

Chapter 1 : Paris Review - Joan Didion, The Art of Fiction No. 71

I spend a lot of time and too much money in restaurants. I go on dates to restaurants. I visit friends in restaurants. And because I am a writer, and because I am single, and because I work from.

The kind where you never feel you can start writing because it always seems that there is someone else you need to call up or something else you must look into. That those boundaries may be a myth. Diligent grafts and noteworthy quotes and requisite descriptions and smatterings of sense-making. Or have I just been forcing myself too much to try to care deeply about a thing that, in the end, is just a job? And that shows? And, does it matter? Intending to scan the lead, which references an essay I just taught to a circle of undergraduates for the first time, I read the piece straight through to the end when you get to the end, you will realize why this matters. Some things stood out to me. Most of the people who walked around the Village looking like Beats in , like most of the people who walked around San Francisco or Berkeley or Cambridge looking like hippies in , were weekend dropouts. They were contingent rebels. They put on the costumes; they went to the concerts and got high; and then they went back to school or back to work. It was a life style, not a life. And this, on what her work and legacy mean to so many of us who found her writing when we were young—as I did when I was in college in New York twelve years ago, and as my students did in their college classroom six months ago—and decided that we, too, wanted to be a writer, like Joan Didion: The subject is American self-deception. Growing up, Didion had been taught that for the generations that followed the challenge was to keep those virtues alive. There was always a new wave of settlers ready to sell out the pioneer spirit. No, we must do the work, fruitless as it is. Think on it as hard as we can and then sleep, allowing some other force to click the final pieces into place, to draw those lines. And my life is in a very different place at thirty-two than hers was at that time. I slept thirty minutes, dreamt fitful dreams, and awoke. I am at the edge of the Pacific.

Chapter 2 : Close Reading: Joan Didion's "The Women's Movement" |

"To have the sense of one's intrinsic worth which constitutes self-respect is potentially to have everything: the ability to discriminate, to love and to remain indifferent." —Joan Didion "Although even the humourless nineteen-year-old that I was.

I lost the conviction that lights would always turn green for me, I lost a certain touching faith in the totem power of good manners, clean hair, and proven competence on the Stanford-Binet scale. To such doubtful amulets had my self respect been pinned, and I faced myself that day with the nonplussed apprehension of someone who has come across a vampire and has no crucifix in hand. Whether or not we sleep in it depends, of course, on whether or not we respect ourselves. It does not at all. It has nothing to do with the face of things, but concerns instead a separate peace, a private reconciliation. Although the careless, suicidal Julian English in Appointment in Samarra and the careless, incurably dishonest Jordan Baker in The Great Gatsby seem equally improbable candidates for self-respect, Jordan Baker had it, Julian English did not. Jordan took her own measure, made her own peace, avoided threats to that peace: They know the price of things. If they choose to commit adultery, they do not then go running, in an access of bad conscience, to receive absolution from the wronged parties. [T]hey display what was once called character, a quality which, although approved in the abstract, sometimes loses ground to other, more instantly negotiable ones. Self-respect is something that our grandparents, whether or not they had it, knew all about. They had instilled in them, young, a certain discipline, the sense that one lives by doing things one does not particularly want to do, by putting fears and doubts to one side, by weighing immediate comforts against the possibility of larger, even intangible, comforts. It did not seem unjust that the way to free land in California involved death and difficulty and dirt. That kind of self-respect is a discipline, a habit of mind that can never be faked but can be developed, trained, coaxed forth. It was once suggested to me that, as an antidote to crying, I put my head in a paper bag. As it happens, there is a sound physiological reason, something to do with oxygen, for doing exactly that, but the psychological effect alone is incalculable: To say that Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton is not to say that Napoleon might have been saved by a crash program in cricket; to give formal dinners in the rain forest would be pointless did not the candlelight flickering on the liana call forth deeper, stronger disciplines, values instilled long before. It is a kind of ritual, helping us to remember who and what we are. In order to remember it, one must have known it. To lack it is to be locked within oneself, paradoxically incapable of either love or indifference. If we do not respect ourselves, we are on the one hand forced to despise those who have so few resources as to consort with us, so little perception as to remain blind to our fatal weaknesses. On the other, we are peculiarly in thrall to everyone we see, curiously determined to live out "since our self-image is untenable" their false notions of us. In its advanced stages, we longer answer the telephone, because someone might want something; that we could say no without drowning in self-reproach is an idea alien to this game. Every encounter demands too much, tears the nerves, drains the will, and the spectre of something as small as an unanswered letter arouses such disproportionate guilt that answering it becomes out of the question. To assign unanswered letters their proper weight, to free us from the expectations of others, to give us back to ourselves—there lies the great, the singular power of self-respect. Without it, one eventually discovers the final turn of the screw:

Chapter 3 : Joan Didion "On Self Respect" - READING is THERAPY

Joan Didion has spent a large part of her life in New York, which she writes about with sharp authority, with the astringent voice treasured by the New Yorker. But to California writers and

Jill Schary Robinson is a Los Angeles-based novelist, essayist, illustrator, and teacher, whose memoirs contend with the themes of addiction, recovery, and growing up during the golden age of Hollywood. Only Joan Didion can do this with the spare reach of meaning learned in her land. She never whines as she tells us how pain feels. We had not expected Joan Didion to speak long or get all radiant over our admiration, our affection, our honor. Joan has the integrity of the authentic writer. Solitude is the ignition key and the requirement. The room went silent. Then came frowns, turns of heads, questioning eyebrows, fingertips to lips. Abashed was the name of the evening. Yes, we were there to see the new writers get their PEN awards, see them standing here, ordained writers. We were shown a brief video clip from a documentary. We listened to the new writers; all appreciating the attention. And caught up in the moment of their glory. Joan Didion has spent a large part of her life in New York, which she writes about with sharp authority, with the astringent voice treasured by the New Yorker. But to California writers and readers, she seems to be our writer. And this chance to see her, as PEN wisely knew, was the one draw which might pull us out of our haggard economic slump, our despair over the elephant in the room not invited - the collapse of publishing as many of us knew it. We are expecting horses and carriages and there are only small cars. Joan was the first writer I read who wrote with the voice of the land she came from, not with the voice of a gender or a time. The separation, of north from south - and even more acutely of west from east, of the urban coast from the agricultural valleys and of both the coast and the valleys from the mountain and desert regions to their east - was profound, fueled by the rancor of water wars and by less tangible but even more rancorous differences in attitude and culture. She speaks with affection of the train from L. I remember taking that train just for the ride you want as a writer; to have essential mulling and brooding time. You needed to be in New York. Or to be a man, ravenous with urgency, fierce experience. Then, in I read *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and I began to imagine there might be a way to write about the actual world around me. Joan and her husband John Dunne and I were at some of the same places. They represented a level of sly perception you only got from having time back east in Manhattan. Each sentence they spoke arrived direct, and succinct. But they spent enough time here to avoid being aloof, to regard L. Hard to pull off. I learned the distinction reading Joan. Her comments glide in place as before a camera; a long shot capturing an exchange you had not caught. And the ardent slice of climate which awards isolation with steady light for reflection. There is the solemn arch of eloquence the lower half of the state cannot achieve. The clothes chosen for me as a child had a strong element of the Pre-Raphaelite, muted greens and ivories, dusty rose, what seems in retrospect an eccentric amount of black. I still have the black mantilla I was given to wear over my shoulders when I started to go to dances, not the kind of handkerchief triangle Catholic woman used to keep in their pockets and glove compartments but several yards of heavy black lace. Growing up in L. You want to feel your roots. Joan Didion preserves the legacy of women like Narcissa Whitman, the pioneer who held the reins, leading the survivors in a wagon train west when her husband was killed. Joan gives us a recipe for what you ate on the trail, the suet pudding that was part of the Old West we pretended to belong to during the Second World War, when friends and I roamed the ivy-covered hills, through unfenced gardens, pools and patios of Brentwood, wild and open as it was then. Each time I learn something new about where Joan Didion was from, and something new about the way to place a word or a sentence and why her writing takes my breath away. A great writer challenges me to write strong, sharp and clear. Reading Joan Didion does that.

Chapter 4 : Reading Joan Didion - Lynn Marie Houston, William V. Lombardi - Google Books

Late last year, while passing through a depressive period, it seemed an opportune time to read Joan Didion's Play It As It www.nxgvision.com were odd vibrations, at that time, within most of my moods.

There were odd vibrations, at that time, within most of my moods. I could tell that I was appearing a little crazy by the way that people looked at me nervously, and by the way that men, strange men, seemed more than usually interested. I assume this was because they sensed in me some latent desire for high-risk behavior. This was Christmas; though its being Christmas meant, if I am honest, nearly nothing. That winter, the rain never stopped. The news was rarely happy. The season had no discernible cheer or goodwill. Sometimes a book is the right book for some kind of feeling. Carry a Yorkshire in Beverley Hills. It has a bare-bones bleakness that does not require much of a narrative. The book, as you no doubt know, is the story of a year-old divorcee, Mariah Wyeth, who is having a nervous breakdown and who owns a banana-yellow Corvette. It is also about Joan Didion: In the picture on my original order, the book is a different edition: This is not a universal story—what it does convey, however, is a fairly universal feeling in a year as exceptionally dark as the last one has been, and the current one is now. The Levis jackets of teenage boys are noted. Nothing does anyone any good. As in life, there is abortion and suicide, and there are parties. There are no visible politics. I try not to think of dead things and plumbing. I try not to hear the air conditioner in that bedroom in Encino. We, of course, are still left thinking about the dead things and the plumbing. Article continues after advertisement One can look for dark coincidences everywhere. One racks them up. There were things about the place that I grew up in that I did not care to question, either: I find no record of this suicide in the news: I believe in it anyway. There is not often much poetry. Life does not provide us with a great many hummingbirds. I had no idea what else to do with myself. The place is called San Remo Towers, even though it is in England, and in spite of the fact that the sun rarely shines there. It looks as if it belongs in Morocco. The architect—a man whose optimism we can be sure of—meant to bring the style of Los Angeles over to Britain. A few years earlier, he had been the recipient of a prize in Soviet Russia. It is especially obvious that there is no Spanish or Moroccan or Los Angelean weather in sight; the sea, being grey, English sea, was especially choppy. Our San Remo is different: This past year, the flat in the penthouse ended up on the market and I returned, two or three times, to look at the listing. The current occupiers have filled their house with statues of life-sized horses. In it, Didion explains, she played a girl who was raped by the members of a motorcycle gang. Maria had seen it twice, once at a studio preview and a second time by herself, at a drive-in in Culver City, and neither time did she have any sense that the girl on the screen was herself. In fact, she liked watching the picture: A little later that day, I met up with a long-term friend who asked me seriously whether I really intended to go through life not having children, and whether I might not regret it. Different people need different things. She crosses the casino alone and picks up a house telephone. I watch her because I have heard her paged, and recognize her name: I know nothing about her. Who is paging her? Why is she here to be paged? How exactly did she come to this? We moved down to Silver Wells because my father lost the Reno house in a private game and happened to remember that he owned this town, Silver Wells. The town around San Remo Towers was, at one time, a drying-out spot for a number of out-of-town rehab facilities: It surprises me that I dream sometimes about owning the penthouse in San Remo Towers, since this would mean moving back home: There had been no question of our keeping the baby—this was not a thing that either of us wanted. Maria, who does not ever see a reason not to keep playing, even when her hand is bad, does not. Maria has an abortion. There were no lines more relatable to me in the novel than those where she is trying to induce her period by everyday witchcraft. She did this in the same spirit that she had, a month before, thrown a full box of Tampax into the garbage: To give the charm every opportunity she changed the immaculate sheets every morning. Not at a party reacting to somebody else. Not just thinking about her lot in life, either. A long section in which she was the main player. The abortion was a narrative strategy. You can be not too crazy about other people but still too crazy, you know? In this adaptation, Weld is a walking suicide with honey-blond hair and a turtleneck, and with the smart mouth and sad eyes and the slow, mooning, languor of

the classic Didion heroine. She does not ever look un-chic. She cannot, because doing so would be more a betrayal than even the scrape-job. Poor Maria Wyeth wants to be regressed by a hypnotistâ€”not back to a previous life, because she does not care about living, but back to being a fetus in the womb. Tuesday Weld in *Play it As it Lays*, dir. So here she is, playing a failure. On the cover of my copy of the novel, Maria Wyeth is blonde, and looks like a nail salon advertisement, and someone has written the number 10 on her forehead in thick black pen. Everything between them is pure understanding; she holds him until there is no him except for his body to hold. I mean, it leads nowhere. The line break yawns and yawns; in a book full of white space, it still looks expansive. You know what it means: I left my hometown because I did not feel and could not see myself feeling connectedâ€”to the year-old girls who looked like year-old adult performers, the penny arcades, the pier-end theatre. I mean, whatever worksâ€”whatever turns you on; different people, as I said, need different things. It did not work for me. It turned me off with a deadening thump. I moved to the city as soon as it seemed feasible for me to move to the city, and pretended not to feel disillusioned once I realized I did not feel any more sense of belonging there than I had in the first instance. What the city offers me, now, is traffic: The crush and rush of trains; the dread of barely-sustainable finances. There is no ocean. Maybe this is why Didion proved so observant. Didion intended, I think, to write a hate letter to L. The impulse was nostalgia. This was, I thought at the time, fairly freaky. Here is the truth about women as objects: In March, I turned twenty-nine. She asked Phillips, then 17, to help. Phillips, believing it her duty as a friend, agreed. Hodel swallowed a bottle of Seconal. Phillips fell asleep beside her in bed. Fortunately, other friends came home in time to call an ambulance. I hardly blame her for it, as almost all writers are bloodsuckers. The only difference being that a writer can do it all alone.

*Joan Didion on Morality "Who would call a day spent reading a good day? But a life spent readingâ€”that is a good life."
Annie Dillard.*

Courtesy of the Associated Press It is usual for the interviewer to write this paragraph about the circumstances in which the interview was conducted, but the interviewer in this case, Linda Kuehl, died not long after the tapes were transcribed. Linda and I talked on August 18 and August 24, , from about ten in the morning until early afternoon. The walls in that room were white. The floors were of terracotta tile, very highly polished. The glare off the sea was so pronounced in that room that corners of it seemed, by contrast, extremely dark, and everyone who sat in the room tended to gravitate toward these dark corners. Over the years the room had in fact evolved to the point where the only comfortable chairs were in the dark, away from the windows. I mention this because I remember my fears about being interviewed, one of which was that I would be construed as the kind of loon who had maybe degrees of sea view and kept all the chairs in a kind of sooty nook behind the fireplace. Her interest in and acuity about the technical act of writing made me relaxed and even enthusiastic about talking, which I rarely am. Quite often you want to tell somebody your dream, your nightmare. The writer is always tricking the reader into listening to the dream. Do you write listening to the reader listening to you? I am always writing to myself. Once in a while, when I first started to write pieces, I would try to write to a reader other than myself. I would freeze up. I wanted to be an actress. The only difference being that a writer can do it all alone. I was struck a few years ago when a friend of oursâ€”an actressâ€”was having dinner here with us and a couple of other writers. She had to wait for someone to ask her, which is a strange way to live. When I was fifteen or sixteen I would type out his stories to learn how the sentences worked. I taught myself to type at the same time. Very direct sentences, smooth rivers, clear water over granite, no sinkholes. You could drown in them. I loved those novels so much that I was paralyzed by them for a long time. All that perfectly reconciled style. It made me afraid to put words down. An entire pieceâ€”eight, ten, twenty pagesâ€”strung on a single sentence. Actually, the sentences in my nonfiction are far more complicated than the sentences in my fiction. All he needed was his first sentence and he had his short story. Everything else is going to flow out of that sentence. It should open the piece up. It should make you go back and start reading from page one. I think of writing anything at all as a kind of high-wire act. I hate the book at that point. After a while I arrive at an accommodation: Maybe I can have another chance. Something about George Eliot attracted me a great deal. DIDION When I was starting to writeâ€”in the late fifties, early sixtiesâ€”there was a kind of social tradition in which male novelists could operate. Hard drinkers, bad livers. Wives, wars, big fish, Africa, Paris, no second acts. A man who wrote novels had a role in the world, and he could play that role and do whatever he wanted behind it. A woman who wrote novels had no particular role. Women who wrote novels were quite often perceived as invalids. Carson McCullers, Jane Bowles. Novels by women tended to be described, even by their publishers, as sensitive. I dealt with it the same way I deal with everything. A certain amount of resistance is good for anybody. It keeps you awake. But this whole question of sexual identity is very tricky. I loved Lily and Martha, but I loved Everett more. It seems so finished for a first that I thought you might have shelved earlier ones. In no particular sequence. When I finished a scene I would tape the pages together and pin the long strips of pages on the wall of my apartment. When I had about a hundred and fifty pages done I showed them to twelve publishers, all of whom passed. The thirteenth, Ivan Obolensky, gave me an advance, and with that thousand dollars or whatever it was I took a two-month leave of absence and wrote the last half of the book. I kept trying to run the first half through again, but it was intractable. Not that the last half is perfect. So I straightened it out. Present time to flashback to present time. Again, I was not very sure of myself then, or I never would have changed the title. I ask this for the obvious reason that first novels often are. A lot of people there seemed to think that I had somehow maligned them and their families, but it was just a made-up story. I think I really put the novel in Sacramento because I was homesick. I wanted to remember the weather and the rivers. The impulse was nostalgia. I could see exactly that kind of nostalgia, that yearning for a place, overriding all narrative

considerations. The incredible amount of description. Every street is described. You could take that passage and draw a map of Honolulu. None of those descriptions have any narrative meaning. I could see the impulse. Want to keep reading?

Chapter 6 : Reading Throwback: The Indelible Genius of Joan Didion | capracity

Reading the Evolution of Joan Didion The past two days I've been working on writing up a fairly long article that I've been reporting for a few weeks. The kind where you never feel you can start.

Didion recalls writing things down as early as age five, though she claims she never saw herself as a writer until after her work had been published. She read everything she could get her hands on, and even needed written permission from her mother to borrow "adult" books—biographies especially—from the library at a young age. She identified as a "shy, bookish child" who pushed herself to overcome social anxiety through acting and public speaking. In or early , her family returned to Sacramento, and her father went to Detroit to negotiate defense contracts for World War II. Didion wrote in her memoir *Where I Was From* that moving so often made her feel like a perpetual outsider. Writer and friend John Gregory Dunne helped her edit the book, and the two moved into an apartment together. A year later they married, and Didion returned to California with her new husband. In , she published her first work of nonfiction, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* , a collection of magazine pieces about her experiences in California. Her book-length essay *Salvador* was written after a two-week-long trip to El Salvador with her husband. The following year, she published the novel *Democracy* , which narrates the story of a long but unrequited love affair between a wealthy heiress and an older man, a CIA officer, against the background of the Cold War and the Vietnam conflict. Her nonfiction book *Miami* looked at the Cuban expatriate community in that city. Dunne and Didion worked closely together for most of their careers. Much of their writing is therefore intertwined. In , she began working on a one-woman stage adaptation of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Although she was at first hesitant about writing for the theatre, she has since found the genre, which was new to her, to be quite exciting. It addresses their relationship with "stunning frankness. He was the younger brother of author, businessman and television mystery show host Dominick Dunne. The couple married in and moved to Los Angeles with intentions of staying only temporarily, but California ultimately became their home for the next twenty years. Their daughter Quintana Roo Dunne was adopted in After undergoing a psychiatric evaluation, she was diagnosed as having had an attack of vertigo and nausea. She was also diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. On December 30, , while their daughter Quintana Roo Dunne lay comatose in the ICU with septic shock resulting from pneumonia , her husband suffered a fatal heart attack while at the dinner table. Didion put off his funeral arrangements for approximately three months until Quintana was well enough to attend the service. This style is also described as creative nonfiction, intimate journalism, or literary nonfiction. It is a popular moment in the longer history of literary journalism in America. Tom Wolfe , who along with E. Johnson edited the anthology *The New Journalism* , and wrote a manifesto for the style that popularized the term, pointed to the idea that "it is possible to write journalism that would The style gives the author more creative freedom. Exhibiting subjectivity is a major theme in New Journalism. Didion includes her personal feelings and memories in this first person narrative, describing the chaos of individuals and the way in which they perceive the world. Here Didion rejects conventional journalism, and instead prefers to create a subjective approach to essays, a style that is her own. Writing style and themes[edit] In a notorious essay published in called "Joan Didion: Only Disconnect", Barbara Grizzuti Harrison called Didion a "neurasthenic Cher" whose style was "a bag of tricks" and whose "subject is always herself. In *The New York Times* article, *Why I Write* [27] Didion remarks, "To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind Other influences include writer Henry James , who wrote "perfect, indirect, complicated sentences" and George Eliot. This happens not during the writing, but during the research. At the end of the day, Didion must take a break from writing to remove herself from the "pages". Didion spends a great deal of time cutting out and editing her prose before concluding her evening. The next day, Didion begins by looking over her work from the previous evening, making further adjustments as she sees fit. As this process culminates, Didion feels that it is necessary to sleep in the same room as her book. Burkey Award from the Writers Guild of America.

Chapter 7 : Joan Didion | Books | The Guardian

Joan Didion (/ ˈdɪ d i ˈdɪʃən /; born December 5,) is an American journalist and writer of novels, screenplays, and autobiographical www.nxgvision.com is best known for her literary journalism and memoirs.

Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends. The question of self-pity. Those were the first words I wrote after it happened. I had made no changes to that file in May. I had made no changes to that file since I wrote the words, in January, a day or two or three after the fact. For a long time I wrote nothing else. It was in fact the ordinary nature of everything preceding the event that prevented me from truly believing it had happened, absorbing it, incorporating it, getting past it. I recognize now that there was nothing unusual in this: Later I realized that I must have repeated the details of what happened to everyone who came to the house in those first weeks, all those friends and relatives who brought food and made drinks and laid out plates on the dining room table for however many people were around at lunch or dinner time, all those who picked up the plates and froze the leftovers and ran the dishwasher and filled our I could not yet think my otherwise empty house even after I had gone into the bedroom our bedroom, the one in which there still lay on a sofa a faded terrycloth XL robe bought in the s at Richard Carroll in Beverly Hills and shut the door. Those moments when I was abruptly overtaken by exhaustion are what I remember most clearly about the first days and weeks. I have no memory of telling anyone the details, but I must have done so, because everyone seemed to know them. At one point I considered the possibility that they had picked up the details of the story from one another, but immediately rejected it: It had come from me. Who was part of our household. Who was supposed to be flying to Las Vegas later that day, December 31, but never went. When I first told him what had happened he had not understood. I had picked up the abandoned syringes and ECG electrodes before he came in that morning but I could not face the blood. It is now, as I begin to write this, the afternoon of October 4, This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had 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 the shallowness of sanity, about life itself. I have been a writer my entire life. As a writer, even as a child, long before what I wrote began to be published, I developed a sense that meaning itself was resident in the rhythms of words and sentences and paragraphs, a technique for withholding whatever it was I thought or believed behind an increasingly impenetrable polish. The way I write is who I am, or have become, yet this is a case in which I wish I had instead of words and their rhythms a cutting room, equipped with an Avid, a digital editing system on which I could touch a key and collapse the sequence of time, show you simultaneously all the frames of memory that come to me now, let you pick the takes, the marginally different expressions, the variant readings of the same lines. This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning. This is a case in which I need whatever it is I think or believe to be penetrable, if only for myself. December 30, , a Tuesday. We had come home. We had discussed whether to go out for dinner or eat in. I said I would build a fire, we could eat in. I built the fire, I started dinner, I asked John if he wanted a drink. I got him a Scotch and gave it to him in the living room, where he was reading in the chair by the fire where he habitually sat. Who Started the Great War in ? I finished getting dinner, I set the table in the living room where, when we were home alone, we could eat within sight of the fire. I find myself stressing the fire because fires were important to us. I grew up in California, John and I lived there together for twenty-four years, in California we heated our houses by building fires. We built fires even on summer evenings, because the fog came in. Fires said we were home, we had drawn the circle, we were safe through the night. I lit the candles. John asked for a second drink before sitting down. I gave it to him. My attention was on mixing the salad. At one point in the seconds or minute before he stopped talking he had asked me if I had used single-malt Scotch for his second drink. I had said no, I used the same Scotch I had used for his first drink. I have no idea which subject we were on, the Scotch or World War One, at the instant he stopped talking. I only remember looking up. His left hand was raised and he was slumped motionless. At first I thought he was making a failed joke, an attempt to make the difficulty of the day seem manageable. When he did not respond

my first thought was that he had started to eat and choked. I remember trying to lift him far enough from the back of the chair to give him the Heimlich. I remember the sense of his weight as he fell forward, first against the table, then to the floor. In the kitchen by the telephone I had taped a card with the New Yorkâ€™Presbyterian ambulance numbers. I had not taped the numbers by the telephone because I anticipated a moment like this. I had taped the numbers by the telephone in case someone in the building needed an ambulance. I called one of the numbers. A dispatcher asked if he was breathing. I said Just come. When the paramedics came I tried to tell them what had happened but before I could finish they had transformed the part of the living room where John lay into an emergency department. One of them there were three, maybe four, even an hour later I could not have said was talking to the hospital about the electrocardiogram they seemed already to be transmitting. Another was opening the first or second of what would be many syringes for injection. The names came to mind but I had no idea from where. I remember saying that he might have choked. This was dismissed with a finger swipe: They seemed now to be using defibrillating paddles, an attempt to restore a rhythm. They got something that could have been a normal heartbeat or I thought they did, we had all been silent, there was a sharp jump , then lost it, and started again. Atrial fibrillation did not immediately or necessarily cause cardiac arrest. Maybe ventricular was the given. I remember trying to straighten out in my mind what would happen next. Since there was an ambulance crew in the living room, the next logical step would be going to the hospital. It occurred to me that the crew could decide very suddenly to go to the hospital and I would not be ready. I would not have in hand what I needed to take. I would waste time, get left behind. When I got back to the living room the paramedics were watching the computer monitor they had set up on the floor. I could not see the monitor so I watched their faces. I remember one glancing at the others. When the decision was made to move it happened very fast. I followed them to the elevator and asked if I could go with them. They said they were taking the gurney down first, I could go in the second ambulance. One of them waited with me for the elevator to come back up. By the time he and I got into the second ambulance the ambulance carrying the gurney was pulling away from the front of the building. The distance from our building to the part of New Yorkâ€™Presbyterian that used to be New York Hospital is six crosstown blocks. I have no memory of sirens. I have no memory of traffic. When we arrived at the emergency entrance to the hospital the gurney was already disappearing into the building. A man was waiting in the driveway. Everyone else in sight was wearing scrubs. I opened the door and I seen the man in the dress greens and I knew. Inside the emergency room I could see the gurney being pushed into a cubicle, propelled by more people in scrubs. Someone told me to wait in the reception area. There was a line for admittance paperwork. Waiting in the line seemed the constructive thing to do. Waiting in the line said that there was still time to deal with this, I had copies of the insurance cards in my handbag, this was not a hospital I had ever negotiatedâ€™New York Hospital was the Cornell part of New Yorkâ€™Presbyterian, the part I knew was the Columbia part, Columbia-Presbyterian, at th and Broadway, twenty minutes away at best, too far in this kind of emergencyâ€™but I could make this unfamiliar hospital work, I could be useful, I could arrange the transfer to Columbia-Presbyterian once he was stabilized. I was fixed on the details of this imminent transfer to Columbia he would need a bed with telemetry, eventually I could also get Quintana transferred to Columbia, the night she was admitted to Beth Israel North I had written on a card the beeper numbers of several Columbia doctors, one or another of them could make all this happen when the social worker reappeared and guided me from the paperwork line into an empty room off the reception area. The room was cold, or I was. I wondered how much time had passed between the time I called the ambulance and the arrival of the paramedics. It had seemed no time at all a mote in the eye of God was the phrase that came to me in the room off the reception area but it must have been at the minimum several minutes. Excerpted by permission of Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Discussion Questions From the Publisher: Consider the four sentences in italics that begin chapter one. What did you think when you read them for the first time?

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