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Vanishing Points:
Memoirs of Loss and Renewal

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live." –Joan Didion

Wave. Imagine the unimaginable. Vacation day, summertime at the beach, begins in its usual rhythm, the sun rising, waking up gradually to waves whispering in the distance. Listening to familiar gulls and insects, Martin's casual snoring, my own drowsiness distracted by faint pangs of hunger, workaday to-do lists are supplanted by alternatives as deliciously sculpted as a bento box of sushi, fresh from the sea. Falling back to a half-sleep, hugging Martin's warm nakedness, I hear the waves' susurrus change to a growl, lower and louder, closing in. Eyes opening now as "waves not receding or dissolving. Closer now. Brown and gray. Brown or gray. Waves rushing"—Hokusai's Great Wave but darker—"closer, closer. . . All these waves now, charging, churning. Suddenly furious. Suddenly menacing" (5) and we are swept away. The beloved dies, the storyteller survives in this tsunami of grief.

I am here braiding three strands of narrative: the idyllic what-I-did-on-my-summer vacation story; the way Martin and I always slept, throughout 63 years of marriage; and the beginning of Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave*, an intense, searing beautiful account of inconceivable horror. On December 26, 2004 in the twinkling of an eye a tsunami off the coast of Sri Lanka swept away the author's husband, her two young sons, and her parents. *Wave* renders the absence of the loved ones, as Abraham Verghese explains,

“in such a beautiful way that what was lost emerges as a new life-form, one whose flesh and sinew are memory, sorrow, and undying love” [*Wave* book jacket].

In grief, we look for stories to help us survive, and as models that will enable us to tell and interpret our own stories. Deraniyagala’s story is extreme—in the erasure of three generations of family at once; in her understandable wish to kill herself, at 40; in the seven years it took her to find calmness, “to rest with my disbelief about what happened, and with the impossible truth of my loss” (203). She concludes this brief, bone-thin book, “I am not whirling anymore, I am no longer cradled by shock. . . .But I have learned that I can only recover myself when I keep [my family] near” by imagining their presence in “Our life, as it would be today” (226-7). That hardly anyone except bombing or earthquake victims can match Deraniyagala’s story in extent in no way diminishes others’ grief for their own losses, of parents, spouses, children. Loss is a tsunami, whatever the scale.

Martin’s last day. *I’ll try to tell this story as simply as I can. June 20, 2021, the longest day of the year, dawned especially bright. I slipped out of bed to go for a swim; year round I swim laps for an hour a day—a quiet time to meditate, and to write in my head to the rhythm of the strokes. Martin looked so peaceful that I decided to let him sleep. Lately, lacking energy to swim, he’d supplanted laps with the hot tub—and after all, it was Father’s Day.*

The day before had involved a seven hour roadtrip—Needham MA-Dobbs Ferry NY—with our son Laird and daughter-in-law Sara, to visit our older son. After the onset of glioblastoma and surgery the year before, Bard, 58, MIT PhD in computer science, had in the twinkling of an eye lost control of the left side of their body, their profession, and much of their ability to function in the world. Yet this was our best visit during the three years of Bard’s illness. Bard could then walk with a cane, their ironic wit intact—“I can do all sorts of fancy higher math, but I can’t add two plus two.” With gusto Bard devoured ample slices of the Old Fashioned Chocolate Cake with “luxurious chocolate frosting” that Martin had insisted on making all by himself (usually we cooked as a team) to celebrate our grandchild’s high school graduation.

There was enough cake left for Martin's bedtime snack, augmented by two World Peace cookies. With the onset of Martin's oral cancer eight years earlier, we told each other of our love every day, through four increasingly dramatic surgeries and, ultimately, radiation. With that treatment concluded, diffuse large B-cell leukemia popped up in two soft lumps under his left arm, treated with chemo and more radiation. "How old are you?" asked the doctor. "84," replied Martin. "You'll live to be 94!" And Martin—who never lied—began telling me I was perfect. We both knew this wasn't true, but I was perfect for him. Secure in these messages, we had gone to bed.

After swimming I called Martin from the pool. No answer. I called him again on the walk home and again the answering machine chirped, "If you are neither a politician nor a solicitor, leave a message and we'll call you back." I opened the door, trilling "Martin," to find him still in bed, face down, motionless, so close to the edge that I feared he would fall off. I touched his warm arm, but when I began to rub the back of his neck—a favorite wake-up caress—and he didn't respond I began to imagine the unbelievable. He wasn't breathing, I couldn't revive him, he was dead.

Dynamics of Reader Response. I have spent two years since Martin's death, and three years since the onset of my son Bard's glioblastoma—they died a scant three months ago—looking for memoirs of loss that speak to me in a conversation of life-affirming strength and perspective. There are innumerable narratives of loss—not only of people and animals, but of physical and mental functioning, support systems, residence, culture, habitat, country, anything that matters. I have sought works addressing the loss of a spouse or adult child that most directly parallel my own experiences and values. These also have to be congenial to my own ways of storytelling. As with Deraniyagala's spare story, every word a gut punch or an exaltation, I would rather say less and trust the readers to fill in the blanks than to clog a story with surplus information. I was born into mid century modernism, its soul expressed through minimalism and clean lines in literary aesthetics as well as in furniture. Although I have throughout life remained true to this first love, I'm happy now to see its revival amongst the millennials and Gen Z; style and substance have transcended generations.

In this essay I want to explore—in conjunction with telling my own stories—not only how the authors dealt in their lives with the processes of losing and renewal, but how they wrote about these, how they constructed their intimate—because grief is always intimate--stories for an audience of strangers. When I read memoirs about situations analogous to my own, I instinctively make comparisons, just as cartoonist Roz Chast's reader of newspaper obituaries does on seeing column captions, "Two years younger than you," "Twelve years older than you," "Exactly your age." Don't all readers do that?

To understand the loss is also to appreciate the found, the familiar. Before the crisis occurred life was one way, whether ordinary or extraordinary, mundane or exciting, reasonably predictable, often happy, sometimes beautiful. After the crisis or trauma life was changed, changed utterly. Although the authors' aims are varied, all are trying to make sense of things that don't make sense--events unexpected and unwanted, situations and phenomena unfamiliar, unsettling, as terrifying as tsunamis. Accustomed to being in charge of their lives, they're now plunged into a maelstrom they can't predict and can't control. What they can control, as professional writers, is their writing. Through presenting the principals—the missing persons and lost relationships, themselves as both narrators and characters, a meaningful supporting cast, talking and acting in specific contexts--authors can control their stories. Even if they can't control their lives, their writing can impose order, structure, characterization, point of view, and interpretation on the chaos that inevitably accompanies loss.

I also want to like the authors I'm in conversation with, not only as writers, but because this subject is so intimate, as people whose authorial personae, inviting and open, imply that I'd enjoy knowing them in person. Since Martin died and I am feeling vulnerable and alone more often than I'd like, this has become an important criterion. I want to read their works as Eudora Welty's mother read Dickens, "in the spirit in which she would elope with him." Writers on grief whom I find congenial illustrate un sentimentally how they coped with loss, coming to terms with grief in ways that enabled them to be more than mere survivors; to prevail over the loss rather than merely to endure it; to function, sometimes

with happiness as well as sorrow; to find some resolution, even peace, and not to blame themselves for what they could not help. They have done the best they could.

Illness narratives are intrinsically dramatic: will the central character live or die—and under what circumstances? Is there hope of a reprieve? At the outset the drama (even when we know the person will die) resides in the sick person, as does reader sympathy. In a grief narrative, written during or after the loss, the emphasis and the sympathy may shift to the narrator, who is often the caregiver, also in pain and suffering; often worn down with anxiety and labor, and in need of respite. Grief does not necessarily ennoble the sufferer, yet grief narratives can be models of healing, rather than poised on the precipice of self-pity. I want to believe that the writers I'm conversing with here would understand and be sympathetic to my particular loss, instead of being totally preoccupied with their own—a fantasy, I know. Yet if their relationship to their beloved resembles mine in substance and also in style, literary and human, then the work speaks memorably to me.

So I am talking in this conversation to contemporary narrators whose works and personae I appreciate and admire, even love, four authors—that's enough. In addition to Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave*, these include the following. A memoir of caregiving and anticipatory grief, Karen Babine's *All the Wild Hungers: A Season of Cooking and Cancer* (2019) and two memoirs of beloved spouses and their deaths. Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) cuts to the heart at the outset: "*Life changes fast./Life changes in the instant./You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends*" (1) and Calvin Trillin's loving, lively portrait of his lovely, lively wife, *About Alice* (2006).

Bard's Glioblastoma. But before other voices chime in, I want to tell you my own story of anticipatory mourning. With a terminal disease, grief begins with the diagnosis, not with the death. Three fleeting springs ago Bard was stopped short by seizures, ominous signals of either a stroke or a brain tumor. When surgery revealed glioblastoma we knew there could be no good outcome. Martin had just completed seven

years of treatment for recurrent oral cancer (an irony of disease, he never smoked!) followed by two more years of chemo and radiation for lymphoma, and we were hoping for infinite remission. As a family, we are hopeful, but glioblastoma offers no hope.

I did not know at the onset of Bard's glioblastoma how to stop dwelling in terror of the known— a 12-14 month life expectancy, a less than 1% survival rate after five years—and of the unknown--everything else. I did not know then how to cope with overwhelming sorrow and pity for Bard and, I admit, for myself. I did not know then how to write about grief, how to write a single sentence about this sentence of death for I had never before experienced such pain, such loss of power.

I did know I could not write about Bard's illness from their perspective. Nor could I write about it from the viewpoint of Vicki, Bard's wife, who with wisdom and unwavering compassion oversaw the complicated medical treatment that required hospitals, rehab, nurses, therapists, aides, a ramp, a stair elevator, several wheelchairs, lifts, mammoth quantities of medicine, and continual negotiation with insurance, social security, and ultimately hospice—even this list is exhausting. A year after the first surgery, the removal of a non-malignant cyst in same site left Bard unable to stand up without help. They couldn't be left alone, ever. So, living four hours away and unable to be on the scene except for short visits, I did the only thing I could do, and provided an aide 12 hours a night for the rest of Bard's life. If I were ever to write a memoir of Bard, I would concentrate on the healthy person I knew and will always love.

Recipe, Part 1. To reduce the tension I maintained my usual hour-long daily swims, took long walks with friends (Martin's energy was failing), and found a therapist for monthly Zoom conversations. As a writer I knew that for my own survival and for Martin's sake I had to write in order to emerge from the valley of the shadow. I needed to find a good story, exuberant rather than grieving, that would engage myself and thus my readers in a positive, passionate life. Fortunately, before Bard got sick I had submitted a proposal for *Recipe*—true stories about the culture of food and cooking, identity and hospitality, famine and feasts — for Bloomsbury Press's Object Lessons series. As announced, these are quirky, “beautifully designed books about the hidden lives of ordinary things, the emphasis throughout on lucid writing,

imagination, and brevity” [OL web site] My proposal had been accepted, so I decided to write *Recipe* as a breakwater against Bard’s anticipated death. The loss was already so profound that I feared it would bleed through into the pristine printed pages, but I vowed that not a scintilla of grief would surface in that book.

Technically *Recipe* is not a grief memoir, nor is any other work written on a subject overtly unrelated to grief, however soothing the process of writing it. Indeed, numerous books have doubtless been written as the author’s literary therapy, although readers cannot know this unless the authors themselves or other commentators, perhaps biographers, supply the information. Had I known when Bard became ill how to write a memoir of anticipatory grief, I might have attempted this, but I had not yet read the work that now speaks to me most clearly from this perspective, Karen Babine’s *All the Wild Hungers: A Season of Cooking and Cancer*.

All the Wild Hungers. In this memoir of her 65-year-old mother’s seven-month treatment for embryonal rhabdomyosarcoma, a cabbage-sized uterine tumor, Babine concentrates on cooking as healing for her mother, herself, her family. Cooking, she says, “for me, is a mode of self-sufficiency that is also about fitting into a network of a family and a place. These days, I find myself reverting to the old ways of cooking, of my mother’s pot roast and boiled potatoes and hotdish, searching through my recipe boxes and cookbooks and the internet for anything she will eat. Comfort food is part of it, meat and potatoes that remind my mother of good things” (72-73). Writing about comfort food is in itself comforting. Babine’s narrative of sustenance bears witness to the processes of both cooking and suffering, inviting her readers to share the food, the hope, the grief, and the comfort over the kitchen table.

Babine’s language and her meditative stance are calming, meditative, spiritual, as befits a writer of natural history (*Water and What We Know*) as well as of human history. When treatment falters, she says, “I need the tension of a spatula through a cake batter. I need the action on the surface of a simmer. I need the chop. Days like these, I need to slow down, to take the hours required to make broth and stock,

simmering mushrooms, Parmesan rinds, beef bones into something wonderful and useful” (105-6). As a cancer memoir with a tenuous outcome, *All the Wild Hungers* could be read as a story of caregiving and hope, for with sensory precision Babine’s activity, like her narrative, keeps the fear, anger, frustration at bay. In sustaining her entire family, she nourishes her readers as well. The narrative ends in June, with new life coming, in the vegetable garden that will replenish the larder, and in the family, with a baby due in August. Yet as Babine says, “A lot can happen in three months: my mother went from cancer free to a cabbage-sized tumor in three months; we watched the fear of miscarriage lessen as my sister crossed from her first trimester into her second. . . . (160-61). If my own son’s glioblastoma had anticipated a more optimistic outcome, I might have interpreted the ending of *All the Wild Hungers* as positive, but through the lens of my own anticipatory grief I read Babine’s elegant, elegiac language as presaging her mother’s death, which in fact occurred the year before the book was published but is not mentioned. A lot can happen in a short time.

Recipe, Part 2. *Recipe* is a work kindred in spirit but minus the medical undertow. I wrote it diving deep into the most delicious research I’ve ever done—mouth-watering cookbooks, food blogs, culinary memoirs, food histories, restaurant menus. Who could resist Marcel Desauliniers’ description of his invention, the legendary Death by Chocolate seven layer torte: “layers of moist chocolate cake, dark chocolate ganache, crunchy chocolate meringue, and an airy chocolate mousse, then coated in a glaze of dark chocolate and served on a pool of chocolate sauce with milk chocolate ice cream, topped with a white chocolate truffle dusted with white chocolate powder” (*Recipe* 120). Even though such sensory indulgence was offset by the UN’s somber reports on world hunger and the Food Empowerment Project’s analysis of “Child Labor and Slavery in the Chocolate Industry,” *Recipe* was deeply satisfying to write, with profound infusions of pleasure offsetting my ongoing grief. As usual throughout our lifetime Martin, himself a distinguished writer and meticulous editor, read every word of every chapter, in multiple drafts.

Had he lived three weeks longer he'd have been as delighted as I was to receive the editor's email, which began "I've now finished reading *Recipe* and I just loved it. . . . I don't have any real edits for you. . . . This is the first *Object Lessons* book that my son (now 10) has asked me to read to him before bed, night after night. I would read sections and then he would get so excited to cook with me the next day (Chris Schaberg to LZB email 7/14/21).

The Year of Magical Thinking. Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) begins where Babine ends: "*Life changes fast./Life changes in the instant./You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends*" (1). These are the motifs of the brave, brief, passionate memoir that speaks most closely to my own experience in substance and in style. Didion's eloquent elegy addresses the sudden death of her husband and intimate literary collaborator of forty years, John Gregory Dunne, and the dramatic, lingering illness of her adult daughter, before and after his fatal coronary at the dinner table on December 30, 2003. On Christmas morning their daughter, Quintana, 37, had been hospitalized with flu which "had exploded into pneumonia and septic shock." In an induced coma, on life support when her father died, she was released from the hospital a month later. Two months after that, anticipating good health in California, she collapsed at the LAX airport with a massive hematoma requiring six hours of brain surgery.

Nine months later Didion, suffering still the doubly intense shock of her husband's sudden death and her daughter's protracted illness, began to interpret this unimaginable experience: "This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends. . . about life itself" (7).

There are so many correspondences between Didion's and my respective lives and traumatic events—our husbands' sudden deaths after long, sustaining marriages while our adult children were in mortal peril—that I'm tempted to make this a string of quotations from Didion, each one followed by *Amen*. In anticipation of re-reading *The Year of Magical Thinking*—my first edition is personally autographed “For Martin” in Didion's firm black marking pen—I made an 892-word (and counting) list of what I lost when Martin died. Martin's professional legacy survives, as a social psychologist, social work professor, and prolific researcher, author, and editor of numerous publications on theory and practice of primary prevention of social problems. Typical of academics, Martin's scholarship, including a mammoth four volume encyclopedia, is transmitted in print, online, and in the research of his numerous collaborators and students.

But Martin's personal legacy rests most intimately with me alone. Didion's fragmented, elliptical narrative illustrates in language and structure her observation that “Grief has no distance,”—I would add, in time or space or psychological separation from the loved one. “Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life” (27). For most of our life together I rarely cried. Even during stressful times Martin, serene of temperament and philosophy, could provide a calming perspective--“It's not you, it's your role!” And after he escaped at 54 from a brain tumor that turned out not to be malignant we measured everything according to a scale of life and death and not much amounted to more than a hill of beans.

With Martin's death two years ago a seismic shift occurred. Something, often innocuous, triggers the wave. A couple, holding hands while walking, as we did, always. (A friend says we held hands while we were swimming in his pool, but I dispute this.) Now that I've started dreaming ordinary dreams again, waking up after a dream and turning to tell it to Martin on the adjacent pillow, now vacant. We were together so much of the time even during our professorial careers, and in retirement as Didion says, “twenty-four hours a day. . . . I could not count the times during the average day when something would

come up that I needed to tell him. This impulse did not end with his death. What ended was the possibility of response” (194). I can’t tell whether my tears come from the recognition of parallel intimacies between Didion’s marriage and mine or sadness for their loss. I have no regrets, none, about our marriage even though my parents, their lukewarm Christianity at the boil, disowned me as I was leaving New Hampshire for England, to marry Martin (a grad student at Edinburgh) in exile: “As Martin’s wife you’ll be the victim of anti-Semitism for the rest of your life. If you marry him, we will have nothing to do with you, or your husband, or any children you may have.” No tears then or during the years afterward when they (and they alone) made good on this threat.

I keep expecting the tears, however high or shallow the wave of grief, to subside over time, but they haven’t. The strand of grief is now woven into what I assume is the fiber of my being, so I just let the tears fall and then re-join the day, generally on an up beat note. Again Didion supplies the paradoxical joy of recognizing an analogous experience even amidst the sorrow of the loss. Two instances will suffice. John’s last birthday gift to Joan, with “twenty-five nights left to live” occurs as he is reading a “complicated sequence” from her novel *A Book of Common Prayer* “to see how something worked technically.” He looks at her and says “Goddamn . . . Don’t ever tell me again you can’t write. That’s my birthday present to you’ . . . the birthday present no one else could give me.” Martin gave me comparable gifts, for with a critical eye and generous heart he read every word of every work of mine in manuscript, sometimes many times over until I got it right. “I remember tears coming to my eyes,” says Didion, “I feel them now” (166), as do I when I remember Martin loving, in the final version, every word of *Recipe*, practically dancing to the rhythm of our favorite sentence: “Chocolate can be . . . curled swirled cracked stacked crumbled jumbled chipped chopped dripped dropped. . . “ (114). What you are reading here is the first manuscript I’ve submitted—with trepidation-- in my whole life that Martin hasn’t read; there is no substitute for that depth of historical intelligence.

Didion's understanding of marriage expresses my own. She and her husband were, she says, "equally incapable of imagining the reality of life without the other. . . . Marriage is memory, marriage is time," and "also, paradoxically, the denial of time. For forty years I saw myself through John's eyes. I did not age." Ever since I myself was actually twenty-nine I have always felt as if twenty-nine was my benchmark age. By that time Martin and I both had our doctorates, a comfortable house, two healthy young sons, and I was gestating my first major book, *Doctor Spock: Biography of a Conservative Radical*. Imagine my pleasure, then, when Didion continues: "This year for the first time since I was twenty-nine I saw myself through the eyes of others. This year I realized that my image of myself was of someone significantly younger" (197). Twenty-nine! Exactly! Martin's aesthetic honesty kept my clothing as elegant as my writing. Our major disagreements were over his utilitarian wardrobe which he was loath to expand ("I have a sweater!"), but he insisted on shopping with me for pretty clothes, and would tell me "If a dress made me look fat. As the years went by, he delighted in asserting that I was beautiful, and that I grew more beautiful with age. So when Martin died, for the first time since I was twenty-nine I too understood with a shock that my self-image, like Didion's, was lamentably out of time, out of date.

It would be logical here, as an analogue to my son's invasion by brain cancer, to address Didion's tribute to her daughter, *Blue Nights*, written five years posthumously, as well as her discussion of Quintana's harrowing illness that permeates *The Year of Magical Thinking*. But I cannot do this. It's too soon.

About Alice. It also took Calvin ("Bud") Trillin five years after the death of Alice, his wife of 36 years, to write *About Alice*, eight brief chapters so full of understated wit, delicious anecdotes, and love that every spouse—not only myself—would hunger for such a tribute. I'm responding to this book not by comparing autobiographical analogues of grief as I did with Didion, but reading it instead as the demonstration of valued partnership in marriage, parenthood ("I couldn't imagine trusting anyone else to be involved in raising our girls" 62), work (Alice was a writing program specialist at CUNY, glamorous and gifted), and

cancer support, particularly of youthful cancer patients at Paul Newman's Hole-in-the-Wall Gang camp in Ashford, CT. But *About Alice* is above all a celebration of the dynamics of a long love affair which does not end when one partner dies.

We see Alice in the jacket photo through Trillin's bedazzled eyes--right from the start preppy-model pretty, blonde hair blowing as she strides in high heeled exuberance along a London street in step with her new husband, just married in a registry office, holding hands and smiling broadly. She was, he says, "so very pretty, but that wasn't the first thing that struck me about her; it might have come as much as two or three seconds later. My first impression was that she looked more alive than anyone I'd ever seen" (14); vitality infuses the book, embodying the quality of their relationship. Alice served as "'muse, cheerleader, literary interpreter, straight person and buster of bubbles,' often appearing as a character in her husband's books" (Sarah Lyall, qtd in Lehmann-Haupt). But because in Trillin's writing Alice "played the role of the mom—the voice of reason, the sensible person who kept everything on an even keel despite the antics of her marginally goofy husband," as an introduction explained, "Alice and Bud are like Burns and Allen, except she's George and he's Gracie" (4).

He never wanted to disappoint her: "I showed Alice everything I wrote in rough draft—partly because I valued her opinion but partly because I hoped to impress her. If the piece was meant to be funny, the sound of laughter from the next room was a great reward" (15-16). Indeed, Alice might have been laughing at this dual portrait, epitomized in the opening sentence of *About Alice*, a quotation from the beginning of *Alice, Let's Eat*: "Now that it's fashionable to reveal intimate details of married life, I can state publicly that my wife, Alice, has a weird predilection for limiting our family to three meals a day." He continues in *Let's Eat*, "I also might as well admit that the most serious threat to our marriage came in 1975, when Alice mentioned my weight just as I was about to sit down to dinner at a New Orleans restaurant named Chez Helène" (5).

Trillin explains the minimalist aesthetic of his dedications, demonstrating how he pared them down from frivolity to their emotional essence. He had initially dedicated the first book he wrote after he'd met Alice, "These stories were written for Alice—to make her giggle," but cut the last few words, "too corny." His first dedication after her death reads "I wrote this for Alice. Actually, I wrote everything for Alice" (14-16). In 2001 Alice died of heart failure caused by radiation damage that occurred when she was treated for lung cancer twenty-five years earlier—"an incorrigible and ridiculous optimist" to the end. She would have said "about a deal that allowed her to see her girls grow up, 'Twenty-five years! I'm so lucky!'" Trillin expresses his love and his grief in nineteen simple, understated one-syllable words: "I try to think of it in those terms, too. Some days I can and some days I can't" (78).

I cry every time I read this endearing tribute, and that's OK. Martin and I had a comparably symbiotic life. We, too, were married in an English registry office, although the Trillins' glamorous wedding photo is drop dead incomparable. For 67 years, from an undergraduate philosophy of ethics course at the University of Michigan throughout dual academic careers until the day of Martin's death, we discussed and vetted each other's manuscripts. After our children were in school I taught English full-time at Butler University in Indianapolis, where we had moved for Martin's job at Indiana University. When Martin was offered a super job at Washington University, I gave up tenure to move to St. Louis. But when I could not find full time work, he encouraged me to commute 2000 miles a week to a career-changing professorship at the University of New Mexico rather than settle for a low status job locally. "Go for it," he said, arranging his teaching schedule to be home when the boys came home from school. Fifteen years later, he changed jobs to accommodate my offer of an endowed chair at the University of Connecticut, and we lived in Ashford, just down the road from the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang Camp.

The relationship between spouses is the central theme of *Wave*, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and *About Alice*. When a cherished spouse has died, although the survivors may be reeling from the loss, they can draw on the strengths of the relationship. Knowledge of the unconditional love and joy and shared

history endures beyond death and abets the gradual re-awakening to a life that is tolerable, if not exhilarating. Events in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, published a year after Didion's husband died, are too raw and recent to provide this comfort, particularly given the stresses of Quintana's ongoing mortal illness throughout the year that Didion was writing the book. But the memoirs of Deraniyagala and Trillin, published eight and five years after their respective spouses died, are ultimately elegiac tributes to beloved partners in dynamic, nurturing relationships that they continue to value, kept alive in these treasure chests of memoir. The grief memoirs actual or anticipatory, as Babine's, discussed here do not offer advice on how to survive their loss or heal from it, but they do provide illustrations which could serve as models for their readers.

About This Conversation. I have written this essay, as Gertrude Stein says, for myself and strangers, myself foremost because as a writer I have to write about whatever is most important to discover what the subject means to me. With profound grief—a new experience until Martin died—this meaning has not come easily, nor all at once, and it has not settled down. Examining how other authors I can talk to as friends tell human stories about grief has helped me to understand not only the nature of loss, but ways to honor those we've lost.

Throughout this essay I have resisted writing about particular works that didn't speak to me, for whatever reason. I don't want to argue the merits of different beliefs or values which provide solace for many. Cataclysm—war, famine, plague, genocide, natural disasters of unimaginable horror—is also off the table. I'm dealing here with loss on an individual scale, which is the only way I can handle the subject. As you have seen, I've chosen memoirs honoring dearly beloved people, acknowledgments of their lives shot through with grace, terror, and sometimes good humor, tart and sweet. I've excluded overstuffed day-by-day accounts of the survivor's protracted suffering; repetitive and narcissistic, they bury the victim under too much information. I have also avoided medical memoirs that demean already compromised

patients through elaborate presentations of intimate, excruciating details of their physical or mental deterioration, as with Alzheimer's, or the twists and turns of their protracted treatment. I don't want to know every dosage, device, and devastating decision, for too much negative information deprives the dying person, however beloved, of agency and dignity.

As a chronic optimist, I would like to end on a positive note. If I can't outrun my grief, I can gain strength and stamina from the perspective of these literary conversationalists. Sixty-three years of marriage. Sixty years of Bard's life. I am so lucky! I try to think in Trillin's terms. Some days I can, and some days I can't.

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