Kathryn Jones

Conveying the Grief Experience: Joan Didion's Use of Lists in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*

Consider the list.

A writer can use a list to do a number of useful things: break into the narrative, surprise the reader, divert attention to another subject, or add emphasis to the topic at hand. In addition, she can point up the unusual or describe the mundane, all to advance the narrative and breathe life into the characters.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights,* Joan Didion uses lists to convey to the reader her personal experience of grief due to death. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion writes of the sudden and unexpected death of her husband, John Gregory Dunne, and the hospitalization of her daughter, Quintana Roo. With the attention to detail for which she is known, Didion describes her experience of the nine months following John's death as a period of magical thinking when she imagines he might still live while also grieving his loss. She wrote the first four lines the day or two after his death, returned to the work nine months later, and completed the book just a year after his death. Throughout much of this same period, her daughter was also critically ill. *Blue Nights*, written several years later when Didion was 75, not only tells the story of her daughter's death but widens the circle to include her grief around her aging, increased frailty, and inability to function as she once did. By using various types of lists, Didion does all the above as she reflects on the stages of grief she experiences, including denial, anger, avoidance, and more. She also uses lists to paint a picture of her husband and daughter, who have both died; reveal both her trustworthiness as narrator and herself as unhinged and delusional; attempt to take control as well as

expose her loss of control; and examine the idea of the ordinary moment disrupted by the extraordinary event.

Didion's grief challenges what she thought she knew about life, the grief "that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness … about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself" (*Magical Thinking* 7). But this grief also challenges her long-held belief that "meaning itself was resident in the rhythms of words and sentences and paragraphs" (7). Now she longs for a cutting room of images rather than words in order to show simultaneous memories, variations on the theme, "variant readings of the same lines" (8). However, as a writer, she has only words. Lists offer one reading on the theme of grief, together with the other devices she employs, such as repetition, dialogue, citation, and scene.

Arthur Plotnik defines a "true list" as an inventory of particulars following a colon and an introductory statement (15). This type of list, often organized in alphabetical or other systematic order, is frequently called a catalog. Didion's lists take many forms beyond this sort of simple list, however. While her lists occasionally come after a colon – for example, the list of items in John's wallet – they are more frequently buried in a paragraph and divided by commas or acting as a paragraph themselves. They always favor, as Plotnik describes, "the concrete over the abstract, the particular over the general" (15). They also serve a purpose. Plotnik writes, "The particulars need to play off one another, build to crescendo, create an atmosphere, unveil layers of character – do something to give them force" (15). That "something" in the two works in question conveys to the reader what it is like to experience grief, whether at the loss of a husband or a daughter or even grief at the loss of one's mastery over daily life as often comes with old age.

Reviewer Lev Grossman writes in *Time*, "Didion's prose is usually buffed to a high polish, but with [*The Year of Magical Thinking*], she deliberately made the writing less smooth, taking out the transitions" (56). In her interview with Grossman, Didion states, "I was sort of crazy, so transitions really didn't

figure." She also says, "I really thought that if it was going to have any value, it had to be immediate, it had to be raw" (56). Through all of the devices Didion uses, including sentence fragments, white space, and lists, she comes across as immediate and raw, pulling from memory straight to the page. For this purpose, lists work exceptionally well in that they often convey the concrete environment that is ripe with meaning just waiting to be extracted by the careful reader. At the same time, they are generally brief and can also move the narrative forward without long pauses.

The first list in *The Year of Magical Thinking* comes early in the work, details John's life, and contrasts the ordinary and the extraordinary. This is a list of the items in the plastic bag Didion was given at New York Hospital the night John died: the pants, shirt, and belt. Embedded in this paragraph is a second list, a formal list that follows a colon: the items in his money clip. This paragraph outlining John's possessions is impersonal; we do not see a uniformed hospital staff member handing the items to Didion. Instead, Didion repeatedly states, "They gave me…" (13). It is monotone, in passive voice: "In the plastic bag I had been given at the hospital there were…" (17). These phrases, followed by the list of cards in the money clip, feel removed and sterile. Didion appears numb, unable to react.

However, in a closer look at the items in the clip, each item resonates with meaning and references daily life. The driver's license suggests movement, motion, and even progress. It reminds us that John once drove the highways of Los Angeles. Credit cards and cash place John in the everyday act of shopping. We might imagine him buying a book or paying for dinner. A Metropolitan Museum membership card suggests the life of the mind and love of the arts that he and Didion shared. His Writers Guild of America card suggests vocation and purpose. Finally, we move from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from a driver's license to a Medtronic pacemaker card. That last card refers to the extraordinary medical intervention that kept John's heart beating until it could no longer. All these items reveal the life of the person, John Gregory Dunne. However, reading them in list format also breaks the narration as the reader

moves from one item to the next, slowing the pace and allowing the reader to consider the significance of and understand the severity of the loss as death intrudes on a life.

While cold and clinical, that list of the items in John's money clip reflects Didion's emotional state. Rochelle Gurstein, writing in the *New Republic*, points to Didion's practice of distancing herself from her emotions as a negative that does not allow the reader access to her psyche. While she lauds Didion's "tendency to stick to the surface, a habit that comes from years of writing with the eye of a reporter and screenwriter," she thinks that proclivity gives *The Year of Magical Thinking* "occasional inward moments … an emotionally detached feel" (30). The reader may argue that detaching oneself from one's emotions is unhealthy. However, the moments Gurstein describes as "emotionally detached" clearly illustrate Didion's immobility and the inability to move forward that one experiences with profound grief.

Reviewer Sam Schulman, in *Commentary*, writes, "Didion hates [self-pity] – guards against it, constantly examines herself for signs of it, and works assiduously to maintain her façade as a cool customer." He continues, "In place of magical thinking and self-pity, Didion substitutes indignation – in particular, indignation at how ill-prepared she herself was for the experience of grief" (88). He criticizes her lack of reading in grief literature and seeming absorption of the stages of grief as described by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, which have since faced criticism. He ignores that the criticism of Kubler-Ross is not so much that grief does not come in stages but that the stages are rarely as linear as believed. Furthermore, he ignores that Didion, as a writer, had no reason to focus her studies on grief literature before this point. Didion tells us that she has given little thought to aging and death. In that, she is like most of us. However, through her writing, she is now staring the subject down. He also states, "Didion's best writing has always been dependent on the presence of her own self, observing what she describes, observing herself describing it" (86). This is what she does using lists in both *Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*. In listing the qualities of self-pity, Didion both observes her current grief state and belittles it at the same time.

This list of John's possessions and the items in his money clip also point to a recurring theme that Didion introduces starting on the first page of this book: "Life changes in the instant. the ordinary instant" (*Magical Thinking* 3). On an ordinary Sunday morning in Pearl Harbor. On a beautiful September day in New York City. Or, on an ordinary December evening, with a Scotch and a book, sitting in front of the fire. The items in the clip remind us of life's ordinary, everyday things before everything changes.

Other lists in *The Year of Magical Thinking* work similarly, including the grocery list on which she absently jots down a note, a simple slip of paper that she finds by the phone during a call with a Los Angeles doctor regarding her daughter's emergency surgery. She writes on the slip of paper, "Arterial bleed … Brain pushed to the left side" (94). Only when she returns home to New York from Los Angeles later that month does she see that she has made these medical notes on an ordinary grocery list. "What I had thought I needed on that March day five weeks before were Evian splits, molasses, chicken broth, and flaxseed meal" (94). Now in her notation, "brain pushed to the left side," she and the reader observe as the ordinary makes way for the extraordinary. When she wrote the diagnosis on the slip of paper, she did not even see the grocery list sharing space on the page. At least at that moment, she had lost sight of the ordinary.

Lists both guide the reader to trust the author and doubt her mental state. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion lists items in John's money clip (17) and pictures lining the corridor (72). In *Blue Nights,* she offers a list of what was served at Quintana's wedding reception (6) and the items in the drawers in her New York apartment (44-46). These lists seem to reveal a narrator who is level-headed. We imagine that she is thinking clearly. These are lists that represent reality; the items exist. The narrator sees them and helps the reader see them. And yet, simultaneously, a fog of grief clouds clear vision.

In the above examples, Didion struggles with the objects and the memories these items prompt. While Didion lists the items in John's money clip without emotion, she ends with this confession: "I

remember combining the cash that had been in his pocket with the cash in my own bag…. I remember thinking as I did this that he would see that I was handling things" (*Magical Thinking* 18). She is at once in control and out of control. Her thinking is clear enough to remember and name the items and delusional enough to imagine that John still cares how she handles them.

In another chapter, she uses repetition and lists to describe the arrangements she has made for John's cremation, funeral, and burial. "On most surface levels I seemed rational," she begins (*Magical Thinking* 42). This is followed by an "I had authorized…. I had arranged…. I had placed…. I had seen" (42). Then follows a formal list of the speakers at John's funeral, followed by this: "I had done it. I had acknowledged that he was dead. I had done this in as public a way as I could conceive" (43). However, she explains, she is still going through the motions, thinking she will bring him back from the dead by doing the right things. "' Seeing it clearly' did not yet allow me to give away the clothes he would need" (44). She seems in control, but she is saving the clothes John will need when he returns to life. Her thinking is informed by grief. She is indulging in magical thinking.

The inventory of items in drawers in the New York apartment plays a similar role in revealing Didion's mental and emotional state. It occurs in chapter seven of *Blue Nights*, an entire chapter of lists. She writes of a time when she did want these mementos, "a period during which I believed that I could keep people fully present, keep them with me, by preserving their mementos, their 'things,' their totems" (44). However, she also states, "In fact I no longer value this kind of memento. I no longer want reminders of what was, what got broken, what got lost, what got wasted" (44). Although she says she no longer wants reminders, she chooses the opposite, keeping his memory alive for three pages naming those same items found in the drawers, boxes, and closets. She examines the black wool challis dress purchased for Quintana when she was four from Bendel's. But the store has moved; what she knew no longer exists. She finds wedding invitations "to the weddings of people no longer married" (46). The mementos of her life have become reminders of change and loss. In her grief, she writes,

> In fact they serve only to make clear how inadequately I appreciated the moment when it was here.
>
> How inadequately I appreciated the moment when it was here is something else I could never afford to see. (46)

Joshua Wolf Shenk poses in the *Wilson Quarterly* that this passage reveals Didion as unable to engage the more critical questions of aging, illness, and death, which now face her head-on. He writes,

> This passage is typical in the way that it digs into the deepest and most difficult layers. And it shows the juxtaposition of Didion's disordering questions with her trenchant voice. There's something hypnotic about her prose, and so, while she exposes us to these veins of inquiry, we are also calmed and comforted. She is an Akido sensei, turning all the disorder she summons into force and energy for greater order. Except that sometimes it feels as though she's doing the reverse – using whatever order her writing creates to convey a sense of the larger chaos. (88)

Didion has created order through lists of real things. Lists offer a way to control the chaos that she experiences. She craves control. She writes of her experience identifying John's body at the undertaker, a description that contains a parenthetical list of the emotions she strives to avoid: "I had arrived at Frank E Campbell so determined to avoid any inappropriate response (tears, anger, helpless laughter at the Oz-like hush) that I had shut down all response" (*Magical Thinking* 18). She seems in control – on the surface, at least – in the way that caused the social worker at the hospital on the night of John's death to call her a "cool customer" (*Magical Thinking* 15). However, this form of grief is not the experience she had expected: "We might expect that we will be prostrate, inconsolable, crazy with loss. We do not expect to be literally crazy, cool customers who believe that their husband is about to return" (*Magical Thinking* 188). She may be able to control her environment and the things in John's money clip or her closets, but she is far from in control, as death proves to her twice.

Didion references this idea of control and the ordinary moment in her litany of the rituals of domestic life: "Setting the table. Lighting the candles. Building the fire. Cooking" (*Magical Thinking* 190). These are the rituals of her marriage to John that afford a meaning similar to, she explains, the meaning she finds in the Episcopal liturgy. "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end" (*Magical Thinking* 189-90). However, this is not a world without danger. Instead, it is a world ever-changing with dangers yet unknown. Rituals give her life structure and meaning that is, in some way, everlasting. One might imagine that meaning comes from the natural rhythms of life through the ages or perhaps from some sense that the ordinary can outweigh the extraordinary, that these moments of domestic ritual hold some goodness that somehow counterbalances or even outweighs the interruption of the extraordinary. That, in some mysterious sense, all we know is everlasting.

She also hints at the constancy of change in her list of the elements of domestic life, which ends abruptly with this: "hurricane lamps for storms, enough water and food to see us through whatever geological event came our way" (*Magical Thinking* 190). The night John's heart unexpectedly stopped, she set the table and cooked dinner. John sat before the fire. These are the rituals of their married life before the trauma. She continues, "These fragments I have shored up against my ruins," quoting T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland." Eliot refers to taking the broken fragments of a culture and piling them up as a defense against the loss of that culture or perhaps compiling them as a reminder or testimony to what once was. Didion's fragments are the sweet moments of married life, the ordinary moments. Perhaps she hopes they will be a defense against her grief and loss, or perhaps only a testimony to what once was.

Toward the end of this chapter, Didion tells of a sea cave that she and John could access when the tides were right (*Magical Thinking* 192). A misreading of the tides would mean death by drowning. She could anticipate that; it made sense even if it caused fear. However, she could not "anticipate cardiac arrest at the dinner table" (*Magical Thinking* 192). The fragments she had shored up did not prepare her for this. This was change she could not control. She returns to this image again on the last page of the book. She

notes that she feared she would misread the tide each time she and John swam to the cave. However, John was not afraid. John would tell her, "you had to go with the change" (*Magical Thinking* 227). To do that, she must relinquish control and trust herself, which she is unable or unwilling to do.

Didion also tries to maintain control of her grief by controlling what she sees and experiences, where she goes. Several lists in *The Year of Magical Thinking* reflect this, including pictures hanging in the corridor of the home she shares with John and a list that references the Brentwood neighborhood she now avoids driving through to avoid memories of the past. The list of pictures hanging in the hall follows two pages of lists that include the guest lists from her wedding to John and Quintana's wedding to Gerry. As it turns out, Quintana's wedding was only four and a half months before she was admitted to the ICU and five months before John's death. Didion explains this while telling how it felt to walk down the hallway of her home in the first week or two after his death, avoiding the pictures on the walls. But then she writes, "I did not need to look, nor could I avoid them by not looking: I knew them by heart" (*Magical Thinking* 72-73).

This list of pictures is not a simple list, but rather a list of items interposed with the rich memories they awake in her, blending list and repetition. There are photos from work, on location, family photos, and photos of friends. A photo of her with John taken on location for their first film reminds her of her first trip to Europe: "I boarded the plane barefoot, it was that period, 1971" (*Magical Thinking* 72). A photo of her young family at Bethesda Fountain in Central Park at a time when they were working on a film with Otto Preminger reminds her of Quintana telling her pediatrician who asked where her mother was: "She's in the office of Mr. Preminger who has no hair" (72). Happy memories. Funny memories. Then there is Barry Farrell's photo of his wife in the Malibu house. "Barry Farrell was now dead." Furthermore, later, as more memories surface: "Conrad Hall was now dead./ Brian Moore was now dead" (74). And, of course, John Gregory Dunne is now dead. Death is the one thing she cannot control. Yet she keeps trying.

Early in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion describes being inside the grief experience and sensing that those outside and not grieving have no means to understand what she is experiencing. She challenges a Virginia doctor who writes that complicated grief is when the one grieving strives to keep the lost loved one alive. "Were you there?" she asks him repeatedly, implying that he cannot understand. (56). The answer, naturally, is no. He was not there when she and John dined at Morton's, when they dropped plumeria blossoms on the graves of the unknown dead in Pearl Harbor, or when they skipped the Monets and went to lunch in Paris at Conti. Didion's anger, normal in grief, is directed at a doctor she has never met.

Didion's recognition of her anger at the doctor also brings further awareness about her recent experience of death and leads to two lists: a list of how death used to occur in the past and a list of what happened when it did occur. Death today, she notes, typically occurs in hospitals and "occurs largely offstage." This was not always true. "Women died in childbirth. Children died of fevers. Cancer was untreatable" (*Magical Thinking* 69). We could not control death, but at that time, we could at least come alongside and experience it. And after the death, "you bake a ham. You drop it by the house. You go to the funeral" (61). Didion is denied this, though there are remembrance services and casseroles. John dies without warning, and Didion is denied a chance to adjust and reconcile herself to it as it plays out in time. Quintana is already ill, in a coma in the ICU. Quintana must be told three times that her father has died, and she cannot join her mother in mourning. Didion has hardly moved past John's death when Quintana also dies. Didion has learned she is alone in this grief; no one can join her there, though they may try.

This feeling of isolation, when death comes without warning, recurs in Didion's focus on self-pity (*Magical Thinking* 192-95). She notes an aversion to "dwelling on it" (192) and reminds the reader that her loss is nothing compared to John's loss of life itself. She writes, "The very language we use when we think about self-pity betrays the deep abhorrence in which we hold it" (193). The list that follows derides self-pity, pokes fun at it, and belittles it through word choice: "self-pity is *feeling sorry for yourself*, self-pity is *thumb*

sucking, self-pity is *boo hoo poor me*, self-pity is the condition in which those feeling sorry for themselves *indulge*, or even *wallow*" (italics hers) (193). Yet she observes that when divorce occurs, the individuals remain alive, no matter the relationship. In death, "we are repeatedly left, in other words, with no further focus than ourselves, a source from which self-pity naturally flows" (195).

In recording the story of John's death on these pages, Didion attempts to refocus her attention on John rather than herself. Though she writes to come to terms with his death and her grief, she refuses to "wallow." Nevertheless, the reader should note the phrase, "we are repeatedly left." Didion describes many times the instances where she has thought to tell John something, to ask John something, to make plans with John. However, he is dead. She may resist the urge to wallow, but loss fills her as she remembers, and she grieves again.

Didion uses lists of concrete images and memories to get beyond the attempt to articulate, to let the reader (and perhaps herself) extract meaning as much as possible from the grief experience, and lay bare the heart of the experience, the inexpressible. Although critic Jennifer Szalai writes in *Harper's Magazine* only about *Magical Thinking*, what she says can be applied to both works: Didion "is still at the edges of comprehending what happened. She is still thinking in images" (97). We have observed that these images frequently occur in the form of lists. Later in the same essay, Szalai writes of the abrupt style conveyed "with language that is altogether shorn of extraneous meaning" (97-102). Lists allow Didion to put on paper her observations as she tries to process meaning. They allow her to work through her experience with words when there are no words. Szalai writes, "The willingness to parse the sorrows of her own experience is extraordinary, insofar as bereavement, the way it feels, the way it is, resists attempts to articulate it." Words, she says, often "declare rather than render." Didion uses lists of concrete images and memories to get beyond the attempt to articulate, to let the reader (and perhaps herself) extract meaning as much as possible from the grief experience, and lay bare the heart of the experience, the inexpressible.

In *Blue Nights*, though written in a similar style with a similar intent – telling the story of loss and thereby trying to understand her grief – Didion digs much deeper into her emotional life than in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. This is not just the story of Didion's grief over her daughter's death and continuing grief over the death of her husband, but it is also the story of her grappling with old age and inevitable death. Britt Peterson writes in the *American Scholar*,

> *Blue Nights* feels meandering and spread thin by comparison [to *The Year of Magical Thinking*] – a collection of 'notes,' as Didion aptly calls it at one point. But like the photos of the author taken right after her daughter's death, it has a laid bare quality that provides its own heartbreaking strength. (122)

The work starts by describing blue nights in early summer that remind Didion of possibility and promise. She calls the work *Blue Nights* because, as she writes, she finds herself considering a list of potential sorrows -- "illness, the end of promise, the dwindling of days, the inevitability of the fading" (*Blue Nights* 4). She continues, "Blue nights are the opposite of the dying of the brightness, but they are also its warning" (4). This is followed quickly by the first list – Quintana's choices for the wedding: "There were cucumber and watercress sandwiches, a peach-colored cake from Payard, pink champagne" (6), and, soon after, by Didion's memory of the Brentwood house that they shared: "cars, a swimming pool, a garden … agapanthus, lilies of the Nile … English chintzes, chinoiserie toile" (13). These are beautiful, rich images and happy memories. At the house, there had even been, she remembers, "A Bouvier des Flandres motionless on the stair landing, one eye open, on guard" (13). Following the beautiful images, Didion reminds the reader that a dog lies on guard. Didion may suggest that she and the guard dog cannot halt the inevitable aging and death. Yet they are unable to let their guard down.

The memories on these pages, whether in list form, in repeated paragraphs, or other structures, all relate to her youth, to Quintana's youth, and refer to the passing of time. Didion writes, "Time passes. Memory fades, memory adjusts, memory conforms to what we think we remember" (*Blue Nights* 13).

Following the litany of memories in the opening pages of *Blue Nights*, Didion states, "*When we talk about mortality, we are talking about our children*" (13). This statement is in italics, a technique she frequently uses to set apart what seem to be key thoughts relating to the theme, often repeated throughout the work. Quintana's death has forced her to face her mortality in ways that the loss of a husband and partner may not have. In *Blue Nights*, the possibility that the young woman who chose leis and stephanotis for her wedding as sentimental reminders of days past now exists only in the past seems unreal to both writer and reader. "*Time passes*," Didion writes. But does she believe it? "This was never supposed to happen to her" (16). Another example: why does Didion still think of herself as living most of her life in California when much of it has been spent in New York? "Time passes. Could it be that I never believed it? Did I believe the blue nights could last forever" (17)?

Chapter Nine addresses another theme raised by the idea of blue nights: fear. It is central to the phrase quoted above and repeated in this chapter, "When we talk about mortality we are talking about our children" (*Blue Nights* 54). Didion explains that as she began to get this story on paper, she gradually understood that the subject was not children but rather "this failure to confront the certainties of aging illness, death. This fear" (54). But, she writes, she soon realized that the two were the same. She continues, "Once [Quintana] was born I was never not afraid" (54). Then, because the scene is ripe for a list, she lists her fears: "rattlesnakes, riptides, landslides, strangers who appeared at the door, unexplained fevers, elevators without operators and empty hotel corridors" (54). But the source of those fears? Not the harm that might come to Didion but the fact that these were threats to her child.

This fear of what might bring harm to her child is emphasized in a list of things she observes in the ICU (any ICU, for they are all the same to her): "The gurgling through plastic tubing. The dripping from the IV lines, the rales, the alarms. The codes. The crash cart" (*Blue Nights* 101). This is followed by an expression of her grief, in italics, a glimpse into her thoughts, and repeated from early in the work, "*This*

was never supposed to happen to her" (101). By sharing with the reader the ICU's frightening appearance, she also allows us to believe what she believes, that what is happening to Quintana should not – and cannot – be real. She attempts to deny the reality of illness and death as if that might relieve grief. Yet at the same time, in listing the images around her in the ICU, perhaps she is also attempting to face that reality and her present grief.

On the following page, she allows the reader a first glimpse of another fear. She writes, "I too have trouble remembering" (*Blue Nights* 102). She observes this first when she cannot come up with the correct term for lawyer as foreign languages mingle in her mind. Then she confesses, "Names vanish" (102). Her example is one that many readers who in childhood memorized presidents or the periodic table or books of the Bible will relate to: she had forgotten the names of the California counties, "once so familiar that I recited them in alphabetized order (Alameda and Alpine and Amador, Calaveras and Colusa and Contra Costa, Madera and Marin and Mariposa)" (102). She has begun to see herself as old. She has written that Quintana had once feared that John would die and that she, Quintana, would have to care for Didion. "She saw me as frail" (101). Now Didion has also begun to see herself as frail. This brings its own grief.

This recognition of her frailty is followed by a series of repeated phrases outlining that frailty and then a list of how she plans to combat aging. The repeated phrases reveal her fears: "I fear falling on the street…. I feel unsteady, unbalanced" (*Blue Nights* 106). She changes her routine again, no longer walking a longer path to breakfast for fear she might fall along the way. She notices that when people ask how she is, they then seem impatient and only half concerned as if they don't care to know the answer. "As if all too aware that the answer will be a complaint" (106). Thus, she determines to speak positively, and hence the list: "*Do not whine*, I write on an index card. *Do not complain. Work harder. Spend more time alone*" (italics hers) (107). She pins these notes on a corkboard next to other notes. "*Struck by a train…. Was killed that afternoon in the crash of a small plane…. My brother became president*" (107). As she studies the older notes on the

corkboard, she realizes she does not remember what they refer to or mean. Whether she whines and wallows or accepts her state, she cannot ignore that she is growing old.

Another list follows, framed as a series of "what if" questions as she imagines more extreme failures than falling on the way to breakfast.

> What if the damage extends beyond the physical?
>
> What if the problem is now cognitive?...
>
> What if my new inability to summon the right word, the apt thought, the connection that enables the words to make sense, the rhythm, the music itself –
>
> What if this new inability is systemic?
>
> What if I can never again locate the words that work? (*Blue Nights,* 110)

For Didion, at age 75 and still writing, the inability to find the right words is as good as death. She has lost her husband and is about to lose her daughter. That triggers in her -- along with the forgotten word and the missed step – a recognition of her own old age and impending death. And yet she continues to write, to capture these days and her grief experience before they are lost. Or perhaps before *she* is lost, before she loses herself.

Finally, Quintana dies, and Didion cries for her. Yet the first cries shared with the reader are a list of positive memories: "The day she cut the peach-colored cake from Payard./ The day she wore the shoes with the bright-red soles./ The day the plumeria tattoo showed through her veil (*Blue Nights* 161). For this is the nature of grief. Good memories mingle with the sorrowful. Good memories of Quintana lead to good memories of other friends who have played a role in this family's life, friends who have subsequently died. "Diana who would die in the ICU at Cedars in Los Angeles. Dominique who would die in the ICU at Cedars in Los Angeles. The beautiful baby girl who would die in the ICU in the Greenberg Pavilion at New York Cornell" (161). Memory seamlessly invokes memory, and naturally, Quintana's death would trigger a list of memories of both their shared experience and the death of others. However, perhaps

Didion is also trying to wrap her mind around what she admits she has tried to ignore up to this point, the reality of aging and death that eventually comes to us all.

There are two final lists to examine, unique in that Didion wrote neither one. First, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion includes a list written in faint pencil on a legal pad. It is a list written by John of the characters who die in his novel. "A night or two before he died John asked me if I was aware how many characters died in the novel he had just sent to press" (147).

Teresa Kean

Parlance

Emmett McClure

Jack Broderick

Maurice Dodd

Four people in a car

Charlie Buckles

Percy – electric chair (Percy Darrow)

Walden McClure (147)

The list of nine (or twelve if you count four people in a car) takes up half a page in the text of Didion's book. The reader's eye is drawn to the list, with names set apart, surrounded by white space. It is as if Didion exclaims, *look at the dead*. John has not only included death in his new novel but has apparently focused on it. Didion notes that the list is written faintly in pencil. "Why would he use a pencil that barely left a mark. *When did he begin seeing himself as dead*?" (italics hers) (147).

Elsewhere we are told that John has long had heart problems. He has a pacemaker. He has already outlived his life expectancy. He appears to know this. His autopsy shows that he could have died at any time. That John one night penciled the list on notepaper proves that he once lived. Moreover, now it is one

more reminder for Didion that he is gone, dead as the characters on the list. The question is not when he began seeing himself as dead, but when she will begin to see him as dead. She has noted elsewhere that in marriage, one does not age (*Magical Thinking* 197). She sees herself always as the young woman she was when she married. Now she is faced with the death of her husband; will this allow her then to see her own death as inevitable and face the future, even if through the veil of grief?

In *Blue Nights*, Didion shares a list composed by Quintana quite different from John's list of dead characters. This is a list of "Mom's Sayings" that Quintana has posted in the garage clubhouse that she once shared with a friend. "*Brush your teeth, brush your hair, shush I'm working*" (35). This seemingly innocent list prompts Didion to reflect on how a young Quintana was subject to fears, to "the startling depths and shallows of her expressions, the quicksilver changes of mood" (36). Didion recalls the items she has framed and hung in her kitchen in New York, a list that includes a copy of text torn from *The New Yorker*, a Pablo Neruda poem, a postcard, and a notice from the Topanga-Los Virgenes Fire District "instructing residents of the district what to do "when the fire comes"' (37). The phrase "when the fire comes" suddenly strikes her as representative of Quintana's state as a child, "when" not "if" the fire comes. This prompts the memory of Quintana's call to a state psychiatric facility to ask if she was crazy. Perhaps this list is not so different from John's list after all.

Does Didion want to remember? Does she write to remember? In *Blue Nights,* she states, "Memories are what you no longer want to remember" (64). Would she rather forget? Forget the lives, or just forget the deaths? However, in writing, she has captured the memory for all time. If, as she said in *Magical Thinking*, writing is her attempt "to make sense" of the period that followed John's death, to make sense of her grief and of death itself, then she does seem to want to remember. (7). If nothing else, she seems to want to remember through the process of writing itself, even if she never picks up these pages

again, even if the process of writing is enough to begin to work through the complicated grief that results with the death of a spouse and the death of a daughter in one short year.

Blue Nights ends with these words, a list of associations:

> I know what the frailty is, I know what the fear is.
>
> The fear is not for what is lost.
>
> What is lost is already in the wall.
>
> What is lost is already behind the locked doors.
>
> The fear is for what is still to be lost.
>
> You may see nothing still to be lost.
>
> Yet there is no day in her life on which I do not see her. (188)

For Didion, there is no day in which Quintana and John are not still alive. There is no day in which she does not still feel the need to protect her daughter, even if that means protecting the memory of her daughter. She knows that today if she reaches out to take her daughter's hand as if Quintana was sitting beside her, "[Quintana] will fade from my touch. Vanish. Pass into nothingness" (*Blue Nights* 188). Didion writes of the memory of placing the ashes in the wall after Quintana's funeral and seeing the cathedral doors locked behind (188). However, she still feels that same fear, as if it is not too late to protect her only child, as if that child has not already passed from her protection.

Through her use of lists in both *Blue Nights* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion gives the reader insight into the grief journey. She tells the reader what it feels like to try to live despite her desperate grief at the loss of her husband and daughter and the recognition that her days are numbered. Lists of concrete items – whether items in a pocket or a drawer, items on a grocery list, or a simple list of names on a legal pad – allow the reader to see what Didion sees, the actual physical world she lives in. Yet they also point beyond the physical and allow a glimpse at the turmoil and anguish, the anger and denial that come with complex grief.

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