

The first thing that comes to our mind when we are asked to describe ourselves is commonly our careers, hobbies, interests, and others. However, there is another essential aspect that defines us. It is the main characters present in our life stories as well as the relationships that provide these stories with emotion, meaning, and drama.

These people and relationships exist in different types like friends and enemies, lovers and ex-lovers, mentors and mentees. However, the relationship that defines us more is those relationships we have with people that we love. Out of those relationships, few may have a deeper effect on us than the ones we have with the family we choose such as husbands or wives, sons or daughters.

Unfortunately, some of these relationships have the ability to shake us to the core when a terrible incident happens to them. None is worse than a life-threatening illness or death itself of all the likely terrible things that can happen. Unfortunately, during the course of a single heartbreaking year between 2003 and 2004, the writer Joan Didion went through both of these disruptions.

**Joan's story of loss started under the circumstances that were simultaneously extraordinary and ordinary.**

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 2003, in the evening Joan Didion and her husband who was the writer of John Gregory Dunne sat down in the living room of their apartment for dinner which was located in the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

The circumstances were extremely unusual in some ways. Joan and John had just arrived from the Beth Israel Medical Center intensive care unit, where their 37-year-old daughter Quintana had been admitted.

Five days before that, on the morning of Christmas, Quintana had been taken to the emergency room with what appeared to be a severe case of common flu. It later turned out to be pneumonia which started spreading making her body go into life-threatening septic shock. On

the evening of the 30<sup>th</sup> of December, she was unconscious for the fifth night and her chances of survival were between 56% - 69%.

The possibility of Quintana dying weighed heavily on both Joan and John's minds. One of the most heartbreaking news a parent can expect is the death of a child. However, in their case; it would have been extremely tragic because Quintana had just gotten married five months prior to that time.

She had been a happy bride on the day she got married at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2003. Now she is laying on the hospital bed with her body being kept alive by breathing tube, arterial lines and IV bags distributing a host of antibiotics such as azithromycin, clindamycin, gentamicin, vancomycin.

Those were the extraordinary circumstances Joan and John were faced with on the evening of December 30<sup>th</sup> where they sat down to eat dinner. However, in another way; it was just an ordinary circumstance being one of the thousands of dinners they have had together in almost 40 years of their marriage. On several evenings prior to that, Joan made a fire, prepared a meal and drink for John.

They were at the dinner table in the middle of a normal conversation when it happened. Joan can't remember what John was saying either talking about the scotch he was having or the historical importance of WWI. All of a sudden, John stopped talking and collapsed in his chair. Joan thought John was trying to make jokes with her.

"Don't do that," Joan said.

John didn't reply.

He wasn't joking.

He'd just had a cardiac arrest.

## Joan didn't know the whole truth about what happened next until long after the fact.

The instants after John's cardiac arrest were unclear to Joan. Joan was not only shocked by that event, but important pieces of information were also withheld from her. The following year, Joan was able to restructure a lot of details of what happened.

In order for her to do this, she had to go beyond her undependable notions and memories of that evening. Using her background as a journalist, she gathered various primary sources of documents like hospital reports and entry log kept by her apartment building's doorman. By tracking these documents down, gathering them together and also by combining the documents together, she was able to create an accurate timeline of the events that would change her life forever.

At 9:20 p.m., the paramedics arrived at their apartment with two ambulances. Changing their living room into an ad hoc emergency room, supplied with defibrillator paddles and an electrocardiogram monitor, the paramedics tried to resuscitate John but their effort was not successful.

At 10:05 p.m., they wheeled John out of the apartment on a gurney and left for the Cornell branch of New York-Presbyterian Hospital. Joan followed the paramedics in a different ambulance.

At 10:10 p.m., John got to the hospital and received triage.

At 10:15 p.m., A doctor attended to John.

At 10:18 p.m., John was officially marked dead, at the age of 71.

However, Joan wasn't aware of any of this. She was busy standing in a queue of the hospital's reception area waiting to get John's admittance paperwork while John was dying. While she was filling the paperwork, a social worker came to her and led her to an empty room where she told her the news of her husband's death.

In remembrance, she suspected that the paperwork was a bit of a bureaucratic pretense, just some motions that she and the hospital staff were doing just for the sake of following procedures and keeping up appearances vis-à-vis bookkeeping. She knew John had died the whole time.

It turned out that she was right. Joan read John's Emergency Department Physician's Record almost a year after his death. In that record, the truth was shown to her in three-letters which the physician had written at the end of the document.

The letters were "DOA."

John had been dead on arrival.

## Amidst the misfortune happening around Joan, she searched for a way to regain her agency.

It is very hard to think about anything more ridiculous than filling out hospital admittance forms of someone that is already dead. When it is a troubled wife filling these forms for her beloved husband whose heart stopped beating almost an hour ago, the ridiculousness borders on cruelty.

However, while Joan was in the reception waiting for the news about her husband's condition, she found relief in doing the paperwork. It gave her a feeling of agency and usefulness. She was no longer standing around passive observers who were just helplessly watching the medical professionals perform their duty. She had something to do, something she thought would have helped John recover.

The same paperwork implied that there was still something to be done to help John. She thought John was admitted to the hospital for treatment. This meant that John was still alive, his fate was still undecided. Also, it meant the result of his situation was something that could be decided. Meaning, there was still hope. With the right course of action, John's life could be revived.

Now Joan realized that she herself could not do the course of action. Most of the courses of action include giving John medical treatment administered by doctors, nurses and physician assistants. John's life was in the hands of the professionals. However, she could choose the professional she entrusted with John's medical care.

She had been thinking about this back in her living room after the paramedics arrived. She even thought John choked on something and proposed this to the paramedics who carefully checked his throat.

Now, let's move back to when Joan was in the hospital reception, where she was thinking the same way about the option of transferring John from the Cornell branch of New York-Presbyterian Hospital to the Columbia branch. She knew the Columbia branch and few doctors with whom she could talk to. And also, she could even transfer Quintana to the same Columbia branch. By doing this, Quintana and her father can be in the same hospital and Joan could make sure that they both got the best medical care.

She was thinking about that until the social worker came and told her that it was all for nothing.

## The next occurrences in Joan's story sparked a burst of memories and associations in her mind.

Remember that at the point where Joan was learning about her husband's death, her daughter's life Quintana was also hanging. In another hospital across town, Quintana was lying unconsciously in a hospital bed with her pneumonia and sepsis being treated and her condition still remains crucial.

Luckily, her condition stabilized and improved from there. Two weeks after which was the 15<sup>th</sup> of January, 2004; the doctors were able to remove the breathing tube and her sedatives intake were reduced which made her to finally wake up.

On a norm, this should call for a celebration; however, there was an unhappy event over the otherwise happy event, the cloud of her father's death. Since Quintana was unconscious for

about three weeks since Christmas of 2003, she was completely not aware of her father's death.

Immediately she saw her mother, she asked the question that Joan was afraid of "Where's Dad?"

However, Quintana's mind was still very unclear and Joan would end up telling her about her father's death three times before she understands.

A week after which was the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January, Quintana got discharged from the hospital. Three days after on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January, she was admitted into the hospital again for pulmonary embolism, a blockage of one of the arteries in her lung. She was discharged again on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February.

Due to Quintana's ongoing medical conditions, John's funeral was postponed to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March. The funeral took place at St. John the Divine, the same cathedral where Quintana had been married half a year ago.

It was also the same church where a plutonium device had once been planted by terrorists; not in real life though but in the movie, Joan and John had been rewriting the script since Christmas of 1990. They both worked on the script in Honolulu, Hawaii which is the same place they had gone anytime they had difficulties in their marriage back in the late 1960s.

She also wrote her first column for Life magazine there, a column where she confessed that she and John had gone to Honolulu to save their marriage.

What is the importance of all of these associations? We will discuss that in the following, where we'll start to turn to the more thematic features of Joan's story.

**The memories and habits of Joan's marriage created the backdrop to her grief.**

Sometimes, it appears as if there is a strange poetry to the stories of our lives. The more we keep going back to them, the more we find obvious rhymes and concealed relationships between the basics of which they are compromised.

This was exactly the case for Joan: Christmas, 1990; Christmas, 2003; St. John the Divine; Honolulu; Quintana's sickness; Quintana's wedding; Joan's marriage to John; the ups and downs of their lives together; their shared vocation of writing; John's death; John's funeral. As Joan searched for the direct and indirect associations between locations, times, occurrences and experiences like these, she saw a complicated connection of unseen threads that connects them together into one web of memory.

This web created the thick, extensive and richly textured fabric of the life she, her husband and her daughter shared. After the death of John, not only did love disappear from her world, the deep relationship of almost four decades of her life also disappeared.

This is usually the case for most of the people who lose their spouse, it was particularly true for Joan's case too. Joan and John both worked from their home and spent almost every hour each day together in most of their marriage. They were occasionally apart for about a week or two when one of them travels to write an article. However, they will still talk on the phone several times each day. Whether through the phone or in person, they'd still talk about everything either big or small from the greater troubles of their lives to the small details of the world surrounding them.

For instance in an event that happened during mid-August, Joan came home from Central Park with some news she wanted to share with John: that overnight, deep green hue of the leaves was lost.

Autumn was coming and the summer was starting to disappear. However, she realized something.

John had been dead for over half a year mid-August of 2004

Her husband was dead, however, her desire to share things with him was still there as well as all the memories they'd shared together all through their life. That desire could no longer be satisfied and all those memories could no longer be relived.

For example, when they were traveling together by air, John used to hold Joan's hand whenever the airplane landed.

Now that hand wasn't there anymore.

In its place was grief.

## In Joan's grief, she found herself swallowed by vortexes of memory.

After she realized John was dead truly, Joan could barely go out or do anything for a few minutes without constantly being reminded of him. She might be driving, walking or trying to live her life and then all of a sudden she starts to see something that would activate a flow of memories.

She could be passing a street of a friend which they have visited together, or a movie theatre where they have seen a movie years ago. However, in any case, because of the web that connected all her memories together, one memory leads to the other and then to another till her mind became painful.

Later on, Joan would name this "the vortex effect" of grief. Even before she gave it a name, she was aware of the effect it has on her and she tried her best to stop it from happening. She tried to avoid certain places that had a lot of memories of John and she tried to dedicate her mind on what she named "good lines of thinking." These were the memories that had nothing to with John and therefore did not pose any threats of leading to painful thoughts of John.

However, this was useless as everything eventually find its way back to grief.

For instance, while she was visiting her daughter at the hospital of Beth Israel North, Joan saw the remaining of a rose-patterned wallpaper border joined between the wall and the ceiling. This gave it a vintage style and she realized it must be a vestige of the 1960s back when the hospital was called Doctor's Hospital. That name fits into a lot of conversations and stories at the offices

of Vogue magazine where Joan was working at that time. She started thinking about that phase of her life before her encounter with John.

So far, so good.

Then she recalled a story of a sex worker who did an abortion at the Doctors' Hospital. She heard about that story at Vogue and it gave her the resource for her second novel, *Play It As It Lays*. After she finished writing that novel, she got a contract with Life magazine.

During this point in her memories, Joan was already on the verge of getting sunk into a vortex. As you may recall, her first column for Life magazine was written in Honolulu where she and her husband went to save their marriage. This memory was very painful to her, the reasons for this painful memory will be discussed in the following chapter.

## At the end of Joan's vortexes of memory were painful questions like "What if?"

During the late 1960s when Joan wrote her first column for Life magazine in Honolulu, she wanted to be in Saigon and didn't want to be in Honolulu. In that year, the Vietnam war was intense and she wanted to be where it was happening, covering one of the most significant stories of that time. Rather, she was told to write a short personal column while staying in a place where the majority of the people associate with tropical beach vacations.

The column seemed frivolous due to the fact of the magnitude of what was happening in the world. Adding insult to injury, the editor of the magazine sent reporters to Saigon, however, he only sent "the boys" as he called them. Joan felt frustrated and disgraced.

John had initially told her that this would happen. John tried to discourage her from signing the contract with Life magazine. While she was in Honolulu even after John died, she wished she had followed John's advice.

This takes us to the thought that troubled Joan whenever she remembers this memory. What if she had listened to John's advice? She didn't assume what would have happened, but she assumed that their lives would have been different.

In the mind of Joan, her choice to work for Life magazine symbolized a stage in her and John's life together. From that point, two different paths developed. One of that path was the one they'd actually taken. Also, on that path was the destination that was already established: the death of John on the 30<sup>th</sup> of December, 2003.

The other part was the one that was not taken which the result was unknown. Maybe the path didn't lead to John's cardiac arrest on the 30<sup>th</sup> of December. Maybe he would still be alive if she had followed this path. In that case, maybe she was somehow the cause of his death, a view that added a feeling of guilt to her grief.

If this thought seems so unreasonable, that is exactly the point: we can see an illustration of the "magical thinking" the title which Joan referred her memoir to. During her state of grief, she was thinking irrationally, therefore, in her words, she defines these thoughts as a form of "derangement."

In the following chapter. We will see that "derangement" went over her thoughts about the past as it also distorted her ideas of the present.

## Joan's irrational forms of thinking led to her denial of the reality of John's death.

Somewhere between late February or early March of 2004 two months after the death of her husband, Joan finally followed the advice that many of her friends had been suggesting. She started clearing John's closet which is an act she saw as one of the rites people go through to deal with their grief.

She started with a shelf of John's outdoor clothing which didn't have a lot of emotional meaning to her. He wore them when he went out for a walk and usually he went on this walk alone. Joan stopped after she finished with the T-shirts and sweatshirts.

She decided to try again after a few weeks later but by starting with John's shoes this time around. However, she was unable to go through with this and she stopped in her tracks by a single thought that she couldn't throw those shoes away and John would want them to return home.

At that point, she quickly became aware that this thought was just a delusion. However, that didn't prevent it from having power over her. She was still unable to get rid of those shoes.

This takes us to the other form of magical thinking that Joan found herself involved in the year after the death of John. She did not only think that she could have done something in the past that would have stopped John from dying, but she also had hope in the present that she could still do something to reverse it or ensure that his death never happened.

This is another example. Months after John's cardiac arrest, Joan was unable to read his obituaries. Reading them gave his death a reality in her mind. Through this line of reasoning, not reading the obituaries would make his death remain unreal.

With all of her irrational thinking about what she could have done or what she could still do to reverse John's death, Joan was unable to accept and process the loss of her husband. Due to this, she continued her grief in the following year as well as the magical thinking associated with it.

Joan's grief and magical thinking were completely gone at the point where she wrote her memoir. Although, she still couldn't bring herself to disposing of John's shoes, however, the feelings and thoughts of it had lost some power over her. She had found a limited way of closure.

## Joan suddenly found a way to move forward.

In the end, Joan found a limited closure in a way that was both predictable and unpredictable which is reading.

This was predictable because Joan was both a writer and an ardent reader who had always used books for her understanding since she was a child. Also, this was unpredictable because most of the writing that has helped her the most wasn't from the work of literature, psychology or self-help.

It was the autopsy report of John.

Along with John's emergency room records, Joan also got this report a year after his death. The enveloped that had all the information got delayed in the mail due to her state of shock and she had written a wrong address on the request form.

In the document she received, she got to know that John had stenosis during the time of his cardiac arrest which is an abnormal narrowing on the left anterior descending artery also called LAD. This is a part of the coronary arteries that supply blood to the heart. If the LAD'S blood flow is extremely constricted by stenosis, the heart will no longer have enough blood to pump and it will stop working. The stenosis of John's LAD was very severe and the artery had narrowed by 95%.

John's family had a history of heart problems and John himself has had it in the past. Actually, in 1987, a cardiologist had noticed a crucial issue with John's LAD when an angiogram showed that it was blocked by 90%. The cardiologist made a comment that would be revelatory 16 years later after he detected this blockage. The cardiologist discussed the LAD with John and he told him, "We call it the widow-maker, pal." This means that the risk of death caused by chronic problems with the LAD is really high that it even had a morbid nickname.

From this information, Joan came to the conclusion that through a stroke of disaster, John inherited this defective heart from his parents. His heart was destined to stop and there was nothing anyone could have done even Joan.

That late realization didn't remove her sadness of losing John. The loss remained a loss for her, irrespective of what caused it. However, her knowing that there was nothing she could have done to prevent it made her forgive herself of feeling responsible for his death and this stopped her from feeling guilty about it.

**In order for Joan to seek explanations for her experiences with grief, Joan turned to psychological and medical literature.**

The months after John's death, Joan read a bit before she got John's autopsy report.

Joan read various range of works from psychology and medicine in addition to the different works of literature, poetry and practical guides on grieving (most of which she found unhelpful) she has read. Her readings consisted classic of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein to more contemporary articles in scientific journals and medical manuals that talked about grief.

She found the latter works to be the most useful, not because it taught her new things, but because they confirmed what she herself had already experienced. It also gave her a sense of validation and reassured her that she was not imagining things that are not there. The symptoms of grief she was experiencing were normal. They consisted of a feeling of shock, numbness, and denial about what happened.

However, she learned a new thing from The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy. In that book, she got to know about the two different types of grief; "normal" and "pathological." The symptoms of normal grief were as awful as the ones she experienced, however, it slowly decreased. The symptoms of pathological grief lingered as Joan had experienced too.

She also learned that one of the likely causes of pathological grief was an unusual amount of dependency among the griever and the deceased. Therefore, it made her wonder if her relationship and her marriage to John could be considered as such.

Another likely cause is a disruption in the grieving process of the griever which can be caused by "circumstantial factors," like the delay of the deceased funeral or an illness in the family.

These factors happened in Joan's life. As we already know, Quintana was extremely ill during the time of John's death in which her illness led to the delay of John's funeral. However, there is also another thing you don't know yet. On the day of John's funeral, Quintana was hospitalized again and this time was more severe than before. Feeling sick, she had fallen and hit her head on the ground. Her brain was suffering from internal bleeding and swelling in different areas. Both of her pupils were fixed and dilated which is a common symptom of brain death.

There was a high chance of Joan losing her daughter a few months after the death of her husband.

## Joan learned the limits of her agency through the medical troubles her daughter faced.

During the time Quintana fell and got injured on her head, she and her husband were about to leave the Los Angeles International Airport. They had just landed there from New York, arriving in California from a well-deserved vacation to Malibu. After the death of John and Quintana's different health issues; Quintana and her husband wanted to start their lives again.

However, now, instead of them starting their lives again; their lives were in limbo again as well as Joan's life. Immediately Joan heard the news about her daughter, she flew out to California as soon as she could. When she got to the hospital, she saw Quintana laying unconscious in the hospital bed at the UCLA Medical Center, the first words Joan said to Quintana were "You're safe. I'm here" which were similar to reassurance and promise.

In order to keep to that promise she made, Joan wanted to keep a close eye and monitor the medical staff that was attending to her daughter. This was what she did previously when Quintana had been hospitalized in New York when she had a pulmonary embolism. There, Joan kept asking the doctors and nurses various questions, reminders, and double-guesses thinly veiled as suggestions.

On one of such occasions, she recalled thinking the following words regarding the treatment that was given to Quintana: "It's not brain surgery." Meaning it was not that difficult.

This impression encouraged her to interfere on behalf of her daughter. As when John was being rushed to the hospital, a few minutes before she got to know about his death, Joan felt capable of managing the circumstance. Indeed, such as various other successful friends and acquaintances, she had a feeling that she was capable of managing any situation. It basically required pulling the right strings in the right ways.

It wasn't brain surgery.

However, now it was exactly the brain surgery Quintana needed. This was outside the scope of her knowledge. She could not even recognize the parts of the brain the doctors were talking about when they said words like "parietal" and "temporal" around. The language of neurobiology was like a foreign language to her. In order for her to overcome this language barrier, she tried reading a medical textbook, however, it was useless because the language still remained unclear to her.

She had gotten to her limit and she understood what that meant: she could not always keep her daughter safe and she could not always control every circumstance.

Some aspects of life were beyond her control.

## Life continues

If you were hoping for Joan's story to have a happy ending, you are going to be disappointed. Just as Joan herself puts it, her story isn't like the movie where the death of one's husband is basically "the credit sequence for a new life". A new life where the wife of the deceased realizes that it is actually possible to "love more than one person."

As we have seen from the story of Joan, there was more to Joan's marriage than to love alone. Also, there was more to her husband's death than the loss of just a single person. Her loss was also the loss of their relationship. Her relationship with her husband, in turn, was bound up in a

thick web of memories and habits which is the life they once shared together and all of a sudden they no longer shared.

As time went by, Joan realizes that those memories and habits do not go completely away, they started to fade. This is also the case for the sense of loss that comes with the death of a loved one, it also fades, however; this does not feel like a relief to Joan. After all, it's based on the thread that connects her and John together. The more the thread loses, the more Joan also loses her vivid sense of him. This also feels like another loss.

And so life goes on, not only with the death of a loved one and not only with life as a whole but with the world as well. Since Joan was a child, she has always known this and she learned it from her grandfather who was a geologist.

Joan's grandfather taught her that, after all, change is the only constant thing in life and change entails destruction. Either by the sudden shock of an earthquake or the gradual but relentless force of an erosion; nothing remains forever. The mountains crumble, the waterfalls dry up and even the islands drown beneath the sea.

With the immediate death of John that happened due to his cardiac arrest, a metaphorical earthquake took John's life away from Joan and the erosion started its work on what she had left of him. Joan did not find relief in the parallel between what happened to her husband and what happens constantly in nature.

Rather, there was just a cold, difficult reality in which she tried to come to terms with that John's life is ended and Joan's life continues. In order for her to move past it, she has to say goodbye and let him go.

If there's any consolation to be established in this, it's basically knowing that John would support her to do the same.

## The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion Book Review

During the period of one year between the years 2003 and 2004: Joan Didion went through one personal tragedy after another: she experienced the death of her husband and the various,

life-threatening health issues that are daughter Quintana was faced with. Joan felt a great agony over the things that happened to her. However, these events taught her various lessons such as the nature of loss and grief, the limits of her capability to control situations and the mutability of life in general.

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