



How I Made a Huge Mess of My Life

(or Couples Therapy with a Dead Man)

A true story
By Billie Best

Chapter One is provided here as an excerpt for review.

This book is a work of nonfiction.
Some names and identifying details have been changed.

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1. The Juicer

It was high summer 2008. My parents had stayed with us on the farm for a month longer than they planned. Since the day they arrived it had been one emergency after another. They could see my challenges and my pain. My dad drove the tractor and reminisced about his youth working on a farm in Iowa. He was enamored with the chickens, fed them from his hand, and they followed him around the barnyard. My stepmom, Peggy, washed and packed eggs, and took care of our bullmastiff, Henry, her constant companion. The animals focused our minds on the present and gave us purpose. When Chet's health was out of control, the farm kept us on a schedule, distracted us from our fears, and reminded us of the natural order of things, the inevitability of the seasons, the necessity of rain, and the bond of people to the land.

Chet's hair started falling out and my dad offered to give him a haircut outside on the long porch. We took lots of pictures, drank white wine and relaxed in the shade. Cancer had become routine. The chemo was respite from the attack of the tumors. Chet was able to go back to work at the college a few days a week. But when he came home, he went straight to bed. Work took all his energy.

A large package addressed to him arrived at the college mailroom and I went to pick it up because it was too heavy for him to lift.

"It's a juicer," I said after I opened the box. He was in bed, half asleep. "Who would send you that?"

"I don't know," he said with his eyes closed.

"Well, they must know you," I said. "I looked it up online. It costs about \$400. That's an expensive gift. Where did it come from?"

"It just showed up in the mail." He rolled over on his side and put his back to me.

"Maybe it's a mistake. Maybe it belongs to someone else. If you don't know who it's from, how do you know it's yours?"

"It's mine," he said.

I went through all the packaging again and searched the shipping labels until I found a name in microscopic text that seemed to correspond to the sender. There she was in black and white, the groupie with the lavender lace bra, a trophy that once hung on his bedroom doorknob when she was his girlfriend in 1984.

"How did she find out you were sick?" I asked, standing over him while he laid there with his eyes closed. "Have you been in touch with her?"

"She must have heard about me through the Boston grapevine," he said

"That's a pretty expensive gift to give someone you haven't been in touch with for 25 years."

"She comes from a wealthy family."

"How did she get your address at the college? Why did she send it there and not here to the house?"

"I don't know."

"She must have been in touch with you. Why are you hiding it? I don't care if you're in touch with an old girlfriend. You never cared if I was in touch with old boyfriends. Why didn't you just come out and tell me it was from her? Why keep it a secret?"

"Bill!" he snapped. "It's just a juicer."

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Most of our friends understood the fear and uncertainty of cancer. Ways of coping had become traditions, especially the ritual of giving food. I couldn't keep up with preparing the kind of meals that would entice Chet to eat. He wasn't hungry and he was losing too much weight. So our Food Fairies took over menu planning and delivered a fabulous meal to our house every few days. Men and women who loved Chet and me prepared extraordinary recipes for us — roast pork with prunes, mushroom lasagna, sweet potato ancho soup, baked chicken and olives, turkey meat loaf, poached salmon, vichyssoise and homemade bread. It was a feast of love.

As chemo reduced the size of the tumor in his lung he felt better. He didn't need his oxygen tank anymore and he started spending longer hours at the college. Each day after work I chauffeured him home and went through his backpack to collect the plastic containers from snacks I had prepared for him that morning. Mixed in with all the other get-well cards, I found a card from the Juicer. It included two photos, one of her sitting in a restaurant in a red suit with red lipstick, and another that looked like a high school photo from about 25 years ago. The inscription on the card said, "Luv ya, miss ya. Really wanna squish ya."

Chet's musician friends, both doctors, stopped by the house to check in on him and one of them mentioned that this woman had called him at his clinic to inquire about Chet's status and discuss treatment options.

After they left, I cornered Chet. "Why are you having her call him to ask about your condition? Why don't you have her call here?"

"She can be really intense," he said. "You're so busy. I didn't want her to bother you."

"So, you have her call a doctor at work?"

"I was just trying to make it easier on you."

"He said she wants him to check out a treatment protocol they've developed at Johns Hopkins. I didn't realize she was so up to date on your illness. You must be pretty good friends with her to be talking about your chemo."

"She's a busybody," he said. "I can't control her. Just let it go."

"If she has some ideas about treatment, I'd like to hear them. Have her call me."

A few days later there was another card from her in his bag.

"Chet, it's obvious you're in touch with her. I want to hear about it."

"Do we really have to talk about this?"

"Yes, we do."

"I got in touch with her in 2006 when I started therapy. She's been in therapy her whole life. I wanted to know what she thought about it."

"How did you know how to get in touch with her after all these years?"

"She's in the same place she's always been."

"So, you started up your friendship again talking about your mental health?"

"She's the queen of therapy."

"And you've kept it a secret all this time?"

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Then don't act like you're hiding something. I can see why she would want to reach out to you now. I would want to reach out to you now, too."

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He was at the college when a customer service rep from Verizon called us on our land line at home to say that if we were going to use our cell phones to text so much, we should switch payment plans. I said we didn't text. In 2008, I didn't even know how to text. The rep said there were more than 100 text messages received and 65 sent from Chet's cell phone in the last billing period.

"I didn't know you knew how to text," I said to Chet. "You've never texted me. Who are you texting?"

"People at work," he said.

"If you have to text that much, wouldn't it make more sense to have a conversation?"

"Bil, it's just texting," he said. "What's the big deal?"

Next time I was in his backpack, I found a package of expensive vitamin supplements sent to his office by the Juicer, along with a couple more cards, each affectionately inscribed with *luv*.

"Why is she still mailing stuff to your office?" I asked. "Why doesn't she mail it here? I would feel a lot better if your relationship with her was out in the open."

"What do you want me to do?"

"If you are going to be in relationship with her, do it in front of me. Don't make it a secret. It's been more than 25 years since your affair with her, and you were fully entitled to have that affair. There's nothing to hide. I can handle your friendship. It's okay."

Without saying another word to me, he took the telephone out onto the long porch and sat down in his chair. Then I heard the voice that had been missing in my life for the past two years. The voice of the man absent for so long I had forgotten what he sounded like until I heard him on the phone with her, light as the morning breeze, the flirtatious voice of pleasure, speaking effortlessly for two hours. *Two hours*. I couldn't remember the last time he and I had talked for that long.

When he came back in the kitchen he said, "I invited her to come for the last weekend in September."

"She's going to spend the weekend with us?"

"Yes," he said. "That's what you wanted isn't it?"

"Sure, of course," I said. "She's welcome to come here."

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September is a busy month on any farm as the harvest peaks and the change of seasons begins. After several chemo treatments, the trauma of Chet's fragile condition subsided, and things were going well enough for my dad and Peggy to go home to Florida. They had come for a week in June, stayed for three months, and missed their house and their friends. When they pulled out of the driveway a wave of fear swept over me, but I choked it down and put my mind on my chores.

I needed a plan to get ready for winter, a winter I expected to farm alone. If Chet couldn't help running the farm in summer, he certainly wouldn't be able to help in the cold and snow, if he was even alive. I could have shut down the farm, sold the animals and stopped farming. I had a choice. But livestock farming had been my passion for the last five years. I was breeding cows and I had plans for the next five years. Cancer was taking Chet. But I wasn't going to let it take the farm. So, while Chet was still alive, I made a plan to farm alone.

To get the money to buy a barn full of hay, it was time to harvest my cow, Lisa. Selling her meat would bring enough cash to pay for winter hay for my small herd of ruminants. Lisa had flunked out of my breeding program when she tried to kill her newborn calf. I knew then she had to go. The harvest date was set for mid-September.

From the very beginning of our interest in livestock farming Chet and I discussed the best way to kill animals. We saw that every living thing eats and is eaten. We knew we were animals in a hierarchy of predators and prey. We took responsibility for the deaths on our farm. We agreed the process

should be done without fear and pain. We believed the energy of the animals we ate became our energy. We thought killing should be a sacred act and the death of our animals should be a beautiful experience.

We knew stories of hunters killing game, but we had never seen a large animal killed with a bullet. We had euthanized our pets in the past and we saw how quickly death came with drugs. We knew death with a knife from our experience killing our chickens. The two of us had toured a small slaughterhouse where the owners felt a bullet to the head was the most humane end for a cow, and for our cows we thought that was the way it should be.

To learn how to do a home slaughter I volunteered to help a friend with one of his cows. He was an experienced cattle farmer, so I assumed he was experienced at home slaughter. I expected to be one of a group of people doing the chore, but when I showed up it was just the three of us, the farmer, his wife and me, and she went into the house as soon as the rifle came out. One bullet in the center of the imaginary X between the ears and the eyes, and the cow shut down like a machine unplugged from its power source; a straight down fall, knees buckled, belly hit the ground. I watched for signs of pain and struggle, but there weren't any. *What a perfect way to go*, I thought. *Lights on, lights off.*

The rest of the process was not as well executed. My tutor's knives were not sharp, and he had no knife sharpener, so it took a very long time to remove the cowhide. Our shade evaporated, sunlight hit us, and after an hour skinning the cow with dull knives in the hot sun the belly swelled and expanded with gas. Finally, we hooked the rear legs and used the forklift on his tractor to raise the carcass off the ground so we could relocate to shade. But first, he wanted to drop the offal on his compost pile, so he drove the thousand-pound swinging meat balloon across the barnyard.

At the compost pile he got off the tractor and I sat in the driver's seat with the carcass raised high in front of me. Then he climbed the bumper onto the engine block and stood with his back to me so he could reach up and stab the swollen belly to slice it open with his knife. His stab released a spray of sour gas with an audible whoosh, sending bits of fermented yellow mush 20 feet in the air. Flecks of slime splattered his face, his hair and his shirt, and the tractor and me. The odor of partially digested cow food gave me new insight into rumination, and I vowed to buy a knife sharpener before we killed Lisa.

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Chet wanted to hear the whole story, every detail. He always had a morbid curiosity, but now it was obvious he was thinking through his own options. We had a glass of wine on the long porch and I told him how it went.

"How did farmers kill cows before guns?" he asked.

"Knives, I guess."

"That must hurt."

"I assume so. Fortunately, we have guns."

"You really think the bullet didn't hurt?"

"That's how it looked," I said. "Lights on, lights off. No sign of fear or pain. No noise. No flinching. No reaction whatsoever."

"But what was she thinking?"

"That's a good question."

"Do you think she felt betrayed?" he asked. "Was she lying there thinking, What the fuck, I should have killed that guy when I had the chance.?"

We laughed. "I don't think so," I said. "But who knows..."

"I've read there can be brain activity for 24 hours after the body is pronounced dead."

“If the brain is still attached,” I said. “The first thing you do is cut the cow’s head off. If there’s any brain activity, I’m not sure what it would be processing when it’s completely disconnected from the body.”

He looked up at the sky and followed a cloud with his eyes. “I don’t think I want my head cut off,” he said.

“Good,” I said, watching him think. “I’m not sure how I would handle that.”

“I feel like I need a plan.”

“What do you want?”

“Cows have thoughts. I’ve seen their faces. They know what’s going on. Where do our thoughts go when we die?”

“I think thoughts are biochemistry,” I said. “Energy. They go wherever energy goes.”

“Are my thoughts going to mingle with Lisa’s?”

“And your dad’s, and Wink’s, and Gandhi’s.”

“You think I’m going to meet Gandhi?”

“Become. Become Gandhi. I think it’s all one thing,” I said. “Your thoughts, Gandhi’s thoughts, Jesus, Jimi Hendrix. You’ll all be one thing flowing around — energy.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I think you start as energy and you end as energy.”

“So, Heaven is God’s force field?”

“Heaven is bullshit,” I laughed.

“But every religion has one.”

“Religion is political.”

“I like the idea of heaven,” he said, looking up at the clouds again. “It’s a place I can understand.”

“You like the idea of knowing where you’re going.”

“Doesn’t everybody? Everybody believes there’s a better place out there. What did Gandhi believe?”

“He probably believed in reincarnation. It’s more of a process than a place. You should believe what you want to believe.”

“I don’t want to be stupid.”

“It’s not stupid,” I said. “It’s a choice. You choose what to believe. You tell yourself the story that makes sense of the world in your own mind.”

“I think I’ll just stick with what I know.”

“What’s that?”

“This. The farm. Nature.”

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The butcher I hired to help me harvest Lisa was a marksman, and an artist with a knife, a third-generation dairy farmer who knew cow anatomy. He had learned the craft harvesting cows with his father and his grandfather, 100 years of knowledge in one man. He brought a few guns and looked at the situation — the cow, the distance, the surroundings. Then he chose the right firearm. Chet and I watched as one bullet in Lisa’s forehead dropped her straight down. I put my hands on her until her heart stopped beating and thanked her for her gift to us. Then the butcher and I commenced cutting her up into four quarters, and Chet went back to bed.

Later we compared notes. “That’s how I’d like to go,” he said. “She wasn’t scared. One second she was here and the next second she was gone.”

“I don’t think cancer is that quick,” I said. “You have to find a way to handle the fear.”

"I'm not afraid," he said. "I'm just trying to understand it. There isn't anything about your energy theory in any religion I could find online."

"It's not religion. It's science."

"Oh," he chuckled. "No wonder it's not popular."

"We go back where we came from. It's a circle."

"Well, it may be unnatural," he said. "But I think a bullet to the head is the perfect death."

"No bullets, Chet."

"I'm not going to die like my father did. Writhing in the fetal position, begging."

"That was your mother's fault," I said. "It doesn't have to be like that. I promise I won't let you be in pain. We'll get the right drugs. You won't need a bullet."

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The Juicer arrived on a Friday afternoon. Chet walked out to meet her in the driveway and kissed her on the lips as I watched from the window. It was the first time I had ever seen her other than the photos she had sent with the get-well cards. She and I may have crossed paths in rock clubs in our distant past, but I didn't remember her face. Groupies were wallpaper in those days.

Now seeing her stand in my driveway, I was surprised she was tall and thin, inches taller than Chet and me, and years younger. She had long straight brown hair and she wore high heels with tight jeans. He led her inside and introduced us. Then he steered her away from me to give her a tour of the house and show her to her room.

I made Italian food for dinner because he asked me to. It was her favorite. Afterward they retired to the living room so he could stretch out on the couch. By the time I was done cleaning the kitchen, I was exhausted and excused myself and went to bed. The two of them stayed up talking on the screen porch in the bungalow until one o'clock in the morning while I stared up at the bedroom ceiling in the dark, listening to their voices waft between happy chatter and hushed whispers.

I felt angry, but I couldn't figure out why. I told myself he was dying. He couldn't be held to account for his emotions at a time like this. He deserved the freedom to be himself as he said goodbye to an old girlfriend. I didn't want to seem like a nagging wife. He was being so brave about everything. I needed to be brave, too. Now was no time for jealousy. I was a big person. Jealousy wasn't my style. When he finally came to bed, I was wide awake, but I pretended to be asleep.

The next morning, I took the trash to the dump and went into town to get chicken feed. When I returned Chet was stretched out on the couch again, smiling up at her sitting barefoot beside him in a spaghetti-strap teddy. The sight of that was like a shitty postcard from a foreign country. I couldn't get it out of my head. Where was I? Who were these people in my house? It was disorienting.

As I carried the recycling bins from the car to the pantry, they continued to talk to each other without even looking at me. It was as though I didn't exist. Maybe jealousy wasn't my style, but good manners were very much my style, and they were being rude to me. I grabbed my car keys and slammed the front door as I left.

Chet bolted after me with startling athleticism. "Bil, what's the matter?" he shouted from the front porch.

"You're having an affair with her!" I shouted back before I could even think about what I was saying. *Fuck*, I thought. *What just came out of my mouth?*

"No, I'm not," he said, walking over to the car. "We're just talking."

"You know her too well."

"You're over-reacting."

"I'm going to the market. I'll be back in an hour." My tires spit up a rooster tail of gravel as I peeled out of the driveway in a blind rage.

When I came home, they were dressed and ready to go out on an excursion into town. He was wearing the new blue shirt I had given him for his birthday. It was the first time he'd worn it. Seeing him look good for her was like eating glass. I had never been so humiliated. The shock of it was immobilizing. I didn't know what to do. So I did nothing. I said nothing.

"I'm going to show her around Great Barrington," he said. "Tonight, we'll cook for you."

And with that, they left in her car, while I watched from the window.

This was the day my brain began to separate from itself, cleaved into sections like a melon split with an axe. I couldn't process all of it at once. It was too much. I couldn't integrate my new reality with my history. I couldn't believe that my dying husband had betrayed me, was betraying me right in front of my eyes. I couldn't accept that he preferred to be with her when we had so little time left, and every day was precious. I couldn't reconcile my self-image with all of this. So I separated myself into pieces, and after September 27th, 2008, wherever I was, part of me was always locked in a box someplace else.