. Dont finish that thought. I was going to ask you to take pity on me, not offer you a bribe. He gave me a wry smile then handed me a citation. Look, Im a busy man. Your paperwork could easily get lost on my desk. Do you understand what Im saying?So, you might not follow up on this?Dont push it, lady. He handed me his card. Just call me when you find a job. I looked into his kind eyes. You, sir, are a saint.He looked into my tired eyes. Im just doing my job and trying to sleep at night.As soon as the inspector drove off, I ran down the block to my neighbors house. Im Chicken Little! I cried the minute he opened the door. Im afraid to cross the street! Frank, a ninety-one-year-old producer who hadnt made a movie since he was thirty, invited me in. What happened now? Your roof cave in?I told him about the building inspector who might lose my paperwork. And you didnt have to sleep with him? He pushed open his screen door. Come in and have a snort to celebrate.Its only ten-thirty. I dont drink until noon.He shrugged. So you can watch me.I followed him into the kitchen where he poured himself two fingers of whiskey. Look, you still have all your teeth. Everything will be fine. Right, I said, wincing as I sat down. Maybe I will have a drink.Why are you making faces like an old lady? He flexed his muscles. Join a gym. Youll get girls and maybe youll give me one. He gulped down his snort and poured a shot for me. And start drinking more, for Gods sake.I tossed back my whiskey and coughed so hard my back went out.The next day I saw a chiropractor. Wow, he said, shaking his head at my fifth lumbar. You must have a tremendous threshold for pain.I thought so too, until I got that five a.m. call. Until my life spun off its axis. Until the sky fell. I had a dream that my mom died . . . and then she did.***It had been five months and three weeks since I lost my job, five months and two weeks since my girlfriend trashed my heart. I should have known better on that warm June morning than to answer that call. Everyone knows that a phone ringing in the dark isnt good news. When my phone jolted me awake, I knew it was trouble. Only finding out youve won the lottery is worth getting ripped from sleep. My life was noisy with bills, my wardrobe crying for an update. All I wanted was quiet, and here that damn phone was ringing, making it impossible for me to go back to that dream that was so real. Wake up, Little Bug. Through the sheets I could see the silhouette of my mother standing over me. Time to get cracking, she said. Youve got a big day ahead of you.Somewhat in the night Id shed forty years and ninety pounds. Now I was a skinny fourth-grader not ready for summer to be over. Please, Mom, I begged. Give me more time. Though my eyes were closed, I could see that my house, my bed, my walls were all different. My mattress had shrunk to a twin; my smooth adobe bricks were covered with ugly wallpaper. My surroundings, though familiar, were unsettling. Only my bookshelves, teeming with ceramic and plastic Clydesdales, palominos and bays, calmed me down. Yes, there was my piebald, with white socks and blaze, my wild-eyed mustang, and docile mare. Even in my dreams, everything equine calmed me down . . . and I did need calming. Go away, Mom, I said. Let me sleep a little more. She pulled back my covers and grinned. Im gonna get mean. Nooooo! I squealed, wriggling from her grasp. But instead of tickling my ribs, she kissed the creases of my middle-aged brow. Now, wake up, she said firmly, and as she drew away, she began whispering answers to questions Id been asking for years. But I couldnt hear herthe damn phone was ringing.What? I grumbled into the receiver.Barb? My sister was on the other end of the line asking me who I was. I didnt have to ask which sister because I knew it would be Sandra. She was closest in age to me. Harriet, the oldest, would call Naomi, who would call Sandra, who would call me. My heart fluttered; my eyes groped the room for my horse collection, now boxed in my basement. I didnt want to ask the question, but I did anyway. Whats wrong?Its Mom.Of course it was Mom. Hadnt she just kissed me goodbye? I struggled to keep from throwing the phone across the room. Naomi called me about ten minutes ago. Sandra burst into tears. Mom died.Damn her, I thought, and then whispered, Oh, my god. I know . . . its unbelievable. I just spoke to her a couple of days ago. The fragile teacup that was my life was already wobbling. Now it was rocking out of its groove. I talked to her too. She said she was feeling okay. I was going to book a flight for a visit, but Look, Im sorry. Ive got to call my kids. Are you okay?I was up and pacing now. Wait . . . just tell me what happened. I dont know, Sandra whispered. Did she fall? Did she have a stroke?Barbara, I dont know.Damn it.Yeah, damn it. We tossed the silence back and forth until Sandra said she had to let her kids know so they could make plane reservations. Im sorry, I really do have to go. She burst into tears again. Youre okay, arent you?My stomach clenched. Yeah, go on. Im okay. Youre sure youre not just saying that?Of course Im just saying that! I took a breath. Im fine. Go call your kids. We hung up and there I stood naked in my dark bedroom with no one to call. The hell Im okay, I grumbled, wandering into the bathroom where I stared in the mirror at my ridiculous hair and silly face. Cry, God damn it. Your mom just died.I cupped water into my mouth and wandered back into my bedroom, leaving the old lady with a dead mother behind. My dogs were sitting on my bed staring at me. Why cant I cry? I asked their blank faces. Why am I so angry with her? Beau, my half-blind dachshund, burrowed under the covers and came up with a filthy tennis ball. Dudley, my neurotic beagle, glanced toward the kitchen where his food bowl was. They didnt care if I was a monster, I was their monster, and I was up earlier than usual.The truth was I was furious with my mother. Four days ago, she had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, but the doctors had given her six

months to a year. I mean, the woman couldn't be on time for a carpool, a school play, or a piano recital, but given the chance to die early, she was all over that. I flopped back onto my bed loathing myself. How sick was I to want her to live through a full death sentence just so I could clear up a few things? What kind of daughter needed a therapeutic breakthrough so badly she wanted her mother to endure bedpans and morphine drips, diapers and bedsores for what, clarity? My stomach circled. I was that kind of daughter. I wanted to drill a hole through my mother and excavate some kind of epiphany. I was certain she was rich with answers, certain she knew why I hadn't made more of my life, and now she had died, taking with her whatever it was I so desperately needed to know. Wake up, Little Bug. Time to get cracking. I curled into a ball as a memory kicked me in the stomach. I covered my ears to keep her voice out, but what if I never heard her again? I'm gonna get mean. I hugged my ribs, but what if her touch slipped away forever? Confused, I crawled between the sheets, and like a willful child, I fell back asleep. *** Again the phone. Just moments ago I had been a six-year-old running down the hall of our Texas ranch house in El Paso, my mother, sprinting after me with a dripping spoon in her hand. Just one bite! she insisted. You'll like it! I trudged back to my mother offering me her latest concoction. The job of taste-tester, passed down from Harriet to Naomi to Sandra to me, was to lick spatulas and spoons, then decide if something wound up on the dinner table or in the trash. But before I could sample whatever weird thing my mother had dreamed up, the damn phone rang. Hello, I grumbled into the receiver, surprised by my grownup voice. Barb? I looked at the caller ID, wondering who wanted me to identify myself this time. Startled, I saw my mother's number, and in a panic, raced around my head to find the logic in this. Of course, Harriet, who still lived in El Paso, was at my mother's house, taking care of everything. You could light Harriet's hair on fire and shed stay calm and get things done. Me, I'd run around like a human matchstick igniting the curtains. Are you okay? Harriet asked. I'm okay. I was just asleep. You're unbelievable, Barbara. How could you go back to sleep? Sandra called you, didn't she? Four years, eight years, and twelve years older than me, my sisters still believed I was the spoiled baby of the family. But it was more like I was overcooked than overindulged, left on the counter untouched and unsavored. I struggled back to Harriet from the undertow of self-pity. Yeah, Sandra called. Do you remember Mom's cream cheese brownies? I was just dreaming about them. Harriet laughed. I loved her cherry maraschino cake. The woman could bake, but she sure couldn't cook. Thank God for Chef Boyardee. An image flashed through my brain of my mother mincing garlic and onions to go with my dad's dinner every night. Your father thinks he's still in Russia, she chuckled, wiping away a tear. So why am I the one who's suffering? My throat clutched. Sandra didn't know what happened. Do you? Not really. Mom was pretty much gone by the time I got there. The paramedics tried to revive her, but I told them to let her go. When they took her away, I started calling everyone. Took her away? Where? I don't know, Barbara. Where do you think? K-Mart? She paused, and I could tell she was holding back tears. Look, I'm sorry. They took her to the hospital. The people from the funeral home will pick her up from there. I felt a sudden urge to start bawling because my big sister had yelled at me. Was she alone? I asked. God, I hate to think she died alone. No, Chula was with her. Poor things pretty shaken up. I think she thinks we blame her. Would you talk to her? Your Spanish is better than mine. As I sat there listening to Harriet assure my mother's housekeeper that it was Barbara in Los Angeles and not the Border Patrol, I thought of Juana, two housekeepers prior. I used to ride her vacuum cleaner like it was a locomotive, pop out of closets like a demonic clown, perch on top of the refrigerator like a vulture anything to get her to play with me. It was Juana to whom I ran when I fell down the arroyo, Juana who found my stash of marijuana and shamed me into dumping it down the toilet, Juana who played Go Fish and I Spy. My mother was playing mahjong or shuffling cards somewhere. Barbara? Chula's voice dragged me away from the past like a brat from a rollercoaster. Ah, mi amor! she wailed. Es un da triste para todos! I let her gather herself and wail a little more before I asked her what happened. Su madre me llaman en la noche, she said. Y me preguntan, Qu pasa? Y nada ms? Then according to Chula, my mom looked at her with ojos grandes, como de una nia chiquita, like a little girl with big eyes, and then she slid to the floor como una mueca de trapo, like a rag doll. I spoke to Chula for a few more minutes, but she kept dissolving into tears, so I asked her to give the phone back to my sister. My God, what did you say to her? Harriet asked. She's hysterical. I told her the truth. That Mom considered her a good friend. It's true. They were close. Did she tell you anything? Not really. Just that Mom kept asking what was happening. God, she was probably scared half to death. More like completely to death, I chuckled, instantly stunned that the words in my head had come out of my mouth. Harriet sighed. I don't know what's wrong with you, Barbara. I really don't. A prickly silence set in. I didn't know what was wrong with me either. Well, at least she didn't suffer, Harriet finally said. No, Chula said she looked excited. Like a little girl going on a big trip. Mom was excited to die? Actually, Chula said exttica. Apparently Mom was ecstatic to get out of here. Wow, Harriet gasped. Yeah, wow. I sat there in Los Angeles, in my shadowy bedroom, picturing Harriet in my mother's bedroom, now streaked with sun. Do you wanna know what I think? What? Mom's in heaven playing canasta with Grandma? No, I said. I think she saw Dad, and that's why she looked so excited. I think he swooped down and whisked her away. Whoosh! Harriet said, laughing. Off into the cosmos! Zoom! I said, giggling with my big sister. He swept her right off to heaven! Just like he whirled me around the dance floor at my wedding. Harriet sniffled. Just like he twirled me around at my bat mitzvah, I said, falling silent, my eyes dry as sandpaper. After Harriet had a good cry and we hung up, Naomi called and we had almost the same conversation. She wound up in tears, talking about how Mom was so loving, so giving, so there for us, and I hung up

wondering whose mother she was talking about. My mother was Queen Elizabeth right down to the shoes and purse. She was regal even when wearing a stained apron the epitome of grace, whether balancing a checkbook or cleaning up dog vomit. But loving, giving, there for us? I remember her giving me a fully packed suitcase when I wanted to run away from home, wishing me luck, and telling me to send a postcard even though I had only just learned to write my name. I remember how she told me to get in the backseat and buckle up before she took me to Sunday School, but drove off before I got in the car, and how she left me behind at the grocery store, not realizing what she had done until I didn't show up for dinner. It wasn't that my sisters were loved any more than I was; it's just that their mom wasn't as exhausted as mine. Their mom had the energy to assemble elaborate Halloween costumes, while mine draped a white sheet over my head and cut out eyeholes. Their mom wore black dresses to fish funerals, while mine flushed floaters down the toilet. Their mom did the mom thing, while mine had moved on. In fact, I'm convinced that if Sandra had been a boy I never would have seen the light of day. Witness my absence on film. I found no photos of me tucked in a drawer or stashed in a shoebox. No images of me graced a wall or sat framed on a coffee table. I appeared on no nightstands, wasn't pasted in albums, or slipped into any wallets. And I kind of missed the whole celluloid window between home movies and camcorders. I remember my excitement and ultimate letdown each time our family gathered around the film projector, turned off the lights in the living room, and watched old black-and-white reels of family outings. There was Harriet, Naomi, and Sandra sledding in Cloudcroft or tumbling down the dunes of chalk-white gypsum at White Sands National Monument. And there was my mother trying to control a checkered table cloth as it whipped around in the wind at a family picnic, or my father sneaking a piece of fried chicken out of a slatted wooden basket. Where am I? I would ask, sitting on the carpet with my six-year-old legs tucked under me Indian-style. You'll show up in a minute, my father would say, threading another reel into the projector. Just try to be patient. Oh, no, Ben, my mother would say. She wasn't born yet or, Don't you remember? We left Barbara with the sitter. To be fair, I'm sure wrangling three daughters on family excursions was hard enough without dealing with a fourth one who couldn't walk yet. And certainly, now as an adult I understand that a crying baby might ruin a nice piece of footage. Certainly one should expect a natural dwindling in the number of photos taken of the mesmerizing first daughter to the been-there-done-that fourth, but I swear there was little record I'd ever left the womb. This was made glaringly clear to me one day when I was home from graduate school on a break. I was reading on the living room couch under a shrine of three large wedding portraits when one of the women who delivered Meals on Wheels with my mother walked in and changed everything. Oh my God! Helga Bloomberg gasped, turning to my mother. You have three lovely daughters! She held her hand to her mouth as if the trio of portraits hanging above me had the power to make her teeth fall out. I looked up from my book. She has four. Poor Mrs. Bloomberg looked like a startled guppy. Well, of course! My mother glared at me. This is Barbara, daughter number four. She's home for spring break. I tipped an imaginary hat. Don't mind me. I'm only here for another week. Mrs. Bloomberg turned pink. Um, what are you studying? Family counseling. Oh, she's just kidding. My mother threw an arm around her friend and began leading her away. Barbara is studying journalism. Not anymore. I grinned. I've found a new calling. Mrs. Bloomberg began digging through her purse. Here they are! She held up a set of keys. Oh, dear, I've forgotten an appointment. Let's have coffee another time. For a moment, my mother stood at the door, waving at her friend's exhaust fumes. Then she slowly turned, gave me a confused look, and drifted from the room. She made it halfway down the hall before I heard her heels make an about-face and click toward me. I expected to get a lecture, an apology, anything but the truth. You know, wedding gowns are really impractical. She sat next to me on the couch. You wear them once, and for what you pay, you could buy ten pantsuits. So how about we go shopping tomorrow and buy the most expensive outfit we can find? She paused. Then let's have a gorgeous portrait of you taken. Okay? We sat there, she waiting for an answer; me determined not to give her one. Don't go away. She patted my knee. I'll be right back. Though I wanted to catch the next plane, I stayed on the couch, pretending to read. Then minutes later my mother returned and sat next to me. She took my hand and dropped a pair of diamond studs in my palm. I was saving these for your wedding day. I guess now is as good a time as any to give them to you. I looked at the tiny earrings in my hand and understood exactly what she was saying. Although I hadn't come out yet, I had abandoned wearing dresses, and this was her way of saying she had accepted that I might never find a man. Thanks, Mom, I muttered. They're beautiful. You know, marriage isn't all it's cracked up to be. You're going to have adventures your sisters will never have. I pictured myself jostling in a jeep across the Serengeti, following a Sherpa up Mount Everest, flinging myself off the Golden Gate Bridge tethered to a bungee cord. I only ask one thing. She glanced toward the symbols of my spinsterhood in my palm. Will you please wear those instead of your feathers for the portrait? And so there we were two weeks later, the four Schoichet daughters, hanging over the living room couch, three in wedding gowns with matching silk shoes, one in a pantsuit with rattlesnake cowboy boots. All of us had diamond studs in our ears; one of us had a blue feather in her hair. Yes, there we hung until we sold my mother's house the first three daughters happily married, with several grown children; the fourth fated to have trouble settling down, with a dachshund, a beagle, and a pond full of koi. And my mom, well, she was right to have given me those studs when she did. There was surely no wedding in my future. In fact, not long after what became known as The Helgaberg Incident, I wound up heading back to graduate school where I had my first serious affair. It was with my nineteenth-century Russian literature professor. She was my first love, a handsome woman twice my age, and a

dead ringer for my dad. And the earrings, well, theyd always been a symbol of failure from the afternoon my mother gave them to me . . . to the night I dropped them in a silk pouch and gave them away.***It was nearly seven a.m., and a sliver of light from a gap in my drapes was keeping me from sleep, forcing me to face that phone call two hours before. I got up and thought about calling some friends, but it was too early and I was still too unsettled. I knew I wanted something warm and soothing to fill me up. And though I wanted comfort, not stimulation, I headed to the kitchen to brew a pot of espresso. By the grace of God, I saw a bottle of Glenlivet and figured it would either knock me out or help me settle into my new reality. With my dad gone nine years and my mom gone just a few hours, I was an orphan. Without warning, I felt as though Id been kicked to the curb like an empty can, dumped by the side of the universe while my mom raced off to be with my dad in another realm. I felt too small for this, too young to handle it. I wanted to run from the house, bolt into the street right in front of a car. I wanted to get someones attention. Surely someone would run after me. My hand trembled as I poured myself a drinkdidnt anyone see I needed a hug? Luckily, the Scotch was the perfect thing to calm me down. It soothed the ache that began in my chest and spread like a grassfire throughout my body. Each sip slapped me in the face and blanketed me with a delicious comfort. It was like being caressed by the same hand that had just hit me. It was like my mother stroking my cheek at night as she apologized for accidentally digging her nails into my arm as she dragged me from a toy store.As I drank my Scotch on my broken bench on my collapsing porch, I let it swaddle me in a blanket of liquid warmth as I watched the sun come up.Im handling this okay, I whispered, and for just a moment, I felt like running to tell my mother what a big girl I was, how great I was dealing with this whole death thing. Then, smiling at my little-girl self, I finally burst into tears.