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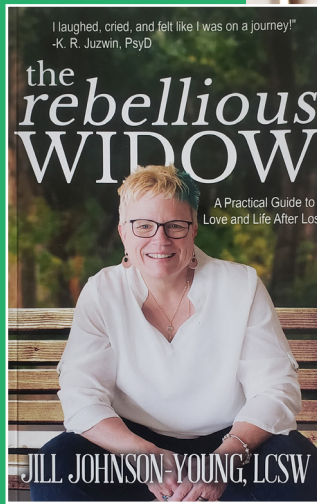
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Excerpt: Introduction

The Rebellious Widow: A Practical Guide to Love and Life after Loss

Introduction

Life is not what it's supposed to be. It's what it is. The way you cope with it is what makes the difference.

- Virginia Satir

The Moment the World Stopped

My wife Linda and I had been together for twenty years and were raising two teenage daughters when we received some of the worst news any couple will ever hear in their lifetimes: her sudden frequent bouts of what we had believed to be pneumonia were actually symptoms of advanced pulmonary fibrosis (PF). A breast cancer survivor, the chemo that had saved Linda's life eight years prior had damaged her lung tissue beyond repair.

This time, no matter how courageously she fought, how much she exercised, or how hard we prayed, and bargained, and tried, it was clear that PF would win the battle. We had to get ready. We had to get the kids ready.

Mama was going to die.

The afternoon we realized what was coming, we stopped for a glass of expensive cabernet at the Mission Inn, our favorite spot to celebrate. In years past, sitting at this same table—our table—under a window in the hotel lobby, we'd toasted her retirement, our anniversaries, and our wedding. We'd even taken our daughter Kerry there for her prom.

There we sat sipping our wine, reminiscing. We texted the kids that we would be home later. Intuiting what was really going on, Kerry replied, "This is it, isn't it, Mom? Mama's really dying now."

Our hearts broke reading her words. There was no protecting ourselves or our girls from Linda's approaching death. No stopping or hiding from it. This was really happening. To us, Jill and Linda. Someday not too far off, I would just be Jill again.

What would that even mean anymore, after decades of being half of a loving, committed couple who'd built a life together? I was about to find out.

The Rules

As it turns out, what life as a widow was supposed to look like had already been decided for me. There were societal rules for this, I learned. A lot of them. And woe to the widow who steps one foot out of line—for she will hear about it from damn near everyone—friends, family, acquaintances, and even strangers.

I was lucky in that I had some forewarning about this. Soon after Linda died, a friend who'd previously lost her wife met me at Starbucks to impart a lesson she said she'd wished someone had told her: society's many, many expectations of widows. It's worth noting that these rules are different for women than for men. And since I'm writing about my own experiences in this book, the focus will be primarily on the rules as they apply to us ladies. But guys, if you're reading, a good deal of this will apply to your experiences too, if you're a widower or will soon become one.

Here are the highlights of the rules of being a widow, especially if you live in a town where everybody knows your name:

- Do not be seen smiling
- Best to look sad—but not too sad, so you don't make others sad or uncomfortable
- No going out for anything social
- No bright- or light-colored clothing allowed; only black
- NO DATING
- Make no changes to your house involving your lost loved one until given permission (by whom exactly is unclear)
- Get your spouse's stuff out of the house right away so it doesn't upset people
- Don't say their name
- Do say their name, but apologize for it because you are making others uncomfortable
- Be prepared to be criticized for your behavior, by anyone, at any time, no matter what you do . . . or don't do
- These rules are in effect for as long as the person admonishing you for breaking them thinks is appropriate

Hearing my friend's words as she broke this down for me made my head spin. I was the one who was widowed. Wasn't it my decision what to do with my life?

As she was kind enough to warn me, the answer was a resounding "no" from many corners. And never mind that half of these rules directly contradict each other either. Whether I liked it or not, they all applied to me now, as they apply to all widows.

I have had complete strangers tell me in the grocery line that if they were widowed, they would never date again. "It would be wrong," a church friend who'd lost her dad told me, in front of my second wife and my kids, adding that if her mom ever dated again she would "never forgive her." I lost a close friend after she cussed me out upon learning I planned to remarry after my first wife's death. Even my daughter's therapist told me, after learning I was dating as a widow, that if he died, he would not want another man "riding my bike or my wife."

It never ceases to amaze me that people who are uncomfortable with death and who have never lost a spouse themselves could presume to know what is right for someone who has been widowed—in my case, not once, but twice. And yet it happens. A lot. If you are already widowed, chances are you have stories like this of your own to tell. And if you've only recently learned you'll be joining this club, believe me when I tell you: you will have stories to tell about this one day too.

But does that mean we're doomed to sitting at home for endless months or years, doing nothing but wearing black mantillas and draping the furniture with black crepe in order to convince some folks we're grieving enough to meet their needs and expectations? I'm here to tell you, definitively: hell no. But first you have to be prepared to tell people—as politely and graciously—or not, as you please—where they can stick all those nonsensical and cruel rules.

You prepared as best you could for this loss. You're knee-deep now in managing your grief and getting back to the daily business of managing your life. On top of all of this, if you want to get through this difficult period in one piece and find the happiness you deserve on the other side of it?

There's one more thing you have to be . . .

The Rebellious Widow

Being a rebellious widow means seizing control of your own destiny rather than letting others dictate it for you based on a bunch of external, nonsensical rules. You get to make your own rules, set your own expectations. You get to decide what path you want to follow.

A rebellious widow must also develop the resilience needed to let the insensitive and even cruel things people will say roll off your back. Even the most well-meaning people in your life may question your decisions. They may ask how dare you find the courage and strength to reimagine your life, to keep living it rather than to feel and behave indefinitely as though you had died too.

You'll learn a little more about me below, but it's important to know here that I'm a therapist who specializes in grief counseling. In my many years of teaching people how to cope with death, dying, grief, and loss, I've learned an important lesson that research is just now catching up to: Widows who expect the death of their spouse due to a terminal diagnosis and walk through this process as a caregiver tend to process and heal through their own grief far sooner than the other people around them.

Why? Because we are right in the thick of it. We have to get ready. Like it or not, death is coming. So, we grieve early and often. We plan and prepare. We reorganize a new life for ourselves in our mind as a means of coping.

We do this because we have to know we are going to survive. We have to be able to tell our spouses goodbye and assure them it's okay for them to go. Those not thrust into this awful role tend to hold out hope even where there is none. It's easy when you're not the one who vowed to be there every day to not see the advance of the illness, or to leave when things get too hard. The other people in your life don't have to reorganize to cope, because when that death occurs, their lives will not change all that much. Yes, they will miss someone they loved too, but not in the same way. And they usually don't start grieving until the person they love is gone. So they finish grieving far behind the widow—and they tend to have a hard time understanding that the widow has already done a great deal of her grieving before that death ever occurred.

The other reality is that most people have all sorts of deep-seated fear and discomfort when it comes to the topics of death, dying, loss, and our own mortality. We all have to work through these issues in our own time, but that doesn't give us the right to project that baggage onto other people—especially those who have suffered a major loss like the death of a spouse. This fear is the other half of what lies at the root of 'the Rules' I outlined in the section above.

If you choose to live your life according to these rules, make no mistake: you're letting fear and other people's expectations dictate your life and your happiness. That's not what you want for yourself. It's certainly not what your spouse would want for you.

Being a rebellious widow means learning to recognize this truth at the heart of 'the Rules.' It means creating healthy boundaries to protect ourselves from those who can't or won't see it. And you may be surprised by who is still standing by you when you come out on the other side. Sometimes those closest to us are those who feel the most strongly that they get a say in how we should grieve. They are sorely mistaken.

You must develop the ability to keep your eyes focused on where you need and want to go—not in a selfish way, but simply enough to do what is needed to take care of yourself. You can't allow yourself to be distracted or dragged down by other people's opinions about what you decide you need to be okay as you move forward. Your ability to master this new mindset is what will set the tone for the rest of your life.

The task of the rebellious widow is nothing short of this: to create your own new life. You are not leaving your spouse behind. They mattered when they were alive, and they matter now. You will always talk to them, consult them, remember them. Your new life will include them.

But it has to be yours now.

To get there, you'll need a plan and a support system. We'll cover how to nail down these two key elements in the chapters to come.

From One Rebellious Widow to Another

So, you might wonder: who is this Jill lady and what does she know about grieving? The simple answer is this: more than I ever expected to, even as a former hospice worker and a therapist who specializes in grief and loss.

I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and the co-owner and CEO of Central Counseling Services, where I see clients and run the clinical side of our psychotherapy practice. Over the last ten years, we've grown from just two of us to a staff of twenty-eight therapists working out of two offices and in one local school, with more locations in the planning stages. We include a wide variety of specializations including my own in dementia and grief and loss. We also have a teaching facility in our main office where we train therapists and other professionals, and I speak on the national circuit to other industry professionals about death and dying. My message focuses on how to address death and loss in a way that offers hope and recovery from grief. I've also established an online grief program, *Your Path Through Grief*, with an intensive focus on the first year after a major loss.

Before opening our practice, I spent more than a decade in hospice work in two states—first as a social worker, and later as a director in charge of a large team of social workers, bereavement center staff, and chaplains. I had the good fortune to be part of opening a residential hospice wing where our patients could come with their families and remain together until the patient's death. In Florida I also ran children's grief programs in the local schools and for adults in community settings. It was a combination of all these professional experiences that shaped me into the therapist I am today.

I have published three books about grief for children (*Someone is Sick: How Do I Say Goodbye?*, *Someone I Love Just Died: What Happens Now?* and *My Pet Is Sick: It's Time to Say Goodbye*). These works have been well-received by parents, funeral directors, faith communities, and young readers. I also authored a grief workbook, *Your Own Path through Grief: A Workbook for Your Journey to Recovery*. I've received awards for my work as a social worker in both Florida and California, and have also presented at state conferences for California Funeral Directors, the National Association of Social Workers, and the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. I've spoken at national conferences—including one for SAMHSA—and internationally. I also speak frequently for local groups across the country, including keynoting and facilitating speaker's panels, and have been featured on a number of podcasts for grief and loss, and for therapists grappling with these issues both personally and professionally.

In my personal life, I've adopted three wonderful children, two with my first wife, and one after her death. I have been married three times, and as I mentioned earlier here, I've been widowed twice. I lost Linda, my wife of twenty-three years in 2010. And after I found love again—to my chagrin, with the very person my stubborn Linda picked out for me while she was dying—I lost my second wife, Casper, a few years later.

I know all too intimately the pain of losing the person you've built a life with and around. That doesn't mean I know exactly what it's like or will be like for you, but I've walked down this road enough to become an expert on navigating its dangers and pitfalls. I've also had the benefit of my professional training to help me steer myself through it all. Even so, I wish I'd had someone to teach me the things I'm going to teach you here, dear reader. So much so that I knew I had to write this book.

How to Get the Most Out of This Book

This book was born out of a series of blogs I wrote as my first two wives—first Linda, and then a few years later, Casper—were sick and dying. Originally, I was writing because it helped me to keep friends and family informed about what was happening and to process my own grief. This time around, my aim is to help you process yours.

The *Rebellious Widow* is designed to prepare you for the loss of your spouse, and for what comes after. In learning what I have to teach you here, born from my own professional and personal experiences, you'll know what to expect not just after your spouse has died, but before and during too. Armed with this knowledge, you'll be able to plot the course for your own recovery in whatever way works best for you.

The first half of the book covers what happens before and during your spouse's death, from the day you get the awful news of a terminal diagnosis, to your loved one's final moments. In the second half, I cover what happens next, starting with how to take care of yourself in those first few awful weeks and months of loss, all the way through how to boldly go forth and seize every bit of the joy this world still holds for you.

Regardless of where you're at in the grieving process, my recommendation is to read the book from start to finish, marking it up as you go to note any sections that you find particularly helpful or that resonate for you. Even if you've already been widowed, you may find that the information I share in the first half to be affirming, or that it helps you to resolve some lingering trauma that may have resulted from lack of access to education about the death process. If you are soon to be widowed, you'll want to read not just the first half, but also the second so that you know what lies ahead and how best to prepare yourself.

Once you've finished your first read-through, you'll always be able to come back as needed to refresh yourself on useful strategies or proactive suggestions for wherever you find yourself along the way.

My Promise to You

I can't and won't make promises about how long your journey through grief will take. I can promise, though, that you will be happier and healthier if you embrace the path of the Rebellious Widow than you would be trying to abide by other people's rules.

Grievers who laugh, smile, and get some sun are the healthy ones, the ones who survive. Some consider it a romantic ideal for a person who has just lost their spouse to die shortly afterward. The reality is that this is a thing that can and does really happen—because some people either lose the will to live when their loved one goes first, or they've done so poor a job of taking care of their own health that they too wind up falling gravely ill. Believe it or not, grief can cause a heart attack in the initial moments or hours after a spouse dies. Later on it causes inflammation, which means someone not ready for what's coming can succumb to a heart attack or stroke. If you are reading this, then at least some part of you wants to survive this, to have a new life on the other side of grief.

This is absolutely possible. All you have to do to start yourself on this path is to decide to walk it.

I don't follow rules well. I especially do not follow the Widow Rules well. We don't get along even a little bit. I've lived an unconventional life, so I see no reason to do widowhood any differently. And I've never been sorry I chose the path of the Rebellious Widow.

You will never stop loving your spouse or honoring their memory. Even so, their death does not mean you can't ever be happy again, or can't love someone else. Remember, this is your loss. Your path. Your recovery. Yours to make of it what you will.

Remember too that every time we make a widow into a rebel, we help the next one after her.

So here is to you, dear reader, a Rebellious Widow in the making.

About the Author:

Southern California based Jill Johnson Young is an internationally renowned speaker, author, clinician and co-owner of Central Counseling services, a large multi therapist mental health center. Jill is passionate about helping people navigate the loss of loved ones and in debunking the myth that there is one right way to grieve. Using her own experience of being widowed twice before the age of 50 along with her years of clinical work, Jill draws upon a unique blend of persona, theoretical and clinical experiences to provide the reader with an easy to understand , practical approach to living life after someone we love has died. She is also the author of Your Path Through Grief; Someone Is Sick- how do I say goodbye?; Someone I love Just Died- What happens now?; My Pet is Sick- It's time to say goodbye.

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