Joan Didion, *Blue Nights* (Fourth Estate, 2011)

On page fifteen of this memoir, Joan Didion describes her daughter Quintana’s picture-perfect wedding on 26 July 2003 in the cathedral of St John the Divine in New York. She continues:

Could you have seen, had you been walking on Amsterdam Avenue and caught sight of the bridal party that day, how utterly unprepared the mother of the bride was to accept what would happen before the year 2003 had even ended? The father of the bride dead at his own dinner table? The bride herself in an induced coma, breathing only on a respirator, not expected by the doctors in the intensive care unit to live the night? The first in a cascade of medical crises that would end twenty months later with her death?

The father of the bride, John Dunne, had been the author’s devoted husband and professional collaborator for forty years. Her account of her mourning him, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, came out to critical acclaim in 2005, just before Quintana died. *Blue Nights* focuses on Quintana’s death and the agonies and questions it remorselessly evokes, about ‘illness, the end of promise, the dwindling of the days, the inevitability of the fading, the dying of the brightness’, because ‘when we talk about mortality we are talking about our children’ (4, 13).

The two books present a fascinating contrast. *The Year of Magical Thinking* tracks the course of a classic mourning, the sort we all face when we lose someone very close to us. Appropriately, Didion cites Freud’s once-more famous essay, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, with its insistence on mourning as harrowing but essential work, in the course of which lapses in one’s sense of the reality of death (‘magical thinking’) punctuate constant regurgitations of poignant, excruciating memories of the deceased, until the ‘work’ is complete, the reality principle is restored, and one can live fully again. In *Blue Nights* the revisiting of sharp, unbidden memories recurs, only now they carry a heavier burden, above all fear and remorse. Here we’re confronting a singular loss, the death of one’s child, recognised by the tragedian Euripides and many since as the greatest grief we mortals can know. In *Blue Nights* the earlier discursive tone is gone; the language is terse, rhythmic, cutting, as it fitfully returns to critical scenes and the italicised tags that first erupted in them.

Life with Quintana begins so casually. On a boating holiday in early 1966 Didion mentions to a friend that she and John would like a baby. The friend introduces her to one of her friends, an obstetrician. A little later, while Didion is in the shower, the obstetrician rings from a nearby hospital. He’s just delivered a beautiful baby girl, the mother can’t keep her, do Joan and John want her? Jump in the car and come on down.

In that terrible hindsight gained at Quintana’s slow death from a cerebral hemorrhage, the author sees that, under the cover of this good fortune, she’s been drawn into a world she didn’t know existed. ‘Once she was born I was never not afraid’ (54). The usual fears around a child’s physical vulnerability fall into the shadow of the fear elicited by the child herself – her implacable presence, her inscrutable needs, her overwhelming dread as an adopted child of a new abandonment (including her adoptive mother’s fragility and distraction), increasing lability, and occasionally surfacing death wish. *What if you hadn’t been home*, the child
demands, what if you couldn’t meet Dr Watson at the hospital, what if there’d been an accident on the freeway, what would happen to me then (82).

On a conventional reckoning the good fortune is all Quintana’s. Snatched from an unfortunate birth, she grows up the only child of a creative, harmonious union; her new parents belong to the wealthy cultural elite, they take her to wonderful places, Hollywood film sets; family and friends wear haute couture, and they stay at the best hotels. But none of this meets Quintana’s needs, quells her fear of abandonment, or even manages to obliterate the warning signs that so unnerv the author, such as her desperate clutching after adult status with its apparent invulnerability instead of living out the blithe childhood she’s offered in carefree California. ‘Was I the problem?’ Didion now asks. ‘Was I always the problem?’ (33). ‘When we noticed her confusions did we consider our own?’ (92).

Again on a conventional reckoning, Didion short-changes us about the adult Quintana; she died aged thirty-nine, after all. We’re not even told what she looked like. We get an outline of her university education, her career, and her recurring mental disorder, eventually but dubiously diagnosed as borderline personality disorder. (‘I have not yet seen the case in which a “diagnosis” led to a “cure,”’ or in fact to any outcome other than a confirmed, and therefore an enforced, debility’ [47]) But again, we should resist the conventional reckoning. Writing at seventy-five years of age, Didion is impatient with trivia, dilution; she’s struggling, she tells us more than once, to be ‘direct’. At her age nothing else will do. “You have beautiful memories,” people said later, as if memories were solace. Memories are not. Memories are by definition of times past, things gone … Memories are what you no longer want to remember’ (64).

She’s unfurling a tragedy, her own tragedy told in the first person, but the constituent elements of it are ours: we can all look back on the now unredressable distance and missed signals and opportunities of the long child-parent interaction, some of us from both directions. Such are ‘the ways in which we depend on our children to depend on us, the ways in which we encourage them to remain children, the ways in which they remain more unknown to us than they do to their most casual acquaintances; the ways in which we remain equally opaque to them … The ways in which our investments in each other remain too freighted ever to see the other clear’ (53).

Fine literature sheds a unique light on ethical questions, Martha Nussbaum argues in Love’s Knowledge, especially on that ur-question, how should one live? It does so because it alone can deploy imagination and attention to particulars so as to illuminate the workings of contingency, fragility and mortality in human life. Following Proust and Henry James, she compares quality literary works to ‘angels that soar above the dullness and obtuseness of the everyday, offering their readers a glimpse of a more compassionate, subtler, more responsive, more richly human world,’ one that expresses ‘bewildered human grace.’ 1 Blue Nights is a fierce little angel, not at all pre-Raphaelite, but it does soar, and leaves our responsiveness much enlivened.

Winton Higgins