

THELMA & MARIE

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Thelma Brenner was bigger than life, a grande dame in the grand tradition. Marie Brenner recalls life with Mother in this excerpt from her book *Great Dames*.

“Well, darling, I have something to tell you... I think this is it for me. Curtains,” my mother tells me on the telephone. Her voice is causal. She sounds like a deb, very Boston, as if she were coming home from a dance. Her frequent calls from San Antonio to New York were a fixed part of our routine. Over the years these conversations had table the unfinished business between us; we had the luxury of being cavalier. “So, the news isn’t great,” she says, “but doctors are often wrong. What is the matter with the medical establishment?” I begin to hear the terror underneath the party tone.

Two days later she was in New York. The entire family gathered at Sloan-Kettering in the office of a brand-name surgeon—the “greatest in America,” a “top man,” people said. Mother was later from the airport. Her brother and sister waited for her in the examining room. There was much looking at watches, grim faces, a concern among her siblings that perhaps they wouldn’t have time to straighten out the years of misunderstandings and complications between them. We strained for civility, but I think we all knew that this would be one of our last times together.

“Hello, everybody!” she said as she breezed through the door in a linen suite the color of lemon pie. Her stride was bold and festive. Head High, she was playing it for grandeur and appeared to be in supreme command. “You look great!” she said, her inevitable greeting, even to the butcher. As always, her auburn hair was brushed in a pageboy, but she was much thinner than she had been only a few weeks earlier when she had been with me in New York.

She hid panic with whimsy, asked questions of others as camouflage. How were her nieces and nephews? “Marie darling, what are you working on?” She was eager to tell us all about a woman she had sat next to on the plane. We could have been at a dinner party. Mother looked more beautiful than I had ever seen her. I thought: Not yet, please. She was only 66.

“You have to hear my list,” she said. “What list?” I asked. “Women I want your father to go out with after I am dead.” She opened her purse with a theatrical flourish and pulled out a legal pad. “I am serious,” she said, adjusting her gaze to approximate world-weariness. “One needs plans, n’est-ce pas? So... how about this idea?” She paused. “Number one: Louise Michelin! She’d be a fabulous stepmother. And she’d make your father laugh... Number two: Jane Dreyfus. I don’t know her that well, but she’s attractive, don’t you think?” Mother looked at me for approval; both women were friends of many years. “But here’s my best idea: Marion Oppenheimer!” She repeated the name again, in case I hadn’t heard it. “Why Marion Oppenheimer?” I asked, seeing in my mind the

artistic matriarch of a local clan. "It's perfect, " she said. "Oppenheimer was so opinionated! Your father will look like a prince in comparison."

Then everyone laughed, and the ferocity in the room temporarily vanished. Did her sister and brother understand the immense effort she had put into every gesture and word? Her performance was a triumph. Soon she would be gone, impossible for me to reach.

I learned to ask questions by watching my mother with her friends. My mother had an ability to project interest without certitude, to allow a monologue to flow. Mother was at her most vibrant then; she had real power in her circle for her gifts as an interviewer. Her friends later told me that they believed that she "oozed empathy." Certainly her friends oozed experience, and she allowed them to let it rip. She was a sponge for confessions and confidences trader at tea. I would come home from school to discover Mother curled up on a white love seat in "the game room," as she called our den, although no one actually played cards or shot pool here. A Texas hodgepodge, crammed with skins and heads. The walls were decorated with actual game: mounted head of record-book kudu, Cape buffalo, and eland. I can hear her voice so clearly. And then what happened? And then what did she say?

The ladies gathered in the late afternoon. I often perched on the sofa and listened to the stories of glamorous exiles on the lam from bad marriages. Mother seemed to vanish into the dramas of her friends; her true self was hidden in the role of witness to bolder lives. Sometimes I would make notes in my diary: "Mother's friend Barbara over this afternoon. She ran away from a creep-some relative of a Mexican president. "Her so is in Mexico City and she is all upset. She cried."

My mother's friends wore denim prairie skirts to the ankle, stockings, Delman shoes, and carried a status symbol of the time: the Collins of Texas wooden box handbag with its leather strap. Those were early Texana-roadrunners in rhinestones, armadillos of faux pearls, Texas flags with metallic gilt-and these women were linguistic pioneers, the first to convert the noun accessory into a verb: "How would you accessorize that outfit?"

We lived at a time and in a place when it seemed to us our South Texas southern enclave, Olmos Park, was the center of the universe. Lyndon Johnson was in the White House for the entire length of my high school years. Johnson's rise to power was part of our daily conversations at the houses of our friends. Many of the local jefes had cut the inside deals. We felt as involved as the courtiers at Versailles. As teenagers we knew by heart the shadowy history of Johnson's past, narrated over drinks by our parents-whom he had cheated financially and politically, whom he had paid off to stuff the ballot box. I knew that Johnson's first call to his daughter Luci after the Kennedy assassination was to tell her to "get her hair done so she looked good for the cameras." We had inside information; we knew before it was reported in the paper that Johnson sold grain from the elevators of his former partner, Billie Sol Estes, and shipped it to Vietnam. Warrie Lynn Smith, our neighbor's daughter, moved to Washington to room with Lynda Bird Johnson at the White House. My father's tailor, Eddie, went to the Johnson ranch many weekend to work on the president's suits. He reported that they kept a can of Ajax, not hidden in a cabinet, but by the kitchen sink. Ajax! My mother was dismayed that the Johnsons did not hide their cleaning supplies.

From time to time, the White House helicopter would land in front of the Spanish mansion at the top of our hill. My friend Judy's father, Morris Jaffe, was a partner of the president. Morris Jaffe then resembled the actor Tyrone Power and traveled around San Antonio in a limousine. At home, he was surrounded with business partners and associates, men in suits speaking in low voices, smoking cigarettes. He rarely ventured from his library, paneled in Spanish wood with portraits of seventeenth-century Mexican saints. At cocktail time, Judy's mother, Jeanette, filled conch shells with bushels of Texas shrimp on ice. Floating by us in an embroidered caftan and a cloud of Chanel No 5, she smiled. "Are y'all having fun?" Did she dye here hair to match her platinum-blond Cadillac, or was the car painted to match her hair? There were five Jaffe children, seven servants, and a vast house filled with Baroque furniture and with no adult supervision of any kind. We tried to overhear Morris's conversations, got drunk in the basement chapel decorated with Spanish tapestries and eighteenth-century Italian putti and religious art. We would hear Morris bellow repeatedly into the telephone: "Senator," "President," "Son of a bitch!" When the governor came for dinner, Judy and I wandered through in our cutoffs and thong sandals, pretending to be unimpressed. In those days John Connally's hair was arranged in a silver pompadour. "Hi, y'all," the governor said in his deep Texas accent, suggestive of sex and inside deals.

We lived down the hill from the Jaffes on Contour Drive, a winding road with Tudor houses and impressive mansions of local limestone. In comparison, our house was small—"modest by design," my mother always said quickly. Our neighbors were bankers and lawyers, cattle barons and sports kings; the daughter of a man who paved the highways of Vietnam for Lyndon Johnson; a Texas air-conditioning giant who kept his palominos in the forest across the street. From my bedroom window I watched the pale horses running in the moonlight. Around the corner lived Pola Negri, vamp queen of the silent movies and innamorata of Rudolph Valentino. Swathed in leopard-print chiffon scarves and dark glasses, tight capri pants, she glided though our quiet streets in her pink Cadillac.

My mother taught me to view the panorama of personalities of Olmos Park as if they were events—the bare bones of what narrative is about. "To understand history you must understand people," she said. It took me years to understand what she meant. Mother listened to my stories, questioned me. She made me feel that my impressions mattered; she had aspirations for me.

Mercilessly, we analyzed behavior, feelings, and appearance. She was an amateur sculptress and had a keen eye for body image. Mother defined fat as anyone who weighed over 135 pounds. "People treat you better if you look good," she often told me. "Looking good" was a euphemism; she had me on Metrecal at age twelve, Dexedrine by thirteen. I wrote in my diary: "I will lose two pounds by the end of the day." She was five feet five inches tall and the ideal weight for her size: 135 pounds. She wrote to me, "My trouble is that since I was 23 or so, I've been ten pounds overweight and then I was only 125 for a short period of time, just long enough to land your father..." Weight and diet was a theme in our letters and in my pink leather Barbie diary with its tiny key. "I've lost four pounds since you've been in New York," I wrote my father when I was twelve. "Mommy starves me when you're gone." She also bribed me with offers of trips to Europe, clothes from DePinna in New York if I would lose six pounds.

Like Clare Boothe Luce, Mother kept her eye on the prize. She talked in terms of resumes and bona fides. She used colleges and ranks as adjectives; she was courted by a "Harvard-trained" doctor and a "tenured" Yale professor. During the war she worked at the OSS. Meeting my father at an officers' dance at the Jewish Community Center in Washington, she checked out his background and even had a prosperous uncle look up the family business in Dun & Bradstreet's financial-rating books. He was a lieutenant colonel, a Wharton grad, 32 years old, and in charge of the finance division of the Air Transport Command. His picture was often in the papers. My mother kept all the clippings: FINANCE CHIEF VISITS POST, December 9, 1944. "Colonel Brenner just complete a 40,000 mile inspection tour of Air Transport Command bases around the world." She had a file of his statements to the press: "We find everything at the 556th in excellent condition with the finance office operating in an extremely efficient manner."

She bragged to her sister that Milton sent "planes around the world with troops and even Fala," Roosevelt's dog. With meat rationed, Mother had steak dinners with C.R. Smith, the former president of American Airlines. The illusion of power suited her, quieted her envious nature. She hid her ambitions behind her questions; she was convinced her ability to listen attracted my father in wartime Washington. They married quickly, and Mother, who had been reared in Boston, found herself in the small town of San Antonio, surprisingly lonely and out of sorts with a fractious new family in the heat of postwar years.

The Brenner family was part of an extensive social history of Jews in the South who were defined by their stores. In all the towns and cities of Texas, "trade" was what many Jews did. Medicine and law were still restricted, as were the quotas of Jewish students permitted to enroll in college. Open for business at the end of the flu epidemic in 1919, the first Solo-Serve reportedly used the former county jail site on the San Antonio River—shoe boxes were warehoused in the cells. My grandmother used to plant cuttings in discarded coffee cans to sell at the new store. In those days, Solo-Serve unloaded anything my grandfather could deliver: tamales, plants, designer dresses, whiskey, groceries. He marketed a form of crepe that you could clean with a sprayer: Crepe Zuki. In the 1920s, Solo-Serve had a roof garden theater that ran Saturday-night movies for the Mexican and Sunday tea dances for the Anglos. The Solo-Serve Sale of Progress in the 1930s attracted swarms of early-morning customers; the sheriff would sometimes close off the block. Solo-Serve was the kind of place that had tables of tangerine patent leather shoes fashionable in the days of the pachuco, fancy dressers for the country club set, velvets and stains for the costumes for the yearly Fiesta queens.

"You're not like other mothers," I told my mother when I was ten. I had come home from school in the May heat of Texas to discover her standing on her head. "Have I ever told you the importance of reversing the blood flow? Gaylord Hauser recommends it! Marvelous beauty treatment! It give you such élan vital and joie de vivre!" Joie de vivre and élan vital were the pillars of her maternal wisdom, but this was the first time I had heard either phrase. In this upside-down position, she carried on a running commentary. There was often an urgency in her manner, an agitation underneath her quiet voice with its whiff of her native Boston. "How was school? What did you have for lunch? Let's go to the store and see if there is anything new in the warehouse. They might have a smashing new dress for you or the shipment of Don Sophisticates from New York." My mother's feet pressed

lightly on a white wall of our living room, her plaid pedal pushers bagging, her face flushed.

She was often playful and unconventional. "I don't believe school should get in the way of your education," she said, and she occasionally appeared in my classrooms to spirit me away to attend a movie or meet an interesting visitor from out of town. Mother had a policy against attending PTA meetings, and for that matter had no interest in pep squads, cheerleaders, football, Fiesta princesses-the activities that other San Antonio mothers felt were crucial to their children's success in life. "Why waste you time with callow youth?" she said. "Read a book instead."

My mother taught me not to be lonely by myself and to this day, I rarely am. "Only boring people get bored," she told me, a bromide I have repeated to my own daughter, Casey. I could pass hours then exploring the Solo-Serve warehouse full of Easter bunnies and Christmas trees used by the window dresser, Salvador, or watching the pasteup ritual of the adman who produced six pages of coupon specials twice a week for the local paper. The Solo-Serve price tags were stamped LOOK FOR DEFECTS. I would spy on the dressing rooms, on the housewives who carpoled to San Antonio from Austin or Seguin to work the racks. "Daddy said today a movie star came into the store. She was wearing an orchad," I wrote in my diary when I was seven years old.

My father wanted to expand our lives. He began to talk about moving to another house. My mother appeared to go along with this idea and took me looking at real estate in the neighborhood until we found a charming and larger house around the corner. It was pink, I remember, with balconies and verandas, black wrought-iron French provincial trim. Not a mansion, but more spacious than our ranch house. Several days before the closing, I found my mother sobbing. "Get in the car," she said, and drove me through the quiet streets of Olmos Park near the new house. She parked in front of a magnolia tree blooming in the May heat. I remember vividly her hysteria, the stories of her childhood terror as her father lost his money and they were forced to move to smaller and smaller apartments. "I cannot move," she said. "Every time we moved when I was a child, it meant my father was even poorer." I moved to the driver's seat and took her home. "Thelma, you are acting crazy," my father said, then mashed a few Miltowns in a scotch and soda and canceled the contract.

Instead, Mother began to build sprawling rooms onto the ranch house. The game room with its cathedral ceilings, an airy master-bedroom suite. There were painters and carpenters adding windows, pushing out walls. It must have cost my father more than the new house would have, but the additions did not set off my mother's demons. I observed him becoming more and more irritated by the contradictions of her character-the flossy upper-middle-class ambitions and her panic attacks. "You will never know what my childhood was like. My father lost everything. Everything," she said. Her father had once owned three jewelry stores in Boston and had been comfortable enough to send his own sister to Radcliffe. In moments of extreme self-pity, my mother played her childhood as if she were Madame Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard*. "We used to have to scrape the gold off my father's watches to pay the rent," she said, berating me for my freewheeling ways.

Mother glided around San Antonio with no money in her wallet. Like royalty, she rarely carried more than five dollars in cash. She would announce airily at the grocery store, "I'm Mrs. Brenner. My husband owns the Solo-Serve," and then turn the phrase into a question, as if she did not quite believe it. She was never comfortable with cash. Once I started working, she rarely picked up a check when we had lunch or dinner out. She expected that I would take care of her; she envied my independence. There were always comments about money issues. "A family of four could live on the amount of change you leave on the mantel," she would say. I kept angry manifestos from my high school days when I would rail against these accusations of my irresponsibility. "Even Granny thinks I'm am mature and deserve an allowance to pay all my expense of \$100 a month." I submitted lists of monthly proposed budgets, and they were small, even in 1967 dollars: "\$5 for gas, \$15 for clothes." Long after I was married, I would come home when my mother was visiting to see that every piece of silver was laid out in my dining room. "I'm writing down exactly how many forks and spoons you have," she said. "You are so hopeless, you would have no sense when anyone is stealing from you."

Like the czarinas, Mother issued imperial ukases, tricks and strategies for all life situations, but her most urgent campaign focused on the need for me to make a rapid marriage. The letters with my mother's schemes arrived weekly from San Antonio. When I was 24 and trying to ear my stripes as a reporter in New York, she suggested that I write a "Where the Men Are" guide that would have had me searching through several cities. "Think of all the girls who would love to read a book about the availability of real men in Texas. With taped interviews-you could get loads of interesting material-limiting your investigation to perhaps three cities, Atlanta, Chicago, and Houston...Along the road you would be in the propitious situation of finding yourself a great husband which then would be a twofer. It could be a gold mine! Just on the tennis courts alone...visiting t he coffee shops in the splendid legal building where there are only the best law firms, investment houses, etc."

She wrote: "Always take an elevator going down, not up. First, you need the exercise climbing stairs. Most important, if you are on an elevator going up and someone handsome gets on, you get out on your floor and that's it. He has vanished out of your life forever. But if you meet him going down, he will take one look at you and say, "Let's go for coffee."

For years, she dismissed the concerns of my generation. Her bookshelves held more books such as *Women and Psychoanalysis*, *Women's Urge to Achieve*. She sent me scores of letters filled with harsh judgments and opinions on my life. "You must admit to yourself that your urge to work is a sublimation of not having the right man in your life," she wrote to me when I was starting out. Envy made her angry; she lashed out. If she saw Gloria Steinem on television, she would call me. "That young woman is not happy. The tension in her face is terrible. I don't understand how such a pretty girl can be so furious! Why are all of you so angry?"

When I was 27 and working in London, I fell in love with a 42-year-old reporter. A telegram arrived

from San Antonio: "Forty-plus man usually not marriage minded. Let head rule heart. I love you, Mother." It took years for her to let up, but as time passed she got tired of her struggles. "You are as stubborn as the rest of the Brenners and it is too exhausting to take you on sometimes," she wrote. I think she began to change. "Never let anyone order you around," she told me years later. "That was my problem. I wasn't independent enough. You young women are lucky. You have so many options. I never felt I had many options."

My father was convinced of the rightness of his battles, no matter that it meant he would later be isolated socially within the intimate confines of the community. He took on crooked local mayors; he offered large cash rewards for whistle-blowers. In the midst of one of his campaigns there was excitement around him, a feeling of possibility. He was just secure enough to stick his fingers in the eyes of the authorities and not fear that any harm could come to him. I think my parents' best moments were when he was riding a hobbyhorse and she could listen as he worked the phones. The largeness of his personality defused her anxieties that they would be shunned; in fact, she never was. She seemed then particularly girlish, appreciative of his spirit.

But sometimes I would find her wandering in the hallway in the middle of the night, distracted and melancholy. "What is it, Mother?" I would ask. "Oh, nothing. Everything is fine," she would say unconvincingly. She refused to lift the curtain and let us see what was in the darkness. I understand now that she was adrift in a marriage that had given her security and fidelity, but that wasn't enough. Mother was a woman of smoke and mirrors; she deflected us by explaining that she was worried about how she was perceived. Sensitive to slights of all kinds, she would puzzle over ambiguous remarks, What did this mean? Why did someone say this to her?

Oddities of behavior would play out as hypochondria-she kept files of clippings on nitrates in processed meats, carcinogenic substances, contagions found on toilet seats. It feels to me now that she was looking for a catchall for her anxieties, but her coping mechanism was motion, a trait she has passed on to me. Sleeping late was unheard of in our house. She set the standard-up at sunrise in full maquillage, ready to set off on her day. The silver Buick would zoom down Contour Drive heading for the University of Texas seminars, tennis games, conversations about Martin Buber, assignments to teach the history of the Holocaust in the local schools. She began to quote Abraham Maslow on the "fear of nonbeing" and put up signs in my room with telling remarks from Hannah Arendt: WE MUST THINK ABOUT WHAT WE ARE DOING. In parentheses, she had added, "In case you are interested, that comes from *The Muses Flee Hitler*, page 132." She went back to college and earned one degree and then another in psychology, but she had a fear of analysis of any kind. "I know more than these shrinks do," she told me, and later was contemptuous of my belief in the beneficial quality of psychoanalysis. "Do hope you are seeing results from the 6 to 9 month period you have been going-not that I am as intolerant as Fritz Perls (the gestaltist), who thinks that talking to a psychoanalyst in free association is a schizoid exercise by its very nature and does not impart authentic insight." Perls was concerned, she wrote, that in psychoanalysis, "Something must be wrong if it takes many years and decades to get nowhere."

At night she read from the dictionary, quizzing me with words- tautology, hegemony, loquacious. She mastered French and often used phrases: "Ma vie!" "Il faut que nous partions!" That coping mechanism had a flair. "It's good that you too are taking French," she wrote. "As Pascal said, 'When all else is gone, knowledge remains.'"

Mother's attraction to that sentiment was real. She had her first cancer at 46. She lost a breast, but she was on the tennis court two weeks after surgery. That first performance must have been excruciating for her. She confided that if she lost ten pounds, finished her master's degree in psychology, or perhaps had a spectacular party, her marriage could be "transformed," but she spent many nights believing that the cancer had come back and she would die.

Soon there were fewer visits from the fluty ladies. Mother began to see the futility in idle conversation and trying to penetrate my father's isolation. She used the expression "climbing up a glass wall," and he would stare at her blankly, impervious to insult. She continued to serve my father dinners that would often feature myriad uses of Stouffer's frozen spinach soufflé. He never once got up or learned to cook or help himself. I found that disturbing, too. "Why can't he serve himself?" I would snap. She never had an answer. Mother would eat only dry-roasted peanuts. Later she discovered they were laden with the carcinogens she was so terrified of.

It could not have been coincidence that she became obsessed with the rights of victims of all kinds. She underlined Hannah Arendt with a shocking-pink marking pen. The selves in the game room filled with new books-Elie Wiesel and William Shirer, memoirs of survivors. It was crucial, she believed, to know every fact, every date, and she started to teach the history of the Holocaust to high school students. They were mostly Hispanic, and there were those who could hardly read. What did they care about Treblinka? "I must teach them the perils of demagogues," she said as I drove with her to hear her speak. We passed the Delicious Tamale Factory on Culebra Street. The air suddenly was filled with the smell of chiles and frying corn and beans. In her zeal that day, she got all tangled up on the dates of Treblinka and Bergen-Belsen. She was upset on her way home in the care, as if she had let them down. On Culebra Street again, I was desperate for those bean tamales, but my mother was too agitated to stop. "You don't need all that grease," she said.

She began to feel she had limited time to accomplish something important in her life. Mother saw oppression and darkness around her; she spent hours counseling child victims of "sick and perverted" families, a phrase she often used in her work as an advocate for CASA, the volunteers who took on child welfare cases in family court. I found it hard to listen to her descriptions of the children's lives.

This was a difficult time. I was in my 20s, and Mother came to believe I was her doppelganger, perhaps because she was finally alone in her marriage. My father would rarely travel or go to parties with her. They lived separate lives, but they were loyal to each other. She persisted in trying to crack his code. It was clear to her friends that this yearning was the essence of her life. She more and more talked about her carefree days in wartime Washington, where she had been surrounded by beaux at the OSS. Mother would describe being bused to dances somewhere near Langley, Vir-

ginia, the curtains drawn for security reasons. She wrote odd and melancholy letters to me. "There is no one role we are destined for but we act as the situation demands. That is why we can never know who we are. We are not just a mother or wife or artist of sweetheart or teacher or friend or competitive sports player or businesswoman-but a person with versatility. The best thing we can do for ourselves is to act with fair play and integrity in all we do-remembering Kant's categorical imperative...When we affirm what is good in ourselves (and in others), we lose the habit of self-pity, which can keep us everlastingly sick and neurotic."

She believed, however, that a deal was a deal. Once at a dinner in San Antonio, an acquaintance of my new husband insulted my father. "You married the Brenner girl? The daughter of that impossible man?" "We have to think of a way to respond to these people," my mother said the next morning when we told her what happened. "How about this? The next time someone insults Milton to you, just look them straight in the eye and say, 'A peasant never understands an aristocrat.' That is a line of Diderot."

I see myself with my mother in the summer of 1967. I am soon to leave San Antonio to attend college in the East. I will never live in South Texas again, but I don't know that yet. I am at the beginning of the beginning of a long journey. I am gathering clothes to take in my trunk to Penn. I tie pastel yarns in my new fall, the thick hairpiece that was a Texas wardrobe necessity. I have matching Pappagallo loafers in pink and green. For this summer, I wear white shoes, lime-green mini-skirts. My mother has convinced me that the sky is the limit; I have picked up her interior panic, but I keep it hidden underneath an odious teenage superiority.

I know everything. I will never have her life of bourgeois convention, I tell her and myself. Your friends are phonies, I tell her, although I truly love the women who gather around her and luxuriate in a warm bath of Texas female hyperbole. You look good. I don't. Ewe look good. You've lost some weight. I haven't. Well, I love you hair. Who is doing it? Your skin! The texture is like a pearl.

They were smart women with college degrees; they had opinions on events and organized against the Vietnam War in a clique called San Antonio Mothers for Peace. That summer, when Robert McNamara came to San Antonio to lecture, they forced their way into his room at the St. Anthony Hotel. He was on the telephone, my mother told me, and he was baffled by this cluster of society matrons in their linen suits and color-coordinated shoes. Everyone knew them at the hotel-their husbands were powerful men-so the bellman had let them up.

It was difficult for me to see how serious she was, determined to keep the game going, no matter what. She often stayed up past midnight typing papers for her college course. At the breakfast table, she would read them to us: "Two Philosophical Concepts in 'La Vida Es Sueño' by Calderón de la Barca." She wrote toadying notes to her professors: "Dear Dr. Benavides: All the work done on this paper has been original, based on thoughtful reading of the text combined with lecture notes which have enriched my analysis. Have a nice summer vacation! As usual, I have enjoyed and benefited from being in your class and am looking forward to seeing you in the fall."

She was an anomaly, a housewife among the nineteen-year-old students, and could annoy her

professors with her high-flown phrases and opinions, culled from my father's tirades and The New York Times. I recall that in 1963 she was asked to leave her economics class at San Antonio College. Something about a fight that had to do with price-fixing on General Electric's discounting appliances. I'm sure my father was the ventriloquist and delighted in making a fool of the teacher, oblivious to how he was harming her. My mother wrote a furious six-page letter and copied it to the dean.

You are not doing the student justice when you teach a negative approach to capitalism...I believe that the core of our problem revolved around the fact that you did not like my frankly liberal-capitalistic approach and that I was not afraid to question your socialist slant on our economic system. Certainly, if I had agreed with your notions, you would not be in the position of having axed me. On the contrary, it would have occurred to you what a delightful person Mrs. Brenner is: You might have thought, "She doesn't talk up enough."

My last summer living at home I belittled her for trading recipes for King Ranch casseroles and mango mold. I did a mean imitation of her conversations with her friend Louise: That mold will never jell unless you go to the mercado and get the Jacques Clementes canned mangoes that come from Mexico." "I add sour cream," Louise said. "What an interesting idea! Do you use apricot or lemon Jell-O as your base?" I was merciless, determined to cut the ties. The more petulant I became, the less she seemed to notice. She would make a joke about it. "I'm counting the days!" she said. She became ferocious about my virginity. I parked my car by the local boys' school and made out with my boyfriend for hours. My mother knew where to find me. She would drive up in her silver Buick and shout at the fogged windows of my red Open Cadet: "You are acting like a whore! Remember who you are!" I drank Black Russians and whiskey sours until I was woozy and smuggled vodka bottles into the dorms for my beau at the Texas Military Institute.

Did she intuit I was taking off for the world? She appeared desperate for me to finish my education. She saved her best lesson for the day I was leaving. "Remember, always ask anyone you meet fifteen questions in the first fifteen minutes you meet them. Fifteen questions. They will like you better, and the answers might teach you things."

"You don't need me anymore," my mother said to me as I wept outside a doctor's office on Park Avenue shortly before she died. It was the summer of 1989. We had been to see another miracle man who told her that her rare cancer could be cured with coffee enemas and his regime of 50 vitamins a day. My mother wasn't buying; she had an unerring instinct for a phony. "Please, Mother, try it," I said. "Do this for me." She would have none of it. "You are independent. My work is done." She had been well enough to travel by herself back to San Antonio, but she was soon too weak even to venture much from her bed. She insisted that she wanted to be at home in the large airy bedroom decorated with Japanese woodblocks.

"Please don't wear black to my funeral," she said. "The color has never suited you. Stick to jewel tones. A rich red. Vibrant yellow. Royal blue." I see my mother so vividly in her bedroom that

day. She was in fine spirits, issuing orders. She was by then ravaged by cancer but had somehow managed to retain the essence of her looks. She was propped up on pillows, wearing a lace gown. On the bed beside her were lists, always lists. She was at last the grand Texas lady. She dictated lengthy instructions about her funeral, as if she were planning a dinner party. "Keep the red roses and 'awful' flowers like gladiolas out of the Temple. Try to find bougainvillea and oleander. Tell the rabbi not to go on and on. You know I can't stand sentimentality."

The room sparkled. Her house sparkled. On one wall were the signed engravings, the flowers and tea gardens, warriors and city scenes. She insisted that I go through her closets. Her blouses were hung by color; her good shoes were in plastic boxes or neatly arranged in racks. In the kitchen, the recipes were sorted in categories: Desserts and Dessert Sauces, Salads and Dressings, Main Course, One Dish.

I wrote about this on my first Mother's Day without her. I was still angry that she determined to die exactly as she lived; she never dropped the pose. Now I view her last moments as an act of supreme courage. She was a class act: I tried to distract her with talk of parties, a coming hoedown in New York. Mother was slipping into a coma. The nurse was alarmed and was frantic to call the doctor. My mother looked up. Her timing was as good as it got. "Do you know where Marie can get a pair of red lizard cowboy boots?" My mother saw my tears. "Quel hassle, chérie," she said weakly. She was losing strength; the pages slipped off the bed. "Please, darling," she said. "Don't lose your looks over this."

I've thought about my mother's last line to me for years. My friends all laugh when I tell the story, but I am haunted by the subtext of her words. Her message was strength and fortitude: She had the mettle of a pioneer woman and had carved out an interior private world all her own. For my mother, image was a version of a tribal mask, the outer layer of the hidden self. Mother had havens of thought, arcs of silence, moments of deep retreat that were hers alone to guard fiercely, especially from me. She left no diaries and made no revelations on her deathbed except once when she whispered: I've had a wonderful life.

In the years since she has been gone, I have made it a policy not to visit her grave. My avoidance of the cemetery seems selfish to my father, and I have tried to explain my reasons: My mother may be dead, but I don't have to believe it if I don't want to. My father's answer is characteristic: "that is ridiculous." For several years, he sent me a photograph of her grave, an impressive gray marble tomb surrounded by azaleas. I could easily read the carving of her name: THELMA BRENNER 1923-1989. I keep the pictures in my desk drawer in their original envelopes.

I couldn't escape her if I wanted to; the idea of my mother continues to live. I carry her with me every day. "What if you mother did float around above you big as a barrage balloon blocking out the light?" asks the poet Liz Lochhead. And even as I type Lochhead's line, I can hear my mother taking me to task: "What do you mean, 'blocking out the light?'" She is nettled at my need to hurl a spear at her. She thinks I have an inability to savor her legacy, but of course I do. When I was a child I believed that I could tell her anything, and she would listen. It felt then that her love was soft and emotive. If she wanted a man with a parallel soft and emotive heart, she never got one.

She learned to be an independent thinker, to seek out friends and women to admire. I learned as well to read the feelings that hid beneath the well-crafted patina of her surface. She never let down the side. And in the end, mystery surrounded her and unexpressed desires, and did it really matter? She was tender and imperfect and striving. My mother was the best of the breed-a great dame with tenacity. She persevered.