

The year of magical thinking

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Is life real, or is it just a comfortable illusion? In fact we are quite happy to believe it is an illusion. Our lives are mostly conducted by habit. Habit is the cocoon which we weave to protect ourselves from the ragged edges of reality. Life is something we are used to, and the most sincere form of happiness is the orderly succession of one ordinary moment after the other. Joan Didion and her husband Dunne are living a charmed life. An apartment in Manhattan. Visits to Paris and California. Influential friends, exciting work, both literary and commercial¹. Never mind that their daughter is hospitalized with a very severe flue with unexpected complications, it does not seem to have bothered them deeply, as they were preparing for dinner. The fire is kindled, the wine bottle opened, and the inconsequential chatter of her husband, be it on the present bottle of wine or the book on the First World War he is happening to be reading. The river of ordinary moments flow unobstructed, as it has almost always done, when there is a sudden rupture.

Can death be instant? Maybe in the middle of a nuclear explosion, but otherwise surely death is not such a clear-cut affair. One thing leading to another in an unhurried orderly fashion. A blockage of the heart, the blood ceasing to flow, the cells being deprived of oxygen. It takes about five minutes of oxygen deprivation to permanently damage brain-cells, but before that loss of consciousness must have occurred. Anyway the pain must be felt, the desperate struggle to get air must have followed. But none of this. Only the slumped body on the table. Then the uncontrolled fall onto the floor in an effort of revival. The chipped tooth, the blood on the floor, but that is a latter issue. The call for the ambulance. The attempts of resuscitation, the apartment temporarily being turned into a make-shift emergency ward. All the tricks are tried. Injections, electric shocks. Removal to the hospital, the hapless wife following along in a second ambulance. Is this all real? is this part of the bargain we make with life. One ordinary moment after the other. Those are hardly ordinary moments, but the habits of life will treat them as such. 'A pretty cool costumer' is the verdict. Sure, habits survive. The habit to function, to fill out form, to do what is expected. Grief does not strike as a bullet. There is paralysis, a sense of unbelief. This is not really happening. Life is but an illusion. Sometimes I wonder whether we are not all solipsists, and that only at the moment of facing death - our own death, to be precise; do we realize that the world is not of our own making.

A long time after the event Joan Didion expected her husband to return. This is pretty irrational, yet it makes perfect sense. We are creatures of habit, and nothing upsets us more than to have our habits disrupted. Love is not a matter of passion and carnal

¹ Their involvement with script writing in Hollywood is well-known. Apart from the occasional glamour and the welcome check, it must be somewhat humiliating, if not openly acknowledged, as testified by being present at the preview of the trashy movie 'True confessions' which I just happened to watch on TV prior to reading the book

desire, or at least not primarily so. Love is a matter of sharing habits. The two of them having spent a remarkably large fraction of their 40 years of married life actually together. Literally so, in the sense of sharing physical location. This allows you to share your stream of consciousness, or at least the running dialogues you have with yourself. And this is what makes the loss so physically palpable. The very disruption of your interior monologues. They having no other monologue to interact with.

There is not only the death of a husband, but there is also the catastrophic neurological events threatening to destroy their daughter. No sooner has she recovered from her flu and pneumonia, and only thanks to modern medicine, when she is hit with bursting arteries in her brain. Survival seems more of an exotic possibility than anything else. Thus during the summer the author spends time with her daughter in Los Angeles. This is maternal duty of course. But could there ever be a sweeter duty? Or a better distraction? And a distraction it is, horrible as that may sound. The fate of the daughter being intertwined with the fate of her husband, the latter event by being enlarged, loses some of its sharp focus.

Whom do you love most, your husband or your child? There may be politically correct responses to this. Or at least there used to be obvious ones. Anyway, the loves clearly are different, and hard, not to say impossible to compare. But sometimes the incomparable has to be compared. There is only so much room, and your thoughts follow a stream, and at each moment, ordinary or not, they have to take a decision. Close as you may be to your children, it is a closeness not of habit but of decision. The tragedy of her daughter, a newly wed woman not yet forty is clearly objectively far more serious than the untimely death of the husband. The latter had indeed lived through his biblical three score of years and ten, and would without modern medicine and luck probably have been dead fifteen years ago just like his father expiring in his fifties. He was living on borrowed time, the actual event of death being in the nature of an accident, but his eventual cardiac arrest being foredoomed. Could there have been a better way to go? In the midst of the ordinary, so swift indeed that you do not even notice. (Or do we all notice? Maybe there is no such thing as a swift painless death, which for all intents and purposes is identical with subjective immortality?) And the fact that it was ordained should also make it easier to accept, unlike a blind accident, which strikes the unmarked. Yet the death of her husband overshadows the crisis of her daughter. But the daughter is not part of the most intimate habits, and as such in the nature of an outsider. The catastrophes of the outer world cannot begin to compete with even minor disturbances of our habits.

There are flash-backs. This is inevitable as well as welcome. A life presented chronologically and systematically will, no matter how meticulously documented, induce a sense of emptiness. Is this all? Is this really all, is there nothing more? A life recalled episodically has the opposite effect. Rather than to limit it suggests. Just like those medieval portrait paintings which in the background present tantalizing glimpses of a landscape beyond. So we are treated to common memories. Life in California. Brentwood. I lived there too in 85-86, timewise we overlapped. The carefree life of the 70's are recalled, and once again my own memories of youth in the States are sympathetically evoked. Manhattan. I know the locations, I know the names, I too have lived there. It is to some extent shared territory, shared time. But there is a limit to how much you want to share. Dunne was genetically

cursed by a bad heart. There is some truth to the biblical adage that punishments are being perpetrated generation after generation. Some of us are not dealt the best hands of cards.

Clinical information can soothe as well as disturb. The failings of the body belong to a parallel universe, one of which we have no control. This would be fine would not those parallel universes sometimes intersect at ordinary moments. Medicine is one of the flimsiest of sciences, yet by its very subject matter it brings home that the universe is not of our making. The clinical fact that pertains to us is a fact that not only kicks back at you, but more to the point kicks back at you were it really hurts. If your inequalities do not line up in proper order, this is frustrating, but if worst comes to worst you can simply ignore it and turn to other things. Life is wonderful and contains so many distractions. But from your own lack of health you cannot walk away. You cannot choose another health. You are stuck, you are trapped, and the ordinary moment ceases to be a moment at all.

Yet, even when confronted with the objectivity of clinical findings. And the author does dip into it whenever there is an opportunity, habits are deeply ingrained, especially the habit of magical thinking. Magical thinking meaning that after all your life is a script that you make up, and when you run into problems, surely there must be ways of revision. Maybe the regression into magical thinking is the defining quality of the madness of grief, the only madness which is socially acceptable. Grief is involuntary, unlike mourning. Grief can literally kill, and it has. The book is about grief. Grief at the loss of a husband, not about worry about a child. The latter is, as we have noted, just a distraction. Worry you may chose to do, but not grieve. The extent of grief, and what it excludes lies not within your jurisdiction.

And magical thinking also means looking for cues, for patterns, because the script of life surely has some meaning. She finds many instances which in retrospect can be interpreted as forebodings. Dunne finding his life as an author meaningless, having produced nothing of value. His desire to fly to Paris earlier in the fall, his feeling that it might be his last chance. Surely his death was ordained, and he knew it coming.

A year goes. A year that shadows the year that preceeded it. For each date the author tries to recall what she was doing on that date with her husband one year ago. Then suddenly the dates run out. A year ago her husband ws already dead. Thus it is impossible to continue this life of two parallel tracks, which maybe another defining feature of grief. The pathology evens out and the loss is accepted. It might be simply out of exhaustion, because by not accepting the loss, by not really accepting that there is just one track, the hope of regaining is going to be extinguished. To accept loss means an active act of killing. Of killing the only remaining chance of reunion. But in the end this final act is performed. It is usually thought of as a decisive act of recovery. Of regaining sanity, or relinquish magical thinking.

So the author does it. She writes a book, puts it behind, continues her life, by making it into one of different habits, different ordinary moments. The main thing is to rebuild the illusion of life being run according to our desires. That we write the script and follow it through.