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# **Death and individualism: Joan Didion's year of ruptured thinking**

## **Walking Grieved: a meditation on love, loss & memory**

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the Master  
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## ***Abstract***

In this thesis I explore the contemporary grief memoir, an increasingly popular subset within the autobiography genre, and one that primarily concerns authors' subjective recollections and responses to the rupture in the fabric of their lives caused by the death of an intimate other – typically a spouse, parent or child.

In my exegesis I examine Joan Didion's grief memoir – *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2011 [2005]) – written in the year following the sudden death of her husband of forty years and fellow writer, John Dunne, and the concurrent serious illness and hospitalisation of their adult daughter, Quintana, in 2004. In particular I analyse how Didion's memoir addresses the rupturing of her reflexive individuality and especially her dispositional orientation and idealization of an agentic, informed and progressive self as key components of her self-identity. In my creative non-fiction writing – *Walking Grieved: a mediation of love, loss & memory* – I explore the rupture and my responses occasioned by the death of my wife in 2003. I specifically reflect on how this has impacted on my romantic, familial and other self-identities and on my understandings of the constructs (social, historical and subjective) of intimate love, dying and death, memory, enduring grief, elective sociality and the narrations of self and other.

Contemporary grief narratives represent an emerging body of literary work and socio-psychological theorizing that contests the 'denial of death' (Ariès 2008 [1981]: 559) ethos prevalent in modern Western societies. They also contest the equally prevalent Freudian model of pathological grief that asserts survivors need to 'move on' from grieving to form new intimate attachments, ideally within months (Dennis 2008; Neimeyer et al 2001). These memoirs represent a contemporary, even post-modern, form of *ars moriendi* and promote varied forms of 'textured recovery' (Prodromou 2012: 57) that are based on subjective, nuanced and eclectic grieving processes and outcomes. These include highly personal searches for understanding and comprehension of the death, of rupture and grieving, and the fashioning of post-rupture identities, ideas, values and practices that frequently incorporate the deceased and which span a range of themes – restorative, evaluative, interpretive, affirmative, affective, transformative (Dennis 2008).

As a form of autobiography, grief memoirs also address issues of self-identity as a series of constantly evolving narratives or stories that individuals tell about themselves and which, in feedback loop, both generate and reflect the evolving modalities and ethics of autobiography (Eakin 1999, 2008). Narrated self-identity is always period and socio-culturally specific. For the middle-classes and higher social strata of post-industrial societies, self-identity therefore routinely coalesces around the hegemony and practices 'reflexive individuality' (Beck 2002: 3) – especially the ideals of agentic, knowledgeable,

reflective (self and social) and progressive individuality. Indeed authors of grief memoirs typically highlight their personal experiences of rupture and loss, and particularly their responses to first experiencing a 'death blow' (Rimmon-Kenan 2002:10) followed by an 'identity crisis' (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 10).

Furthermore grief memoirs are subject to the norms and expectations generated within the 'autobiographical pact' (Lejeune 1989: 22) that exists between authors and readers. The autobiographical pact asserts that the text's narrator is the author (or that any connection to a 'ghost writer' is overt); secondly, that revelations about the author's identity, experiences, memories, beliefs, etc are truthful; and finally, that recollections are tactful, especially in terms of revelations concerning others. Clearly notions of tactfulness are a matter of evolving debate. Moreover, perceptions of truthfulness are framed within understandings of the limitations, inherent idiosyncratic biases and the selectiveness or justificatory character of personal memories. Issues of truthfulness are also framed by standards of 'emotional truth' (Williams quoted in Miller 2007: 543), in which recollections of the author are orientated toward producing verifiable, subjective truths that are not directly contradicted by historical or agreed fact.

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## *Contents*

<b>Abstract</b>	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	iv
<b>Contents</b>	v
<b>Section 1:</b>	
Death and individualism: Joan Didion's year of ruptured thinking	1 – 37
<b>Section 2:</b>	
Walking Grieved: a mediation on love, loss & memory	1 - 95

# Death and individualism: Joan Didion's year of ruptured thinking

P. J. Howland

## Introduction

'Death is the most terrible of all things' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III.5, 975 – quoted in Hawkins 1999: 91).

The death of any individual represents a rupture in the fabric of life, and especially in the networks – social, economic, political and other – in which they have participated, contributed to and generated. The more intimate their networked relationships, the greater import attributed to the individual's contributions and subsequently to the deficits created by their death, the greater the potential for trauma experienced by survivors. This is true of all societies. In post-industrial America and elsewhere, however, the compartmentalization, atomization and individualization (Beck 2002; Giddens 1991) of most aspects of life has meant that many relationships and networks (e.g. occupational, recreational, friendships, etc) are fleeting, episodic, truncated, contractual and/or comparatively diluted in social and emotional resonance (Bellah 1995; Gellner 1983; Luckmann 1967). As a consequence significant emotional, social, sexual, economic and other loadings are often placed on the most intimate of social relationships – especially those of family and the primarily dyadic attachments of marriage, romance and sex.

In addition, advances in medical science, living standards and life expectancy, have meant that popular notions of a good death have skewed towards one that is anticipated and experienced peacefully in old age, without pain or mental impairment, and ideally occurs when surrounded by supportive loved ones (Ariès 2008 [1981]; McManus 2013). When all these factors combine, a sudden, accidental or otherwise unanticipated death can represent a particularly traumatic, even calamitous, event for intimate survivors. In any regard the death of an intimate, especially of a 'marriage' partner or other family member can, in post-industrial societies, represent a significant rupture in the praxis – the routine practices, embodied dispositions, economic and other regimes, in self and social identities – of their closest kith and kin.

Interestingly, however, modernist societies – both industrial and post-industrial – have been characterized by a pervasive 'denial of death' (Ariès 2008 [1981]: 559). In part this is due to death (and especially unanticipated or early-age deaths) representing a challenge to the order and control offered by the empiricism of science and medicine, to the rational bureaucracy and

predictability regimes of governmental/neo-governmental organizations, and to the life management of ideally informed and agentic individuals. It is also influenced by the institutionalization of death, in which the vast majority of individuals now die in hospitals or hospices, where their corpses are managed by professional undertakers, and where burial and cremation are under the auspices of public, regulatory bodies such as local councils. This institutionalization has significantly abstracted death from domestic, occupational and recreational spheres, and in addition has likewise sanitized (and commercialized) the physical processes of death and bodily decay (Ariès 2008 [1981]; Giddens 1991).

Joan Didion, an acclaimed American journalist and author, unequivocally experienced rupture when her husband and fellow writer of forty years, John Dunne, died suddenly in 2004 of a massive heart attack while sitting at their dining room table. This occurred shortly after the couple had returned from the hospital where their adult daughter and only child, Quintana, lay in a coma after taking suddenly ill five days earlier. In writing her grief memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2011 [2005]), nine months after these devastating events, Didion records that she experienced pronounced feelings of helplessness, personal loss of control and order, and irrational or 'magical thinking' through which she believed she could reverse John's death. Didion writes:

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 (2011 [2005]: 7).

Didion's memoir is one in an emerging body of literary work and socio-psychological theorizing that contests the denial of death ethos. These works also contest prevalent Freudian models of pathological grief that assert survivors need to 'move on' from grieving over the death of a spouse or child so that they can form new close attachments in a timely manner, ideally within months (Dennis 2008; Hawkins 1990-91, 1999; Gilbert 2006; Luckhurst 2009; Neimeyer et al 2001). Although Didion herself appears unaware of this gathering move away from Freudian responses to grief (Bregman & Thiermann 1995; Brennan & Dash 2009; Prodromou 2012; Walter 1996, 2005), her work is nevertheless situated alongside other grief memoirs and pathographies that represent a contemporary, even post-modern, form of *ars moriendi*. In these autobiographical works the causes of rupture – typically the death of an intimate (or indeed a life threatening/ altering illness of the intimate or the author) – are specifically identified and comprehended, together with the varied, idiosyncratic responses of the authors. Prodromou argues such accounts represent forms of 'textured recovery' and as such 'form a sub-genre of the "grief memoir" that does not conform to the compensatory paradigms normally identified with that genre' (2012: 57). They typically advocate more individuated, nuanced and eclectic grieving processes and outcomes, which are based on personal searches for understanding and

meaning that enable survivors to not only personally comprehend the death or illness, but to also fashion new identities, ideas, values and practices that variably incorporate the deceased into their post-rupture existences. Dennis has identified six key dimensions in such accounts – restorative, evaluative, interpretive, affirmative, affective, transformative. He argues that Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* primarily operates in the realm of the restorative (2008: 808) and is chiefly 'aimed at solving, lessening, or managing the difficulties of grief so that it is easier to live with' (2008: 808).

Yet, despite the differences in autobiographical grief narratives, all authors highlight experiences of rupture and loss, and particularly their responses to being 'deprived of a vital element necessary to the understanding and performance of a self. The loss of this stabilising force threatens to violate or negate the self' (Prodromou 2012: 58). Or, as Rimmon-Kenan recounts, firstly experiencing a 'death blow' (2002:10) followed by an 'identity crisis' (2002: 10). A death can therefore significantly disrupt not only the socio-emotional, economic and other stabilising forces for an intimate survivor, but can likewise represent a traumatic rupturing of their own self-identity.

Eakin (1999, 2008) has championed the thesis that self-identity is a series of constantly evolving narratives or stories that individuals tell about themselves and which, in a feedback loop, both generate and reflect the likewise evolving modalities and ethics of autobiography. In addition, self-identity is always period and socio-culturally specific. Thus, for the post-industrial middle-classes and higher social strata, self-identity constructs routinely coalesce around the hegemony and practice of what Beck has called 'reflexive individuality' (2002: 3) and especially around the ideals of agentic, knowledgeable, reflective (self and social) and progressive individuality.

I analyse Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* specifically in terms of her quest to understand the causes and consequences of John's death and also in regard to the rupturing of her self-identity and reflexive individuality. I develop Eakin's thesis concerning the nexus of self-identity, autobiography and individualism, particularly in identifying specific dispositions and ideals of reflexive individuality (Beck 2002; Howland 2008), and then in critically examining how Didion seeks to negotiate these following the rupture of John's death. I first outline Eakin's theory of narrative self-identity before briefly discussing the institutional and structural dimensions of reflexive individualism. I then examine the social dynamics, propositions and ethics of the autobiographical pact before discussing Didion's own evolving ethic of individualism, her distrust of the social contract, and her surety in the perceived orders of nature and the empiricism of science. Lastly, I consider how this is interrogated by Didion in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, concluding that she arrives at a more nuanced or textured understanding of her own individualism – especially in terms of the limits of her agency and informed rationality, and also in accepting that what she had initially regarded as a form of deranged irrationality or

'magical thinking' is a normal, even appropriate, form of emotionality for a grieving individual such as herself.

### **Self-identity as narrative**

Eakin, following developmental psychologist Ulric Neisser<sup>1</sup>, argues that there are five types of self that individuals conceive of and experience. However, it is the extended self – the self of memory and anticipation, which is typically acquired by the age of three and is significantly linked to language acquisition – that is universally regarded 'as identity's signature' (2008: 3) and most importantly for this argument, it is the extended self 'of memory and anticipation, the self existing continuously across time, that is the primary self of autobiographical discourse' (2008: 3).

The extended self with its intrinsically temporal dimensions, and in combination with the private self of conscious interiority and the conceptual self or the self as socially framed and reckoned, provides the foundation of self-identity in a variety of registers – verbal, textual, performative, embodied and dispositional or unconscious. Moreover the extended self is generated in a feedback loop that both draws from, and likewise reflects, specific forms of autobiographical narration:

Narrative is especially suited to registering the effects of time and change that are central to this mode of self-experience. As a result, the extended self takes the form of narrative identity, and identity narratives serve as the medium for displaying that self in interpersonal encounters. For others, we are indeed versions of the extended self and its identity story: when we perform these stories, we establish ourselves for others as normal individuals (2008: 3-4).

Identity narratives are not, however, simply engaged at special or purposeful moments of autobiographical reflection. Rather most identity narratives are enacted in the habitual practices of everyday life and accordingly manifest in the seemingly intuitive and normative ways that we think about, express and perform ourselves:

Autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living. We don't, though, tend to give much thought to this

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<sup>1</sup> Neisser argues there are five kinds of self that individuals experience. These include, in order of developmental acquisition - the Ecological self or the self perceived with respect to physical environment as an 'I' who in this place is engaged in a particular activity; the Interpersonal self who is engaged in unreflective social interactions with others (present in infancy); the Extended self of memory and anticipation – existing outside the present moment – with certain specific experiences, engages in certain specific and familiar routines (aware of by age of three); the Private self of conscious experiences that are not immediately or directly available to anyone else – may be aware before age of five; and the Conceptual self which represents a synthesis of extremely diverse forms of self information re: social roles, personal traits, theories of body and mind, subject and person and which generates self as either an explicit or implicit category (Eakin 2008: 2).

process of self-narration precisely because, after years of practice, we do it so well. When this identity story practice is disrupted, however, we can be jolted into awareness of the central role it plays in organizing our social world (2008: 4).

Eakin and others (Bregman & Thiermann 1995; Cohen 2008; Chawala 2008; Hawkins 1999) argue therefore that at moments of rupture – for example, the traumatic events and deaths of 9/11 for many Americans – the everyday, dispositional and often unconscious manifestations of self-identity are dislocated and de-normalised, prompting the construction and articulation of new identity narratives. At times of rupture a heightened identity consciousness is typically generated primarily by attempts to comprehend the causes and consequences of displacement; through retrospective examination of pre-rupture identities and associated values, beliefs and ideals; and finally in attempts to form a newly minted identity that can explain, is aligned with, or even better can agentially engage with, the consequences of the rupturing circumstance. At a minimal level the unconscious self-identity of pre-rupture times no longer functions as a predictive marker of previously valued and expected meanings, actions and interactions. In more pronounced circumstances an individual's self-identity may be violently, even grotesquely, dismissed, rendered obsolete, and superseded by new paradigms of value and event. Whatever the outcome, however, previously unconscious, dispositional and embodied components of everyday, pre-rupture identities, are typically revealed.

Selfhood exists therefore as a series of evolving, sometimes durable, identity narratives that we tell ourselves and listening others about ourselves, including stories about ourselves in interaction, and in comparison, with others. In contemporary English-speaking societies identity narratives routinely emphasize linear time constructs (Brockmeier 2000) and identify opportune events, values, beliefs, interactions, etc. considered pertinent in the formation of a sense of self over time, at the point of articulation and in predicting future selves (Chawala 2008; Eakin 2008; Linde 1993). As such they typically display a marked (and frequently illusory) tendency toward coherence, cohesion and justification, with probable experiences of chaos, serendipity, pluralism, and other conflicting, yet mutually constitutive, variables that routinely inform the actualities of existence either omitted, altered, or replaced by more cohesive imaginings. William Maxwell goes so far as to assert that 'in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw' (quoted in Eakin 2008: 27), while Eakin argues that 'memory and imagination conspire to reconstruct the truth of the past... we tolerate a huge amount of fiction these days in works we accept nonetheless as somehow factual accounts of their authors' lives; we don't bat an eye' (ibid: 63).

### **The autobiographical pact**

This tolerance, however, has limits, especially in terms of the 'autobiographical pact' (Lejeune 1989: 22) that normatively exists between the authors and readers of autobiographies, memoirs and other self narratives. The autobiographical pact firstly asserts that the text's

narrator is the author (or at least that any connection to a ghost writer is evident). The pact also asserts that revelations about the author's identity, experiences, memories, beliefs, etc are truthful and are tactful, especially in terms of the 'entangled self' (Chawala 2008; also Eakin 1999; Lejeune 1989) and the discretion of revelations of mentioned others. Clearly tactfulness is a matter of debate, dependent on the experiences and persons narrated in dialogue with the expectations of the reading public. For example, the revelations from a sex worker might be expected to be more explicit than those concerning those of husband or wife. Truthfulness is likewise mitigated by a pervasive awareness of the limitations, especially the forgetfulness and selectivity, of personal memory – although these recollections should not wholly or wilfully conflict with accessible empirical facts and detail (Eakin 2008; Lejeune 1989). Truthfulness is additionally mitigated by what Williams calls 'emotional truth' (quoted in Miller 2007: 543) or the understanding that memory is inherently idiosyncratic and necessarily reproduces the bias, selectiveness, sentiment-orientation and justificatory character of the individual and their 'truths' of self-identity .

Emotional truth assessments have been applied to Didion's memoir with several reviewers noting that Quintana died before publication. Didion, however, 'decided to not edit the book to include this fact,<sup>2</sup> but instead preserved the reader's dim hope of a return to rationality and normal life promised by the existence of her daughter' (Balk 2006: 697-698; also Dennis 2008; Gilbert 2006). Gilbert notes that Didion has repeatedly asserted her memoir 'was "finished" when her daughter died and that furthermore it is an elegy for a marriage into which it would be inappropriate to interject an elegy for a child' (2006: 56). Even though significant portions concern Didion's responses to Quintana's illness, Gilbert concurs that it would have been inappropriate for Didion to recall and rewrite the book to include the circumstances of her death.

A similar standard can also be applied to Didion's writing about the intimate life she and John enjoyed, especially where she appears to erroneously assert that for 'all but the first five months of our marriage, when John was still working at *Time*, we both worked at home. We were together twenty-four hours a day, a fact that remained a source of both merriment and foreboding to my mother and aunts' (2011 [2005]: 194). In this Didion has forgotten that in 1968, early in their marriage and when Quintana was two-year's-old, John, who was suffering from writer's block, had lived 'in a residential motel just off the Strip in Las Vegas, and for 18 months lived there among hookers, card sharks and comedians. Didion bought him three sets of

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<sup>2</sup> Didion later wrote another grief memoir – *Blue Nights* (2011) – that detailed her responses to Quintana's nine month long illness and consequent death. This memoir, however, has been criticized for drawing a 'veil' over alcoholism as the cause of her illness and death – despite Didion referring to Quintana as 'an alcoholic' in previous interviews:

Didion is of course free to remember, and to grieve for, her daughter in whatever way she judges best... But we too are free to ask exactly how this veil that she has discreetly drawn over the causes of her daughter's death serves Didion's readers... Didion is a world-class journalist. How could her curiosity fail her at this juncture?... Why choose to leave the death at the center of the story so cloaked in mystery that even critics can't tell what actually happened? (Sauers - jezebel.com/ accessed January 27, 2013).

clean sheets and a wastepaper basket; she did not see the apartment until the day he headed home' (Kakutain 1984: 37). This act of forgetting – whether wilful or simply circumstantial – nevertheless poignantly speaks to, perhaps even enhances, the emotional truth of the intimate working and personal lives that Joan and John crafted.

Autobiographical narratives are always 'culture specific and period specific' (Eakin 2008: 16) and as such are generated and disciplined, in both form and content, through various cultural, political, economic, gendered, aged, and other 'social accountability' (Eakin 2008: 24; also Freeman 2002) mechanisms. For example, in the type of kinship and ancestor-orientated societies usually studied by anthropologists, self-identity is routinely socio-centric and takes the form of what Strathern terms 'partible personhood' (1988: 192). Partible personhood emphasizes that individual's self-identity is plural and bio-cultural – determined by the cultural and social ascriptions assigned to birth (e.g. genealogy, kinship, birth-order, etc.), to marriage and/or by those assigned to achievement (e.g. a renowned warrior, shaman, etc.) – and therefore has the capacity to span varied social roles and statuses. For example, those of daughter, older or younger sister, member of father's or mother's clan, wife, co-wife, affiliate to husband's clan, mother, mother-in-law, gardening or trading partner, etc. Which self/social identity is foregrounded, and which social roles, obligations, responsibilities, privileges and statuses are likewise foregrounded, are therefore contingent on who else is interactive within a specific context. Thus, for example, in a patrilineal society – in which kinship is reckoned exclusively through male lines of descent – a second-born son may only assume authority over his female siblings in the absence of his father and/or elder brother. By contrast, however, in contemporary, English-speaking, post-industrial societies, the dominant paradigm of self-identity is arguably individualistic, atomistic or self-referential, and is generated within the structures, discourses and practices of reflexive individualism.

### **Reflexive individualism and narrative identity**

Autobiographical narration of the extended self in contemporary Western or English-speaking, post-industrial societies is habitually framed within the parameters of what sociologist Ulrich Beck terms 'reflexive individuality' (2002: 3; also Baumann 2000; Bellah 1985; Giddens 1991; Luckmann 1967). Reflexivity is a universal process through which individuals generate an evolving, social, and yet distinct sense of self that manifests (implicitly and explicitly) as *I* and *me* compared to *we* or *them* (Quinn 2006; Van Meijl 2006). Accordingly reflexivity, which by definition is individuated in the first instance, and which is socially, culturally and historically mediated in the second, can take many guises including the aforementioned socio-centrism and partible personhood of kinship-based societies, or the structural individualism of post-industrial societies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Critics of the reflexive individualism thesis rightly note that it rests untenably on the assumption of a 'traditional', non-reflexive 'Other' and on the radical questioning of 'pure reflexivity' (Argyrou 2003: 28; also Alexander 1996). Clearly

Reflexive individuality is therefore a structurally and institutionally generated form of reflexivity that is firmly rooted in the orientations and dispositions of contemporary individualism. It is dialogically generated as a structural, modernist imperative; as a dominant (and hegemonic) form of discourse; and as the consequent phenomenology of social interactions (Dawson 2011). Reflexive individuality is therefore characteristic of post-industrial societies marked by social, economic, occupational, political and other forms of stratification, which compartmentalize practice and events, and which are ideally meritocratic (Beck 2002; Gellner 1983). Post-industrial individuals are thus largely compelled to adopt the orientations of reflexive individualism – the seemingly simple assignment of a birth certificate or a personal inland revenue number are typically first steps in this process. Accordingly Beck argues that cradle to grave rights and entitlements to everything from welfare support to insurance protection are accessible primarily to the agentic individual rendered as a corporate entity:

The decisive feature of these modern regulations or guidelines is that, far more than earlier individuals must in part supply them for themselves, import them into their biographies through their own actions... For modern social advantages one has to do something, to make an active effort. One has to win, know how to assert one-self in the competition for limited resources – and not only once, but day after day (2002: 2-3).

In addition, post-industrial knowledge – scientific, religious, common sense – characteristically takes the form of hypothesis and is continually open to critical revision. Authority is likewise routinely perceived as multiple, divergent and contestable. Accordingly there is a persistent pluralisation of potential and alternative subjectivities, life-trajectories and lifestyles that demand individual engagement: ‘The human being becomes... a choice among possibilities, homo optionis’ (Beck 2002: 5).

This form of self-identity and individualized agency is not, however, equally available to all and to be a ‘reflexivity winner’ (Lash 1995: 127) is clearly predicated on the personal acquisition of economic wealth, social mobility and political emancipation – attributes commonly found among the middle-classes, who frequently romanticise the meritocratic structures of market capitalism and frame their narratives of success or failures as personal. Enactments of reflexive individualism also vary according to age, gender, physical/intellectual capabilities, ‘race’ or ethnicity, and social context (Skeggs 2004).

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individuals within ‘traditional’ societies are reflexive, although this is more likely to be socio-centric and congruent with the partible personhood compelled by kinship/ genealogical-based institutions (Strathern 1988). Furthermore, it is arguable that the individual is principally a ‘figure of thought’ (Bäckius 2002: 283) in the Western imagination and one that is cynically deployed to substantiate the rationality of individualised, flexible, knowledge-based and mobile capitalism (Adams 2003). Moreover, reflexive individualism only demands a perpetually self-questioning individual and certainly not those endemically attuned to critically questioning the dominant structures and discourses of the world around them.

In fact embracing the aspirations of individualism is a precarious, even illusory, enterprise and Baumann (2000: 16-52) notes that many individuals find themselves anxiously trapped in the fissure between *de jure autonomy* (the agency assigned by society) and *de facto autonomy* (the actual freedom to make choices). Consequently many find that individualised reflexivity is a constant process of negotiation, as well as a source of tension, anxiety and compromise. In addition the demands of institutions (e.g. governmental, corporate, community, etc.) and significant others (e.g. romantic partners, friends, etc.) frequently restrict and compromise their personal desires and aspirations. Not surprisingly then many individuals are drawn to, and valorise, those fields of action where they perceive personal autonomy is optimised – educational and occupational pathways, life politics, the elective sociality of friends and lovers, consumption and lifestyle choices, body cosmetics and various identity projects (Howland 2008). Indeed many find self-identity cohesion and adulation in autobiographical narratives that articulate and validate their personal life choices (Giddens: 1991).

Nevertheless reflexive individualism effectively functions as a checklist of ideal dispositions which are deployed to construct and evaluate the efficacy of individuals' investments (cultural, social, economic) in any given context and their consequential experiences of self and personhood. These ideal dispositions include being self-aware and self-regulating; actively interpreting, generating and positioning the self in relation to social and other modalities; being dedicated to progressive self-improvement; embracing novel or creative knowledge, technologies and circumstances; judiciously cultivating enriching social networks from the intimate to the professional; being proficient in using rational evaluations and/or emotionality as appropriate; and in narrating subjectivity as a series of autobiographical choices that affirm self-identity and a praiseworthy self (Howland 2008). The capacity to generate and enact personal choice is widely considered the cornerstone of individualised reflexivity and middle-class individuals are routinely cast as the architects of their own destiny (Beck 2002).

Autobiographical discourses in English-speaking societies – including purposefully written and published autobiographical narratives – frequently identify various phenomena that influence, positively in terms of enhancement or negatively as impediment, the individual throughout their lives. In particular they frequently identify and discuss the impacts that family, marriage, friendship, work-related and/or institutional relationships have had on the individual's negotiation and generation of personal beliefs, values, actions, interactions, life choices, life trajectories and self-identity projects.<sup>4</sup> As such Western autobiographies frequently 'raise

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<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu (1984) argues that most individual practices of selfhood and personhood consist of unconscious, socially and/or innately generated, habitual dispositions that in many instances exist, and are reproduced, beyond their conscious critical reflection – that is, their feelings, actions and interactions are routinely based on seemingly intuitive notions of right and wrong. Accordingly, autobiographies, which are conscious, articulations and ruminations, are frequently restricted to individuals' intentional examinations of the rules, strategies and consequences they have personally experienced in the various 'games of life', and do not typically contain critical identifications and interrogations of the deeper structures – historical, economic, political, social, religious etc. – that effectively generate these 'games' beyond the personal agency of an individual. An exception to this are the autobiographies of academics and other intelligentsia, who schooled in this type of critical analysis, do frequently critically reflect on deeper structural or philosophical issues and their influence in their personal lives (e.g. C.S. Lewis 1989 [1961]).

questions about the meaning and extent of autonomy, [although] there remain a pervasive trust that staying in control is the key to meeting life's problems' (Bregman & Theirman 1995: 10; also Eakin 1999; Freeman 2002; Miller 2007). Many autobiographical narratives therefore typically highlight the ideals and tensions that underpin all experiences of reflexive individualism. As Bregman & Theirman comment on the expansive range of dying, death and grief autobiographies they analysed:

Our collection of autobiographies shows how Americans struggle over issues of autonomy versus control by institutions, isolation versus community, and search for more humanly adequate definitions of freedom and selfhood in the midst of mortality (1995: 90).

Nevertheless contemporary Western autobiographies are also routinely articulated in the register of 'expressive individualism' (Bellah 1985: 2) or via discourses in which the personal thoughts and actions of a named, biographical individual are identified and discussed as the key referent and causal variable in an individual's life. Robert Bellah in his landmark book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment* calls this the 'first language' (1985: 20) of middle-class Americans and argues that its prevalence contrastingly reflects the historical demise of the economic and political significance of socio-centric modes of being, especially those of family, kinship and community (Gellner 1983). Bregman & Theirman note that what has also 'vanished are ways to articulate these ties, to make sense of them except at the level of autonomous personal choices' (1995: 90). Yet despite a pervasive awareness of these tensions, negotiations and limitations, the ideals of reflexive individualism are nevertheless persistently maintained in autobiographical narratives: 'When we write autobiography or memoir in the United States, our self-reporting may seem to be an expression of the egalitarian individualism enshrined in the Declaration of Independence' (Eakin 2008: 39).

### **Didion's ethic of rational, informed agency**

It is within this historical and cultural milieu of increasing institutionalisation, compulsion and valorisation of individualism; of social stratification, competition and combativeness; and of moral and ethical pluralism that Joan Didion was raised and which she frequently addresses in her writing – journalistic, fictional and memoir. Didion's writings are particularly notable for the manner in which she constructs and interrogates the mutual constitutions and contradictions apparent in state (and other institutional – religious, political, etc.) regulation and intervention, in situational morality and ethics, and most importantly for this argument, in regard to the prevalent, yet evolving, ethos of American individualism. She addresses all of these most directly in writing about her own and her family experiences (natal and married), likewise in examining Californian pioneer and American history, and in commenting on contemporary socio-political issues. As Brookes argues:

The basis of Didion's self-mythologising, and her sensitivity to the mythologising of her country, was a Californian childhood and a lineage going back to the first wagons to hit the territory.... Didion thought of herself as pure Californian: individualist, resistant to group mentalities, 'awkward' in the sense of not wanting to join in (2005: n.p).

Didion's early writings display a marked idealization of a nostalgic and romantic vision of courageous, self-reliant California pioneers (Davidson 1984; Friedman 1984; Kakutain 1984; Muggli 2007; Scatamacchia 2004-04), who in quests for better lives frequently faced numerous pragmatic and moral challenges that compelled them to fashion context-specific, evolving, and sometimes contradictory practices and ethics (e.g. her writing about the Donner Party which in 1846 was forced to resort to cannibalism to survive when trapped by snow). Nevertheless in Didion's idealisations, the pioneers always aspired toward a durable ethics of rugged individualism, self-reliance and care for social intimates (e.g. family, friends and community).

Didion's romantic framings had, however, notably shifted by the time she wrote *Where I Was From* (2003) – a collection of essays addressing aspects of California history, her own and her family's history. This work was inspired, in part, by the social and emotional rupture Didion experienced at her mother's death in 2001 (her father had died in 1992) and the subsequent questioning of her beliefs, values and self-identity prompted by her 'sadness at becoming an orphan' (Scatamacchia 2004-05: 82):

This book represents an exploration into my own confusions about the place and the way in which I grew up, confusions as much about America as about California, misapprehensions and misunderstandings that are so much a part of who I became that to this day I still confront them only obliquely (Didion 2003: 34).

In fact Didion has long regarded her writing as a rigorous exercise in critical self-reflection and articulation that imposes itself on, and makes similar demands of, the reader:

In many ways writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act... there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space (Didion 1984: 5).

Morrison argues, however, that *Where I Was From* is 'less a memoir than a mea culpa. What Didion owns up to is not a fleshly weakness or act of cruelty or some failure in her personal life, but a confusion about where she came from, California. She got it wrong, she says. It's not the place she grew up believing it to be, and never was' (2004: n.p). In particular Didion critically deconstructs three potent myths of the 'California dream' that were celebrated in her earlier writings – the socially redemptive and liberating power of California's pioneers; post-war social change as a primary manifestation of the vagaries and contradictions of democratic, market

forces, but by contrast driven largely by state and federal government interventionist regimes that represent a collusive betrayal of laissez faire individualism; and the associated efficacy and limits of self-reliant individualism (Morrison 2004; Scatamacchia 2004-05).

Numerous commentators have noted that Didion shifts noticeably in her valorisation of the pioneer ethos to conclude that 'the crossing was far removed from the noble odyssey chronicled by California mythmakers. Rather than a noble odyssey, it was "a mean scrambling for survival" (Scatamacchia 2004-05: 72). She also reflects that state and federal subsidization of aerospace and defence industries gave rise to California's post-war economic boom that also led to extensive real estate and population developments. This 'economy based on the threat of nuclear war' (Scatamacchia 2004-05: 77) promoted large-scale housing developments that resulted in the breaking up of large ranches on which self-reliance was the dominant ethic. However when government support was removed after four decades, around 1992, this led not only to persistent, lurching economic crises for the state, but it further undermined and revealed the mythology and limits of the ethos of rugged, self-reliant, unfettered individualism that so many Californians ascribe to (Scatamacchia 2004-05; Morrison 2004).

Didion's stance on individualism has undoubtedly shifted over time. Arguably, however, it has always been underpinned by durable aspects of her narrated self-identity. This includes her formative years as a 'fearful' child (Kakutain 1984: 35) – a motif that Didion repeats in *The Year of Magical Thinking*: 'I was born fearful' (2011 [2005]: 98) – and later as an adult who embodies a frailty of body (Muggli 1987; Kakutain 1984) and to a lesser extent mind, she suffered variously from multiple sclerosis, depression, a nervous breakdown and acute social awkwardness (Didion 1979, Didion 2011 [2005]; Flanagan 2012). Most importantly for this argument, Didion has never really been convinced of the capacity of the individual, nor of the social contract, to ensure a reasoned, ethical and worthwhile existence (Friedman 1984). Accordingly Didion perceives herself as consistently inhabiting a position of marginality – during her socialisation in an upper-middle class family, as an English major at University of California Berkeley, and even when enjoying success and acclaim within the American literati and Hollywood sets: 'I would say I *am* a victim. But you don't live every day of your life walking around talking about how alienated you are – you'd start sounding like Woody Allen's *Interiors*' (Kakutain 1984: 31).

Friedman argues that Didion views the world as atomized, even nihilistic, and has little faith in the efficacy or trustworthiness of universalising orders of sociality, politics or morality:

Like the existentialists, Didion sees no hope for the meaning of existence in the way the world is organized. For her, the world is 'atomized.' As she puts in the 'The White Album,' there is no 'narrative.' There is no God, no dependable system governing the social order. For the existentialists, the 'narrative' may be recovered by the individual. Didion, however, has no faith in the authority of individual choice and action. The individual in

her view is not endowed with the power to recreate the world, imbue it with meaning, restore coherence and purpose (1984: 81).

Friedman also argues that Didion's writing displays a marked tendency to see the world 'in fragments rather than reduced to the isolated self. The Didion heroine generally lacks a well-defined sense of self to isolate from the world. She is continually establishing and re-establishing her selfhood in relation to others and to the past' (1984: 82). Didion's writings and life perspectives are not, however, simply nihilistic in orientation, but appear to be specifically Freudian in orientation, locating the sources of human suffering in the tripartite of 'the superior power of nature, the frailty of our bodies, and the inadequacy of the institutions that regulate people's relations with one another in the family, the state and society' (Freud 2004 [1930]: 29).

I argue, however, that Friedman's argument is overdrawn and that Didion, rather than having no faith in the individual (or later in the mythologization of American self-reliant individualism), is constantly interrogating the motives, desires, aspirations, ethics and actions of the individual in specific contexts. As such Didion seeks to examine in detail the agency of individuals in relation to their relationships with others – particularly with institutions, moralities, social intimates and strangers. Didion persistently interrogates the barriers, opportunities, successes and failures of an ideally culpable, reasoning, informed and agentic individual – and in doing so demonstrates a resolute commitment to the fundamental tenets and ideals of reflexive individualism. In fact Friedman in part notes this when he states that Didion is primarily interested in exploring 'the specific, the particular, the personal, the individual because having come of age in the fifties, in the "silent" generation, that is how she experiences the world' (1984: 89). Or as Didion herself writes: 'I... appreciate the elaborate systems with which some people manage to fill the void... whether they are as accessible as alcohol and heroin and promiscuity or as hard to come by as faith in God or History' (quoted in Friedman 1984: 88-89). As Friedman concedes, Didion:

Redeems the nihilism that a vision of an atomized world invites, allows meaning to penetrate her severe universe, with individual commitments that give purpose to the life of the person making them... [although] the commitments are by definition 'doomed and extreme' because there is no coherent order into which they may be absorbed (1984: 87).

Accordingly for Didion – and as evident in her grief narrative *The Year of Magical Thinking* – the rational, informed, agentic individual is manifested 'right' whenever their context specific actions and interactions affirm, maintain or enhance the personal commitments they have made to themselves and to intimate others (most notably lovers, family and friends) – assuming of course that in the first instance these commitments serve to advance the lot of recipients in ways that are moral or good (Davidson 1984). For example, Didion, who has an almost intuitive mistrust of social institutions and conventions, writes in *The Year of Magical Thinking* how she surprises herself by finding joy and personal fulfilment in the ritual routines of domestic care of

a child and husband (Didion 2011 [2005]: 190-191). Of course, therein lies a rub, as notions of moral or good are likely to vary according to evolving context and individual aspirations – as such the Didion ethic must assume a practice of constant interrogation, critical review and positionality.

For Didion, however, there is surety and order (as in the predictable sequencing of cause and effect) in the forces of nature – in the rise and fall of the San Antonio fault-line (Friedman 1984) or in the inevitable trajectories of the sun, moon, tides and time (Davidson 1984; Didion 1984, 2011 [2005] – see below). Indeed Didion asserts that she is ‘really happy’, even ‘cheerful’ (Davidson 1984: 20) when contemplating the wonders of a night sky, for instance. And despite Didion’s distrust of the structures and institutions of humankind to provision a universal good or moral, she nevertheless overlooks the social, political and economic constructs of empirical scientific observation to also find surety in the facts of physics, geology and other hard sciences: ‘Although Didion doubts the *meaning* of facts, doubts “narratives,” she has always trusted in the particular, in the reality of facts’ (Friedman 1984: 88 – also Muggli 1987).

Though, as might be expected for someone who constantly problematizes, yet idealizes, the agentic individual, ‘Her “I” goes beyond the intentionally neutral voice of the daily newsreporter – it is a created, shifting character who speaks memorably and who sometimes anatomizes her own responses’ (Muggli 1987: 402). For Didion the goal of journalistic and non-fiction writing is therefore the type of objectivity desired and assumed ‘by “precision journalists” trained in sociology and statistics’ (Muggli 1987: 406) and she ‘clings to detail as though it alone convinces her she is in the presence of the actual’ (Lynne T. Hanley quoted in Muggli 1987: 420). Not surprisingly Didion considers that the personally ‘uninterpreted Image is a timeless moment of despair – it is an inexplicable part of an inexplicable world, evoking a chaos indecipherable’ (Muggli 1987: 410). As such, and arguably also in accord with the fundamental tenets and sentiment ethics of individualized interpretation, Didion pointedly prefers *emblem over image* and therefore ‘does not tell us what she heard, but what she might have heard’ (Muggli 1987: 406).

### **Didion’s year of ruptured agency**

In *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2011 [2005]) Didion examines her experiences and responses to the rupture – intimate, emotional, social, life trajectory – occasioned by the twin tragedies of the sudden, critical illness her adult daughter, Quintana, who was comatosed in hospital when her father, Didion’s husband of forty years, John Dunne, died suddenly of a heart attack five days later. So traumatic is this rupturing that it appreciably escapes her capacities as a professional observer and writer:

The way I write is who I am, or have become, yet this is 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 expression, 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 (2011 [2005]: 7-8).

In response to this rupture in the fabric of her existence Didion frequently feels helpless, out of control, that her aspirations and agency are misunderstood or thwarted by circumstance and responding others – institutions, professionals, friends, etc. She also laments being particularly prone at this time to deranged, magical or irrational thinking and emotional responses, which significantly contribute to her sense of being unable to effectively manage unfolding situations toward personally desirable outcomes.

In problematizing her magical thinking, however, Didion clearly valorizes an individualism that rests on rational, informed and pragmatic agency (Balk 2006): ‘In time of trouble, I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information was control’ (2011 [2005]: 44). Similarly Didion displays a pronounced awareness of the apparent necessity to publicly demonstrate her self control. This is especially evident immediately following John’s heart attack when she is described by the hospital’s social worker as a ‘cool customer’ and responds by wondering ‘what an uncool customer would be allowed to do. Break down? Require sedation? Scream?’ (ibid: 16). Didion also writes that when she arrives at the undertakers the following day she is ‘so determined to avoid any inappropriate response (tears, anger, helpless laughter at the Oz-like hush) that I had shut down all response’ (ibid: 18). Even at the moment of John’s heart attack and his attendance by paramedics, Didion demonstrates the presence of a calculating, agentic self when she systematically reasons through what is required for John’s impending move to the hospital:

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. I found my handbag and a set of keys and a summary John’s doctor had made of his medical history (ibid: 12; see also 28).

Throughout her grief narrative Didion constantly interrogates the ideals, negotiations and limitations of her reflexive individuality that inform her self-identity in the interrelated fields of marriage, motherhood, illness, death and grieving. In this Didion addresses many of the ideals of reflexive individualism, namely quests for personal autonomy; elective and enriching forms of sociality; institutional engagements and frustrations; the judiciousness of rational versus emotional response; and progressive (or at least adaptive) and evolving identities (self and public). In particular Didion discusses the tension she experiences in oscillating between rational, calculated thinking and her emotional responses, or what Didion refers to as ‘magical

thinking' (ibid: 33), which she regards as a form of psychological 'derangement' (ibid: 37). She also writes about her attempts to forensically understand the circumstances of John's death, and her consequent, intimate role as an ideally agentic and informed individual who seeks to alter events and outcomes towards the positive. Another common theme is the institutional – primarily medical – engagements that Didion negotiates and constructs, and particularly how these either enable or impede her desired agency. And lastly, how through critically reflecting on these, she experiences a series of realisations about herself and the social milieu she inhabits – particularly concerning intimate relationships such as marriage, the nature of grief and mourning, and of herself as an ideally agentic, informed and progressive or adaptive individual. This examination is pursued within a historical retrospective concerning Didion's role and emerging aspirations as wife and mother in forming a life with John and Quintana respectively, within the immediacy of the circumstances prompted by their respective traumas, and finally in terms of crafting a new, post-rupture identity, supported by corresponding knowledge, value and meaning paradigms.

In the opening lines of Didion's grief memoir this focus on an ideally rational and agentic individual is firmly established via her framing of the issue of 'self-pity':

*Life changes fast.*

*Life changes in the instant.*

*You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.*

***The question of self-pity*** (emphasis mine – ibid: 3).

Didion's 'life changes fast/question of self-pity' axiom, which were the first words she wrote in January 2004, 'a day or two or three after the fact' (ibid: 3),<sup>5</sup> is repeated on a number of occasions (ibid: 3, 77, 192) throughout her memoir (including, in large font, across the back cover of the paperback I possess – 2011 [2005]). Aside from being one of several elegiac chants in her memoir (Luckhurst 2009), these lines also introduce Didion's notion of self-pity and the accordant ideals and pragmatics of agentic individualism that vex her. Didion's 'question of self-pity' is a notion that may appear as a particularly severe framing and assessment of her initial feelings of shock, sadness, loss and other emotional responses to John's sudden death. As such Didion expresses both an implicit and explicit expectation that, as an individual who has experienced, and just as importantly who has crafted, privilege and good in her life, she should now respond in ways that exemplify the ideals and pragmatics of an informed, rational and progressive or adaptive individual:

I kept saying to myself that I had been lucky all my life. The point, as I saw it, was that this gave me no right to think of myself as unlucky now.

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<sup>5</sup> Although Didion wrote this passage just days after John's death, she did not return to write her memoir until 'Nine months and five days' (ibid: 6) later.

This was what passed for staying on top of the self-pity question.

I even believed it (ibid: 172).

Didion also assumes her concern with self-pity is universal – ‘People in grief think a great deal about self-pity. We worry it, dread it, scourge our thinking for signs of it’ (ibid: 192) – potentially reflecting the potent hegemony that reflexive individualism represents especially among privileged sectors of society. And aside from directly linking feelings of self-pity to associated feelings of grief and sorrow generated by the death of an intimate (see below), Didion also associates her feelings to the contemporary Western ‘denial of death’ – both of which she recognises are structurally cast as failures of individual rationality, control and management:

Visible mourning reminds us of death, which is construed as unnatural, a failure to manage the situation. ‘A single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty,’ Philippe Ariès wrote to the point of this aversion in *Western Attitudes toward Death*. ‘But one no longer has the right to say so aloud.’ We remind ourselves repeatedly that our own loss is nothing compared to the loss experienced (or, the even worse thought, not experienced) by he or she who died; this attempt at corrective thinking serves only to plunge us deeper into the self-regarding deep. (*Why didn’t I see that, why am I so selfish.*) The very language we use when we think about self-pity betrays the deep abhorrence in which we hold it: 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*. Self-pity remains both the most common and the most universally reviled of our character defects (ibid 192-193 – emphases in original).

It is interesting to note that Didion’s life changes fast/question of self-pity axiom also demonstrates how the deployment of emblematic, almost clichéd phrases such as ‘*life as you know it ends*’ can establish a connection with the commonplace discourses, experiences and aspirations of an anticipated readership. This technique of association is additionally evident when Didion effectively translates her axiom into ‘working class’ vernacular when reporting on the utterances of co-workers of an injured man who occupies a bed next to Quintana in the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine at the New York University Medical Center: ‘Everything’s going along as usual and then all shit breaks loose’ (ibid: 126). Didion likewise reflects on the circumstances of another patient: ‘There had been a fall from a ladder, he had seemed all right. One more perfectly ordinary day. Then he had trouble speaking. *Everything’s going along as usual and then all shit breaks loose*’ (ibid: 126 – emphasis in original).

In highlighting the prior ordinariness of various contexts ruptured by traumatic change (such as John’s death from a massive heart attack), Didion seeks to establish this as an universal experience that explains why people (including herself) experience difficulty in even comprehending that a rupturing event has occurred:

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: confronted with sudden disaster we all focus on how unremarkable the circumstances were in which the unthinkable occurred, the clear blue sky from which the plane fell, the routine errand that ended on the shoulder with the car in flames... 'It was just an ordinary beautiful September day,' people still say when asked to describe the morning in New York when American Airlines 11 and United Airlines 175 got flown into the World Trade towers (ibid: 4).

Didion's insistence on the ordinariness of the circumstances leading up to John's death, and apparent in all similarly sudden and traumatic events, can be interpreted as a relatively benign assertion of the normative, commonplace and orderly habitual ideals of her everyday existence. Her assertions, while routine for some in contemporary Western societies, nevertheless reveal an assumption of a 'good', untroubled life in which one is routinely distanced from the necessities and immediacies of securing adequate food, shelter, peaceful co-habitation, political stability, etc., and which are therefore characteristic of individuals who experience steady-state economic, social and/or political privilege (Bourdieu 1984).

Part of this steady-state privilege is an expectation that one's physical and mental health will be likewise individually managed and predictable, and if not necessarily optimal, will not usually present serious or catastrophic impediments to one's desired intimate, professional and other social aspirations. This is something Didion realises in the course of writing her memoir when she is reflecting on her and John's management of his heart condition:

'As I recall this I realize how open we are to the persistent message that we can avert death.

And to its punitive correlative, the message that if death catches us we have only ourselves to blame' (ibid: 206).

Didion demonstrates an emergent awareness of the strong links between economic and other forms of privilege and the normalisation of agentic individualism when outlining the responses of friends and family to Quintana's illness:

One thing I noticed during the course of those weeks at UCLA was that many people I knew, whether in New York or in California or in other places, shared a habit of mind usually credited to the very successful. They believed absolutely in their own management skills...

I had myself for most of my life shared the same core belief in my ability to control events...

Yet I had always at some level apprehended, because I was born fearful, that some events in life would remain beyond my ability to control or manage them. Some events would just happen. This was one of those events. *You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.*

Many people to whom I spoke in those first days while Quintana lay unconscious at UCLA seemed free of this apprehension (ibid: 98-99).

Although Didion claims an appreciation of the barriers and limits to her agency, having been 'born fearful' (or at least socialized into this awareness by circumstance), she nevertheless demonstrates a resolute commitment to this central tenet of reflexive individualism throughout her memoir. In recalling instances that she experienced several years before when she had apprehended death, Didion now laments that she is personally unable to accept the actuality of John's death, linking this to her narcissistic orientations that generate the vexing issue of self-pity and also by implication her strong desire and love for her husband:

Why, if those were my images of death, did I remain so unable to accept the fact that he had died? Was it because I was failing to understand it as something that had happened to him? Was it because I was still understanding it as something that had happened to me? (ibid: 77).

The other major and associated concern addressed by Didion, and which likewise contaminates her ideals of agentic, informed, rational and progressive individualism, is the irrationality or 'magical thinking' (ibid: 33) she experiences immediately after John's death and for several months following. Didion's magical thinking manifests in a number of ways – firstly by believing, given the time differences between New York and the Pacific Coast, that if she could stop obituaries detailing John's death from appearing in the *Los Angeles Times* it could effectively reverse the outcome:

I found myself wondering, with no sense of illogic, if it had also happened in Los Angeles. I was trying to work out what time it had been when he died and whether it was that time yet in Los Angeles. (Was there time to go back? Could we have a different ending on Pacific time?) I recall being seized by a pressing need not to let anyone at the *Los Angeles Times* learn what had happened by reading it in *The New York Times* (ibid: 31).

Similarly Didion also believes, despite numerous offers of company, that she needs to be alone on the night<sup>6</sup> following John's death 'so that he could come back' (ibid: 33). Then a couple of months later, rather than give away all of John's clothes and shoes to charity, Didion keeps hold of some of his shoes, a favourite belt, and some clothing:

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<sup>6</sup> Didion does not discuss the possibility of bringing John's corpse back from the hospital to lie 'in state' in their home. It is interesting to speculate what effect, if any, this would have had on Didion's grieving experiences, especially as Didion was not afforded the transitional opportunities to live with, accept and effectively make her peace with a 'dead John' in their home and in circumstances that reproduced the intimacy of their work and domestic lives for forty years.

I stopped at the door to the room.

I could not give away the rest of his shoes.

I stood there for a moment, then realized why: he would need shoes if he was to return.

The recognition of this thought by no means eradicated the thought.

I have still not tried to determine (say, by giving away the shoes) if the thought has lost its power (ibid: 37).

Later Didion recalls how when completing a crossword puzzle in *The New York Times* – a day-starting activity she has assumed after John's death in the hope that the 'practice would encourage a return to constructive cognitive engagement' (ibid: 77) – she spontaneously responds to the clue for six down 'Sometimes you feel like...' (ibid: 77) with the answer:

'A motherless child'.

*'Motherless children have a real hard time–*

*Motherless children have such a real hard time–'* (ibid: 77-78 – emphasis in original).

This is done in full awareness that the answer can only have four letters and thus for Didion her response represents the depths of self-pity and irrationality to which she has sunk, a situation that thwarts her attempts to progressively move forward in certitude of adapting to her new circumstances of widowhood:

The correct answer for 6 Down was 'anut.' 'Anut?' A nut? Sometimes you feel like *a nut*? How far had I absented myself from the world of normal response?

Notice: the answers most instantly accessed ('a motherless child') was a wail of self-pity.

This was not going to be an easy failure of understanding to correct (ibid: 78 – emphasis in original).

Didion also believed that, in having fulfilled her social obligations by arranging an autopsy and funeral for John, she had effectively participated in the collusive notion maintained by others that he was dead and, accordingly, her private beliefs should now be endorsed and John should be enabled to return alive. A belief that was also manifested by Didion on seeing a photograph of John during the Academy Awards 'In Memoriam' montage on February 29, 2004, two months after his death (ibid: 35):

I had done it. I had acknowledged that he was dead. I had done this in as public a way as I could conceive....

Later I realized my immediate thought had been: *But I did the ritual. I did it all....*

*And it still didn't bring him back* (ibid: 43 – emphasis in original).

Later Didion reflects that:

'Bringing him back'. had been through those months my hidden focus, a magic trick. By late summer I was beginning to see this clearly. 'Seeing it clearly' did not yet allow me to give away the clothes he would need (ibid: 44).

Didion's agentic and 'by stealth' thoughts and actions also reflect her pragmatic awareness of the Goffmanesque negotiations and public persona performances (Goffman 1972 [1959]) that inform all self-other relationships, yet which ideally result in the will of the individual being recognised and enabled by others. It also clearly speaks to her deep love for John and her understandable desire that their life together continue as she attempts to orientate herself to the shock that this existence has been irrevocably ruptured.

Didion does not initially countenance that her magic thinking is in anyway an appropriate, understandable emotional response in a time of immense trauma and instead frames it as a problematic form of 'delusionary thinking' (ibid: 22) and as a 'level of derangement' (ibid: 37):

Through the winter and spring there had been occasions on which I was incapable of thinking rationally. I was thinking as small children think, as if my thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome. In my case this disordered thinking had been covert, noticed I think by no one else, hidden even from me, but it had also been, in retrospect, both urgent and constant (ibid: 35).

Moreover Didion's magical thinking is premised on a seemingly contradictory, albeit strongly held premise, that scientific fact could reveal not only the cause of John's death but also what Didion and others could do to reverse the outcome:

An autopsy could show that what had gone wrong was something simple...

It could have required only a minor adjustment – a change in medication, say, or the resetting of a pacemaker. In this case, the reasoning went, they might still be able to fix it (ibid: 37).

This premise not only represents Didion's belief in the agency of the informed individual to manage and control events, but also reflects her faith in the power of empirical, scientific facts to provision the knowledge required by the agentic individual to act successfully – a nexus that her emotional, magical thinking was however undermining:

Throughout the summer and fall I had been increasingly fixed on locating the anomaly that could have allowed this to happen.

In my rational mind I knew how it happened. In my rational mind I had spoken to many doctors who told me how it happened (ibid 204).

In my rational mind I knew that.

I was not however operating from my rational mind.

Had I been operating from my rational mind I would not have been entertaining fantasises that would not have been out of place at an Irish wake (ibid 205).

Nor does Didion initially allow that her contradictory emotional and rational selves, while nevertheless mutually constitutive of her personal desire for control and order in the lives of herself and those to whom she is personally committed, is also generated by the deep and abiding love she has for John. As such his death is an anomaly of such staggering proportions, it effectively demands, and yet transcends, all of Didion's rational and emotional responses. Didion does note, however, that she is fully, and has long been, aware of John's heart condition. Although she is less definitive concerning the statistical likelihood that he was at some point prone to die from a massive heart attack, something John had written about (Dunne 1989: Didion 2011 [2005]: 154) and had repeatedly discussed with her (2011 [2005]: 157, 196). John, when he was in his mid-fifties, had poignantly written of first becoming aware of his congenital heart condition (his father died of a massive heart attack aged 52, his paternal uncle similarly, aged 50), and of his subsequent angioplasty and valve replacement/heart bypass in 1987 some 18 months later:

'I think I know how to end this thing now,' I said to my wife on the walk home from Tim's. I knew I did not have to spell it out to her.

'Terrific,' she said, the novelist in her taking precedence over the wife who knew her husband too well ever to express the concern she felt, the husband who was so volatile except in times of crisis.

'It's a hell of an ending,' I said (Dunne 1989: 37).

Due to Quintana drifting in and out of consciousness, Didion has to heartbreakingly inform her of her father's death on three separate occasions – the first time being fifteen days after his heart attack: 'I told her what had happened. I *stressed the history of cardiac problems*, the long run of luck that had finally caught up with us, the apparent suddenness but *actual inevitability of the event*' (ibid: 84 – emphasis mine). As such Didion reveals that she knew – at least in her rational mind – that John's death, while sudden, was not unexpected in either this aspect, nor in the actuality of a massive heart attack as the cause. In fact in the year of his death John had dealt with a 'series of enervating medical issues' (ibid: 79). His cardiac rhythm kept slipping 'with increasing frequency into atrial fibrillation' (ibid: 79) to such an extent that his last cardioversion, or corrective electric shock procedure, 'had required not one but two shocks...

[and] was no longer a useful option' (ibid: 79). John had consequently 'undergone a more radical cardiac intervention, a radio-frequency ablation of the atrial-ventricular node and the subsequent implantation of a Medtronic Kappa 900 SAR pacemaker' (ibid: 79). In addition John had 'repeatedly' told Didion that he 'believed he was dying' (ibid: 78), that 'if he did not go to Paris in November he would never again go to Paris' (ibid: 80). Only days before his death he had said he was dissatisfied with his life, that all his writing achievements were 'worthless' (ibid: 82) and he had also compiled a list, in 'faint pencil', of the all characters that had died in his latest novel (ibid: 147).

Didion writes that she, however, dismissed his fears and pre-occupations as depression following the completion of a new novel – *Nothing Lost* – a form of post-writing dissonance John had experienced in the past (ibid: 79). However, her recollections of dismissing John's concerns contain a palpable sense of regret:

*I now know how I'm going to die*, he said in 1987 after the left anterior descending artery had been opened by angioplasty.

*You no more know how you're going to die than I do or anyone else does*, I had said in 1987 (Didion 2011 [2005]: 203 – emphasis in original).

As such Didion acknowledges that John's understanding – both medical and personal – of his situation was to prove to be far more astute or realistic than her own (see below). However, Didion's assertion not only expresses her love and desire for John, and that accordingly an ending to their life together is unimaginable, but also seeks to effectively justify her accordant irrational denials or oversights regarding the serious and likely eventual outcome of John's heart condition by according primacy to her rational responses to this circumstance (re: it is nature or fate that decides when an individual dies). Another reading is that Didion is also asserting her faith (perhaps emotionally generated in this circumstance) in the capacity of scientific and medical knowledge to successfully intervene and positively alter the outcome:

As I saw it, the timing had been providential, the intervention successful, the problem solved, the mechanism fixed. You no more know how you're are going to die than I do or anyone else does, I remember saying. I realize now that his was the more realistic view (ibid: 157-158: also 37, 200-203, 206).

Didion thus regards her request for an autopsy as mixture of rational and magical thinking – rational in that it is proposed to empirically identify the cause of death (ibid: 200-203) and magical in that identifying such facts will enable her and medical experts to somehow intervene and reverse the outcome (ibid: 35). On receipt of the autopsy report in December 2004, however, Didion gains a fully rational understanding that no other acts – historical or circumstantial – could have altered the ending.

Only after I read the autopsy report did I begin to believe what I had been repeatedly told: nothing he or I had done or not done had either caused or could have prevented his death. He had inherited a bad heart. It would eventually kill him. The date on which it would kill him had already been, by many medical interventions, postponed. When the date did come, no action I could have taken in our living room – no home defibrillator, no CPR, nothing short of a fully equipped crash cart and the technical facility to follow cardioversion within seconds with IV medication – could have given him even one more day (ibid: 206-207).

### **A newly nuanced Didion**

This awareness reaffirms Didion's commitment to the empirical facts and institutions of science. It also reproduces the tenets of progressive/adaptive, knowledgeable and agentic individualism in marking a tipping point from which Didion adopts a new rational understanding that facilitates her move away from magical thinking toward more controlled mourning and the fashioning of a newly informed, agentic, individual identity (Dennis 2008; Didion 2011 [2005]: 212). In part this is a partial shifting and partial enhancement of her self-identity prior to rupture. This is evident in the title that Didion gives her memoir. Initially Didion refers to her experience as '*My year of magical thinking*' (ibid: 33 – emphasis mine) thus fully embedding her personality and identity in the irrational emotionality she experienced following John's death. However, Didion, after completing a process of critical reflection and arriving at a newly rendered understandings and associated identity constructs, in part, then distances herself from the cogency of her 'magical self' by titling her memoir in the more abstract or generalised *The Year of Magical Thinking* (emphasis mine). This title also infers notions of temporariness, that Didion's foray into deranged and magical thinking was a momentary, ultimately redeemable, malady that she effectively overcame once she had comprehended the forensic causes of John's death and similarly arrived at a more empathetic understanding of her emotional responses, both of which she incorporates into her post-rupture identity and associated constructs of agentic individualism. This notion of a temporary disorder perhaps also gives insight into Didion's decision not to re-edit the book to include the circumstances of Quintana's death. In fact Didion concludes that her temporary and episodic foray into irrational, magical thinking, was well within the range of normal grieving (see below) and that her concern with her derangement tends, in part, to reflect the primacy that she accorded her rational, pragmatic, agentic self, prior to and immediately after John's death. By the end of her memoir Didion has effectively incorporated into her self-identity greater acceptance and import of her emotional responses at times of crisis, as well as of more nuanced, dialectic appreciation of her ideal of agentic, rational and progressive individualism.

Interestingly, however, Didion although aware of her own repeated denial of the catastrophic potential of John's heart condition – '*We call it the widowmaker, pal*' (ibid: 203: also Dunne 1989: 23 – emphasis in original) – and of John's stated belief that he was dying, does not openly

conclude this was another form of irrationality and magical thinking. Although Didion perhaps signals this when she unconvincingly states that immediately after John collapses she consults a list of ambulance numbers that she has taped by telephone in case 'someone else' needs them:

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.

*Someone else* (2011 [2005]: 11 – emphasis mine).

Nevertheless by omitting to frame her denial as another manifestation of magical thinking or problematic illogic, Didion remains consistent in her beliefs about the irresistible forces of nature and the potentially efficacious interventions of science or medicine. In denying the seriousness of John's heart condition, Didion retains her belief in the timely capacity of science to successfully change or forestall a natural disaster – accordingly this is framed as a rational, not magical, belief. By contrast, however, once John is deceased and this particular force of nature is neither irrefutable nor reversible, any beliefs that Didion can bring him back to life by various means – including using science or empirical facts – is necessarily rendered magical or irrational. Yet both beliefs are generated within Didion's deep and abiding love for John, so much so that life without him – or without Quintana – is for her unthinkable (ibid: 197). This again reveals the potentially contradictory, insistently negotiated, and limited character of idealized reflexive individualism, especially in regard to issues of emotionality versus rationality, and the mutualities generated within and the import of elective sociality for the autonomous individual.

Didion also comes to understand, through reflecting on the variously innate, cultural and historical manifestations of loss and grief, that her magical thinking and correlated inability to logically comprehend the causes and actuality of John's death were not necessarily forms of complicated grief or pathological bereavement. She acknowledges that the delay of John's funeral for nearly three months to enable Quintana to attend potentially represents the type of 'circumstantial factors' (ibid: 55) that many psychologists believe interrupt normal grieving processes and result in pathological grieving. Didion, however, rejects the alleged pathologizing effects of another cause of complicated grief identified by psychologists, one that she has 'read repeatedly, was that in which the survivor and the deceased had been unusually dependent on one another' (ibid: 48). In fact in reflecting on the constructive and enriching intimacy she and John enjoyed as fellow writers working together from home for forty years, Didion disputes contemporary popular and prescriptive notions of marriage in which individuals ideally, indeed routinely, work toward retaining their personal independence. She also rejects that individuality (which regularly manifests as competitive and combative in terms of professional, occupational and other social pursuits) could cause tension within a marriage, especially one such as hers and John's where they were fellow writers working from home:

Because we were both writers and both worked at home our days were filled with the sound of each other's voices...

There was no separation between our investments or interests in any given situation. Many people assumed that we must be, since sometimes one and sometimes the other would get the better review, the bigger advance, in some way 'competitive,' that our private life must be a minefield of professional envies and resentments. This was so far from the case that the general insistence on it came to suggest certain lacunae in the popular understanding of marriage (ibid: 16-17)

As such Didion also implies a contestation of the structural pressures that result in the atomisation of individuals and the concordant ideal of avoiding dependency on an intimate other.

Didion – in accord with the tenets of progressive individualism and the search for new meaning, value and self-identity following a traumatic rupture to one's life world – eventually arrives at a realization that her spontaneous emotional responses, or irrational magical thinking, are within the range of normal grieving and are not a cataclysmic failure of the agentic, rational individual. This change is particularly evident toward the end of her memoir when she critically reflects on the process of grieving she has experienced. She notes that 'Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it' (ibid: 188) and concedes that her prior judgements of grieving individuals had been overly harsh and lacking in empathy:

I remember despising the book Dylan Thomas's widow Caitlin wrote after her husband's death, *Leftover Life to Kill*. I remember being dismissive of, even censorious about, her 'self-pity,' her 'whining,' her 'dwelling on it.' *Leftover Life to Kill* was published in 1957. I was twenty-two years old. Time is the school in which we learn (ibid: 198).

Didion also notes how she now comprehends why Hindu Indian widows practice suttee, throwing themselves on funeral pyres (ibid: 75)<sup>7</sup> and reveals a new comprehension of the challenges faced by grieving individuals:

In fact the grieving have urgent reasons, even an urgent need, to feel sorry for themselves. Husbands walk out, wives walk out, divorces happen, but these husbands and wives leave behind them webs of intact associations, however acrimonious. Only the survivors of a death are truly left alone. The connections that made up their life – both the deep connections and the apparently (until they are broken) insignificant connections – have all vanished (ibid 193-194).

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<sup>7</sup> As such Didion startlingly overlooks the deep-structural coercions – religious, social and economic – that significantly inform this practice and as such renders suttee an act of impassioned, if desolate, individualized agency that Didion admires.

In her newly acquired empathy for the feelings of sadness, loss and grief experienced by 'death's survivors', Didion also moves toward an understanding that grief-induced self-pity is a phenomenon significantly linked to the structures of her society that compel individualism, atomization, and the social, dyadic exclusivity of romantic relationships. This is especially evident when Didion reflects on her forty years of marriage to John, working and living together 24/7 for all but the 'first five months' of their married life:

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...

'I think I am beginning to understand why grief feels like suspense,' C. S. Lewis wrote after the death of his wife. 'It comes from the frustration of so many impulses that had become habitual. Thought after thought, feeling after feeling, action after action, had H. [Lewis's pseudonym for his deceased wife] for their object. Now their target is gone. I keep on through habit fitting an arrow to the string, then I remember and have to lay the bow down ...'

We are repeatedly left, in other words, with no further focus than ourselves, a source from which self-pity naturally flows (ibid 194-195).

### **An agentic Didion survives anew**

Didion regularly asserts the primacy (albeit often thwarted) of agentic self throughout her memoir and in fact effectively resolves the various tensions and conflicts she has experienced by fashioning a newly informed, arguably more nuanced, appreciation of her agentic, informed and progressive individuality and thereby retains this as an ideal. Didion's agentic self is most apparent in her descriptions of intentional encounters with others – for example, where she asserts that she has allowed others to believe John is dead (ibid: 35) or where she reads medical texts so as to be constructively informed of, and thus able to substantially monitor and contribute to, Quintana's medical care:

*Read, learn, work it up, go to the literature,*

*Information is control* (ibid: 94 – also 44, 95, 102, 104-106 – emphasis in original).

Didion's agentic orientation is also especially evident whenever she describes her encounters with institutional norms or representatives that in some ways conflict with, or who fail to appreciate, the exactitudes of her personal circumstances and identity. For example when discussing that John had been taken to New York Hospital – one that she was not familiar with – Didion writes: 'I could make this unfamiliar hospital work. I could be useful, I could arrange the transfer to Columbia-Presbyterian once he was stabilized' (ibid: 14). Didion was intent that

once John (who was already dead) was stabilized, he would be moved to their regular hospital where his medical condition was already known and arguably her (and his) agency would be optimized:

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) (ibid: 14 – emphasis mine).

In this passage Didion expresses her agency alongside an awareness of the necessity of institutional engagements and the potential for institutions to either enable or thwart her personal agendas. Didion also reveals how she both attempts to push doctors for information that will enable her to manage situations – ‘I recall pressing the surgeon on this point, myself trying (one more time) to manage the situation, get answers’ (ibid: 100) – and how she purposefully manages her public persona to ensure her agentic desires are optimally received and acted upon by institutional representatives. For example, after reading ‘over and over’ (ibid: 102) *Intensive Care: A Doctor’s Journal* by John. F. Murray, former chief of the Pulmonary and Critical Care Division at the University of California, Didion writes ‘I had learned much that proved useful in the *calibration of my daily dealings* with ICU doctors at Beth Israel North’ (ibid: 102 – emphasis mine). Didion goes on to describe a situation where she attempts to purposefully downplay her medical understandings to facilitate her constructive intervention in Quintana’s care. This was what Didion called ‘the edema contest of wills’ (ibid: 103) concerning the optimal administration of intravenous fluid and the potential failure of attending physicians to distinguish between hydration and over-hydration of an patient awaiting extubation:

*I had learned* that many young residents made a similar error of caution when it come to extubation itself: their tendency, because the outcome was uncertain, was to delay the procedure longer than necessary.

*I had registered these lessons. I had made use of them:* the tentative question here, the expressed wish there. I had ‘wondered’ if she might not be ‘waterlogged.’ (‘Of course I don’t know, I just know how she looks.’) *I had deliberately used the word ‘waterlogged.’ I had noticed a stiffening when I used the word ‘edema.’* I had further ‘wondered’ if she might not be better able to breathe if she was less waterlogged. (‘Of course I’m not a doctor, but it just seems logical.’)...

*You knew you had made headway* when a doctor to whom you had made one or another suggestion presented, a day later, the plan as his own (ibid 102-103 – emphases mine).

Didion also expresses affront when hospital representatives fail to recognise, and as a result demean, her circumstances and personality – most notably when ‘arguing’ (ibid: 123) with doctors about the timing of a tracheostomy procedure on Quintana:

‘Everything’s looking good,’ they kept saying. ‘She’s going to get better sooner once we do the trach. She’s already off the EEG, maybe you didn’t notice that.’

Maybe I didn’t notice that?

My only child?

My unconscious child?

Maybe I didn’t notice when I walked into the ICU that her brain waves were gone? That the monitor above her bed was dark, dead?. (ibid 123)

A trach would leave no cosmetic effect to speak of, ‘only a little dimple scar,’ ‘as time goes by maybe no scar at all.’

They kept mentioning this last point, as if the basis for my resistance to the trach was the scar. They were doctors, however freshly minted. I was not. Ergo, any concerns I had must be cosmetic, frivolous (ibid: 125).

This tension Didion describes not only reflects the primacy she accords her informed, agentic self, but also just as importantly highlights the importance she similarly accords to her personal commitments and especially those generated within the intimacy of her marriage and daughter relationships. In recalling the years of living with John’s heart condition and with various medical interventions, Didion poignantly reveals that her underlying love and care for John was most probably the root cause of this notable blind-spot in an otherwise informed, rational and wilful individual:

I recall that John and I took different views of what had happened in 1987. As he saw it, he now had a death sentence, temporarily suspended. He often said, after the 1987 angioplasty, that he now knew how he was going to die. As I saw it, the timing had been providential, the intervention successful, the problem solved, the mechanism fixed (ibid: 157-158).

Likewise Didion is not without self awareness of the potential conflict and tension her meddling can cause:

At some point I noticed that I was trying like a sheepdog to herd the doctors, pointing out edema to one intern, reminding another to obtain a urine culture to check out the blood in the Foley catheter line....

These efforts did not endear me to the young men and women who made up the house staff ('If you want to manage this case I'm signing off,' one finally said) but they made me feel less helpless (ibid: 127-128).

Didion also mentions how, on occasions, John had complained during arguments that she always had to be right:

*Why do you always have to be right.*

*Why do you always have to have the last word.*

*For once in your life just let it go* (ibid: 141 – emphasis in original).

Although in the same passage Didion also reveals an anxiety typical of those embroiled in reflexive individualism – a concern that, as discussed above, results frequently from the tension between *de jure* and *de facto* autonomy and the constantly shifting sands of knowledge and authority that individuals attempt to negotiate their agency through: 'He [John] never understood that in my own mind I was never right' (ibid: 138).

Interestingly though with respect to the scope and extent of her meddling, Didion in part attributes this to her isolation from John rather than a structurally generated manifestation of agentic individuality rendered as a personality characteristic:

So profound was the isolation in which I was then operating that it did not immediately occur to me that for the mother of the patient to show up at the hospital wearing blue cotton scrubs could only be viewed as a suspicious violation of boundaries (ibid: 106).

Nevertheless throughout these encounters and negotiations Didion demonstrates a persistent primacy in her agency and in doing so also reveals her deep lack of faith in social structures, institutions and their representatives to successfully bring order and control to her circumstance – particularly those of her personally desired identity and committed relationships. Although this orientation is paradoxically ameliorated by her personal faith in scientific fact, Didion nevertheless repeatedly demonstrates a scepticism concerning the ability of other individuals, including professionals, to correctly interpret and act upon these 'facts'. This orientation is revealed in her responses to the institutional engagement of John's death and Quintana's illness, and is also apparent in her recollections of the trouble she had in accepting the conventions of being 'a widow' (ibid: 208) and earlier of 'being a wife'. For example, Didion writes of how her plans for an 'unconventional' wedding ceremony were thwarted by the institutional and socially normative interventions of others:

My intention for the ceremony had been to have no entrance, no 'procession,' just stand up there and do it. 'Principals emerge,' I remember Nick [John's brother] saying helpfully: Nick got the plan, but the organist who had materialized did not, and suddenly I found

myself on my father's arm walking up the aisle and weeping behind my dark glasses (ibid: 70).

In fact Didion – in collusion with John – appears to have adopted an ethos of effectively muddling through, of continually pursuing agency wherever possible, of defying or accepting convention where personally enriching, of accepting success or failure as it came, and beyond all of this, of critically reflecting on it all to determine what could be personally and progressively pursued in the future. Didion records that in 1990 John had written:

'As we walked down the aisle, we promised each other that we could get out of this next week and not wait until death did us part.'

That worked too. Somehow it had all worked.

Why did I think that this improvisation could never end?

If I had seen that it could, what would I have done differently?

What would he? (ibid: 211).

A similar ethos is apparent in Didion's engagement with motherhood. Quintana was adopted, so fully represents an intentional, personal pursuit of parenting by Joan and John. Didion, however, expresses surprise that she thoroughly enjoys the everyday rituals and demands of wifehood and motherhood, which she recognises are largely socially generated conventions, but which she comes to equate with the 'truths' of nature and science:

I learned to find equal meaning in the repeated rituals of domestic life. Setting the table. Lighting the candles. Building the fire. Cooking,...

*These fragments I have shored against my ruins*, were the words that came to mind then. These fragments mattered to me. I believed in them. That I could find meaning in the intensely personal nature of my life as a wife and mother did not seem inconsistent with finding meaning in the vast indifference of geology and the test shots; the two systems existed for me on parallel tracks that occasionally converged, notably during earthquakes (190-191 – emphasis in original; also 208).

In this Didion also retains her faith in the tenets of progressive/adaptive individualism – of the knowing, the critically reflective and intentionally strategizing agent – and especially in relation to evolving personal commitments made to intimate others, which manifest as both pragmatism and desire. Tellingly Didion writes of spontaneously crying during a routine check-up and following John's death, telling her doctor that "I just can't see the upside in this," I heard myself say by way of explanation' (ibid: 170). In fact Didion's commitment to the ideals and tenets of agentic, informed, rational and progressive/adaptive individualism, which in enactment are significantly guided by the personal commitments she has made to her husband and her child, is

evident throughout her memoir. For example, even though Didion is aware that Quintana's medical condition is very serious and largely outside her abilities to influence, she nevertheless tells her: '*You're safe, I remember whispering to Quintana when I first saw her in the ICU at UCLA. I'm here. You're going to be alright... I'm here. Everything's fine...* I said I would not leave until we could leave together' (ibid: 96 - emphases in original). Indeed Didion's memoir can be read as a discussion of the rupture of the nexus of these ideals and tenets of individualism, and of an uneven, still in process, recovery of the same.

This nexus also seemingly underlies Didion's valorisation of the atomization and inviolate individuality of contemporary social life. This is revealed when Didion asserts that even after forty years of an intimate marriage and working life with John:

I could no more know what he would say about UCLA and the trach than I could know whether he meant to leave the 'to' out of the sentence about J. J. McClure and Teresa Kean and the tornado. We imagined we knew everything the other thought, even when we did not necessarily want to know it, but in fact, I have come to see, we knew not the smallest fraction of what there was to know (ibid: 196).

This ethos reproduces Didion's long held 'frontier ethic', which 'means being left alone and leaving others alone. It is regarded by members of my family as the highest form of human endeavour' (Davidson 1984: 14). Didion has also been recorded as asserting that she does not seek to 'impose my own sense of what is wrong and what is right on other people. If I do impose, I feel very guilty about it, because it is entirely against the ethic in which I was brought up, which was strictly laissez-faire' (Stramberg 1984: 23). Clearly this represents both an ideal and a source of tension and frustration in Didion's life, especially when circumstances dictate that she feels compelled to impose her perceptions of right and wrong on others and particularly when she feels moved to defend her and her loved ones' well-being. As such Didion moves toward the conclusion that her and John's agency (and by implication the atomized agency of all interacting individuals) is in fact a dialogic interplay of personally held desires, beliefs, aspirations and commitments that both binds, and paradoxically blinds, them to the meaning and intent of the other:

*When something happens to me, he would frequently say.*

*Nothing will happen to you, I would say.*

*But if it does.*

*If it does, he would continue. If it did, for example, I was not to move to a smaller apartment. If it did I would be surrounded by people. If it did I would need to make plans to feed these people. If it did I would marry again within the year.*

*You don't understand, I would say.*

And in fact he did not. Nor did I: we were equally incapable of imagining the reality of life without the other (2008 [2004]: 196-197).

## **Conclusion**

“Order and control are terribly important to me,” says Didion’ (Kakutain 1984: 40). In the year – or at least for the nine months – following her husband’s sudden, but not unpredictable, death, Didion experiences a rupturing of order and control that are cataclysmic in proportion and scope. Her daily practice of intimacy, work and romantic care with John are irrevocably consigned to a past and to the vagaries, limitations and inevitable fading of memory. At the same time her only child, Quintana, is inexplicably taken seriously ill and is hospitalised. This alone would present a significant challenge to the love and care of many parents, although in Didion’s circumstances it also serves to complicate, and potentially prolong, her grieving over John’s death and her capacity to fashioning a post-death identity.

Not surprisingly Didion writes that many of her deeply held beliefs and values were tested during these traumatic times. In particular her previous negative assessment of the self-pitying of those grieving undergoes a dramatic and empathetic change. More importantly for this argument, Didion’s reflexive beliefs and practices of informed, rational and progressive agency are seemingly tested at every turn. Indeed her reflexive individuality is portrayed as a constant, frequently unsuccessful, processes of negotiation, one that is marked by oscillations in enactment, limitation, and restriction. This is especially evident in how Didion describes her intimate relationships with John and Quintana; in her frequent encounters with social and institutional norms and their representatives (especially doctors); in the tensions between her public and private personae; and likewise in the tension between her rational, informed self and her emotional, irrational self.

Nevertheless Didion’s belief in, and commitment to, many of the core tenets of reflexive individualism – especially an ethic of rational, informed, atomized, agentic and progressive or adaptive individuality – is maintained throughout, although it acquires a patina of experiential nuance and tension. Notably Didion comes to allow that in certain circumstances, an irrational, ‘magical thinking’ self is also a normal, even an ideal, response – as is the self who denies the obvious truth of situations such as the severity and likely outcome of John’s heart condition and the self who knowingly seeks to calm Quintana with assertions of agency that are knowingly limited.

In addition Didion’s scepticism in the social contract, and her seemingly paradoxical belief in the apparently empirical truths of science, are also both maintained. She repeatedly writes of a lack of faith in the judgement and practice of doctors, while seemingly in contradiction craves the receipt of the scientific fact of the autopsy to either vindicate or vilify her and their role in John’s

death. Didion's belief in the inevitable forces of nature is likewise maintained, although in many respects she emerges with a new appreciation of just how powerful and irreverent this force can be, of how it can penetrate and irrevocably change all layers of a person's existence – physical, mental, embodied, conscious, social and intimate.

Didion thus arrives at a newly minted awareness of the nexus and import of forces that influence her existence, and how in response she seeks to fashion an agentic, informed and progressive self. These include the inevitable forces of nature that sometimes routinely, at other times episodically, impinge on, and at times determine, circumstance; the potential intimacy of, and yet the inevitable gap or division within all, social relationships that necessarily arises from the atomization of the individual and which is significantly overcome by proper trust in the other; and the comparative potentials and limitations of her agency, especially as manifested in her commitments to intimate others (and by extension to all others). All are astutely, and as is Didion's wont as a writer, partly metaphorically and partly literally, portrayed in the final passage of her grief memoir:

I think about swimming with him into the cave at Portuguese Bend, about the swell of clear water, the way it changed, the swiftness and power it gained as it narrowed through the rocks at the base of the point. The tide had to be just right. We could only have done this a half dozen times at most during the two years we lived there but it is what I remember. Each time we did it I was afraid of missing the swell, hanging back, timing it wrong. John never was. You had to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change. He told me that. No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that (ibid: 227).

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**Walking Grieved:**  
**a meditation on love, loss & memory**

**by**

**peter j. howland**

## An introduction

*'The only truth is love beyond reason' (Alfred de Musset, 1810-1857)*

Karen was always fascinated by death.

Purchased her urn, when aged eighteen, in a flea market in the States somewhere. Santa Barbara I think.

I imagine it as a warm Saturday morning by a white sand, California beach filled with warm sun and energized by the measured vigour of Pacific rollers. A youthful Karen strolls along a bustling promenade, contributing to the spectacle and inspecting, with festive appreciation, the multitude of stalls hawking Mexican, Asian and other ethnic foodstuffs, dreamy handicrafts and jumbling bric-a-brac. She notices a second-hand stall and a pair of gaudy, faux 'ancient Chinese' ceramic vases, which are hand-painted in muted splendour with scenes of meandering rivers, spring flowers, aristocratic ladies and noble, fighting warriors. One is a lounge lamp. The other, without its lid, a potential vase. Karen is eighteen years old and already thinking ahead. A lamp for her lounge and a matching vase for the sideboard. Keepsakes for when the time comes, after children, grandchildren, a peaceful old age. One, as heirloom lamp in another lounge. The other, with lid sealed, as an urn for her ashes. For her lover's ashes. When the time and the lover are right. They are reasonably priced, although expensive as an impulse purchase for a young woman on a university scholarship. Karen happily strikes the bargain.

In my mind's eye Karen is all relaxed, casual, beauty. All naïve, untroubling sexuality; the kind that youth so adroitly imbibe without wholly knowing or understanding. A young Valerie Bertinelli. An even younger Natalie Wood. With adolescent hints of a chirpy Sally Fields deftly countered by embryonic flashes of an impassioned, fiery Sophia Loren. All rolled into my very own California dream-girl, albeit an elegant mother of two, soon to be four, when we fell.

Not that this is pure imaginary. By the time we were firmly ensconced and Karen had told me of her urn-buying exploits, I had already taken stock of the photo of her in her last year of high school. Photographed somewhere in Indio, a small township twenty-six miles east of Palm Springs and halfway between an ever-encroaching Los Angeles and an ever-retiring Yuma, Arizona. The original water re-fill, sand clean-out, point for the Southern Pacific Railroad, which now lingers on as a satellite town in the Colorado Desert, South California.

Karen is leaning against a shading tree, looking with a shy, youthful confidence directly at the camera. Would have fallen then too, in another heartbeat. Karen made the world, me, essential. Still does if I truthfully remember. If I claw back the relentless cloak of absence and dupe loss. But let's face it; I'm not even sure if Santa Barbara is by a beach.

*Seven years.*

Studied, as an undergrad, with the matriarch of dying and death studies – Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross – at the University of California, Santa Barbara. 'A stern but insightful woman' and told me gleefully she had excitedly visited the morgue on her first day of university: 'Just to see the bodies.'

*Six months.*

Slept, as a child, in her ancestors' Latvian tradition as she viewed it, with her maternal great grandmother as she lay dying. Slept, also as child, again in tradition, with her dying maternal grandmother. The youngest with the oldest. Newest life with life departing. Familial comrades at the beginning and at the end, together ravelling and unravelling.

Said the ghosts of her dead father and of her dead grandmother walked with her always. Even here, down at the bottom of the civil world, thousands of miles away in another home. And was pleased a ghost, female, inhabited Rose Cottage, our slice of idyllic respite in the rurality of the South Wairarapa. Near the bottom of the northern isle of New Zealand Aotearoa where the skies are also large. The moons also full. And the clouds equally filled with white longing.

*And twenty-six days.*

And was working on her M.A. thesis in Anthropology. Researching how individuals in New Zealand with terminal illnesses negotiate their individuality as they knowingly die. Studying via the courageous generosity of her dying subjects, who ranged from the prominent to the teenage, some of whom were interviewed by Karen in the last weeks of their lives. Karen was examining how these individuals maintain, enhance or relinquish their personal agency in the many acts of dying. In the turn of death. As remembrance. In their aspirations for the aftermath when they are forever reliant on the trust and goodwill of the bereaved.

And was examining her breasts after a shower at Rose Cottage. A monthly vigil Karen carried out in memory of her maternal grandmother. In deference to her mother. Both of whom contracted breast cancer when aged forty years old. When raising their families. As mothers and wives. When Karen, who described herself as the 'poster girl of breast examination', found the first lump. When raising her family. As mother and wife. And when she first told me, 'Now don't panic'. Just a month or so shy of her fortieth birthday.

Ching, ching, ching three in row, genetics a brute. Provisions a beauty to hold in the good times, renders this despair to cling to in the bad.

*Aged 44 years when she died.*

The ultimate 'seven year itch'? The ultimate 'going native' in breaking one of the cardinal rules of anthropology that demands researchers maintain analytical and cultural distance from their subjects? Both, perhaps, good for a melancholic quip or two in the aftermath. After all death and dying are not humour immune.<sup>1</sup> As anyone who has spent time in or around a hospice knows, the wit is frequently unfettered, seemingly inopportune and often very, very dark. Besides Estlin, our son, has cornered this market with the morbidly ironic star sign of Cancer. And even though I like to poke and prod, to see how we all jump, a 'seven year itch' quip would have grated. Particularly as the passions, intimacies, the trust that Karen and I crafted – contra to popular stereotypes and common practice – only ever grew in scope and intensity. Especially when we knew that Karen was ending.

*Ninety-one months as bona-fide lovers.*

From Tuesday, July 4<sup>th</sup> 1995 when we first made love. From then on known as 'Karen's Independence Day'. Until Monday, January 27<sup>th</sup> 2003 when Karen died. From then on known as 'Karen's Anniversary Day'.

Not a particularly remarkable length of time. Not when real anniversaries are measured in decades, awarded silver, gold and platinum. When both parties have the opportunity to pop champagne and clink crystal. Whatever assembled well-wishers may know or choose to celebrate.

Then again we were not particularly remarkable people. At least not in the public spheres of celebrity, notable achievement, civic adulation or institutional acclaim. I'm of average height; obese by any body mass index you'd care to download, with permanently greying, curly hair. Have a playful, though not particularly startling, intellect. And am far too quick to be irritated, angered by the frustratingly minor. Though in my defence, I'm just as quick to revel in the human endeavour of great minds, music, art, and onward to the daily mass of voluntary kindness engaged by individuals everywhere. It is the structural paucity of the rational, of the great, of the kind, in our everyday routines, marked as they are by loutish exploitation and stratification, that I find so maddening.

Karen to my mind, however, was all sassy beauty. Smiled with her eyes, hazel, flecked green and always cooked with love. Dressed with a casual grace, filled the house with freshly cut

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Zackheim, V. (ed). (2012). *Exit Laughing: How Humor Takes the Sting out of Death*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley.

flowers – her arrangements of which she sometimes photographed – and had a sharp, pragmatic intellect, a capacity for love and passion that at times were frightening. Not without her faults of course. She adored children but didn't necessarily trust them. Was woefully naïve in her understandings of the multiplicity of motives, calculations and anxieties that propel many men, though she had an acid tongue when necessary. I was always glad she had my back and felt sorry for anyone who crossed our paths. She also had a little sore at the crown of her forehead that she constantly worried and endured even in the good times.

At Karen's funeral one of our friends likened us to the Lady and the Tramp. Beauty and the Beast would have been just as apt.

*Not much, at face value, to anniversary.*

But noteworthy nonetheless.

Noteworthy that we crafted a love, a trust, a passion that exceeded all I had known. Certainly more than I deserved. Exceeded Hollywood. Outstripped my reading of Kingsey and the Johnson's. Give me licence and I will proclaim, hand on heart, that it transcended every coupling however close up and personal, abstract or tangential, I have experienced. Recognising at once, that I am potentially a very tepid, very shallow mover and shaker. That many New Zealanders, at least those of my generation and older, are a reticent lot who live behind closed doors and curtained windows. Who knows what they enjoy or endure? Yet in the resulting silence the joyous are muted, the boastful ground down. And that in grief, as in life, we often crave to prove to ourselves and to listening others that we are lovers grand, heroic or tragic. Not as C.S. Lewis notes, simply 'privates in the huge army of bereaved, slogging along and making the best of a bad job'.<sup>2</sup>

So grant me, least and last, this one egoism.

Noteworthy also that Karen – like many who confront a predicted death, who listen intently and fearfully to those institutional voices that whisper diagnoses, prognoses of the terminal, who plot and who are prodded through to the calculated ending of their lives – displayed a courage and a dignity that was humbling. That vanquished and extolled my vanities in the same instance.

This is no story of clichéd redemption. No story of adversity and trauma overcome. Made mercifully opaque, instructive as retrospect, by a heart-warming tale of recovery and the kindness of strangers. Karen took ill and died. Died at a moment in her life when she was exhilarated in love and sex. When she crooned contentment in the motherhood of her youngest

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis. (1996 [1961]). *A Grief Observed*, p. 46. Faber and Faber, London.

children. And when she was daily enhanced in her all intellectual and social aptitudes (save for sporadic estrangements from her two eldest, teenage children from a previous marriage – we always kept the door open in the hope they could find the courage to walk through. They did. And they didn't). While I, for my conceits and sins was found by, was immeasurably enriched by, and then lost my kindred lover. Forever. I aspire now to simply live well in loss and in memory. No, this is a story of irreversible rupture, of permanent, gnawing lack, of never ending loss and absence – of absolute and sustained failure if you subscribe to the disciplines and anxieties of the good life. Of living fully and in context, in the known frailty of life and death, if you don't.

Karen loathed another cliché, another stereotypical response, that routinely said she was fighting, battling cancer. That her personality, her attitude – up or down beat – or any other supposedly inherent attribute she possessed would somehow determine if she won or lost. That these internal forces could somehow join forces to successfully repel the mutinous disease invading her body. Would influence whether she lived or died: 'It is not a fair fight. I didn't choose this and besides I am not fighting cancer, I'm fighting for my life.'

*And she won.*

Karen lived well until the morning she died. In fact in the last week of her life she experienced several gastronomical epiphanies – the 'best cherries', the 'juiciest peaches' and the 'best chicken' dinner (boned and stuffed with pine nuts, dried apricots and mascarpone, kindly cooked by her eldest Alana's then chef boyfriend Rob) she had ever eaten. This was a notable achievement for someone whose own culinary feats (excluding baking) were legendary among family and friends and to which my waistline still bears testament. Just as importantly Karen died as she wanted, at least in terms of the hand dealt. Far too early for someone realizing good in life, but on her terms at least. At the hospice. Without hearing her loved ones cry out in pain and anguish. With elegance and grace. With everyday life pitching on as normal, as possible.

*And she lost.*

'Seven years and seven months'. I didn't know this until recently. Until I listed myself as Dr Peter J. Howland on LinkedIn. Presently employed as Director/ Senior Researcher at Critique Aotearoa New Zealand Ltd. Previously employed – remarkably as a Demi-God (it is quite a resumé I admit) – at Karenscontentedsmile.org from July 4, 1995 to January 27, 2003. And bingo. A spontaneous, unsolicited, institutional calculation pops into my profile. Into my consciousness. Forever. Seven years, near seven months as a Demi-God until made redundant. Surplus to circumstance. Another lifetime. Even for a Demi-God.

I never kept an eye on our time together. Just consumed with verve. Although death, the precise absencing of Karen throws a persistent, sifting pall on my perceptions. Dulls my sanities. Exposes a present, a life lived, as remembrance. Dusted in the opaque.

*Nearing ten years since.*

Yet in the time it takes me to say 'in a nanosecond'. In the time it takes me to begin to think about expressing the phrase 'in a nanosecond' (which is most probably a more accurate manifestation of an actual nanosecond), my mind is swirling with images, utterances, memories, the voice, touch, smell of Karen. The truth is that this entirety of invocations never leaves me; it is my constant. My present. It is for better or for worse, who I am.

To polish stones you need water running. Polish. Polish. And the stones begin to shine. Polish. Polish. Stones wear thin. Polish. Polish. Stones and water refine as one. To remember you need life running. Remember. Remember. And the memories begin to sing. Remember. Remember. Memories begin to hum. Remember, Remember. And the memories, life, remembering attune. Become accustomed, routine.

*And counting...*

But I'm bored. And I am tired. Weary and annulled.

Not of the memories. But with the work of remembering. Of being a widowed husband, a widowed lover, a widowed friend. Bored of polishing. Of labouring to remember, while publicly failing to forget. Weary with the habit of grief. With the routines cast as mourning, that veil, manage the grief daily. Weary also of perpetual absence, with the myriad, everyday provocations of lack. A thousand unchanging reminders mired in the banal. The memories are not the problem. They still sustain, lift me effortlessly above the humdrum. The problem is with the work of remembering. With polishing. With memories that shine with the lustre of habit, with the lust of solitude. The lustful rendered lurid.

And I need to take hold. I need to describe, analyse, theorise, philosophise. To bed, in the writing sense, my remembering and my forgetting. To wrestle, corral my memories of Karen into text. Call a narrative halt to their atrophy, to their capriciousness, to the effort of grieving. Neuter my memories, condense them into story, to reach out a hand and rest it upon the ease, the justifications of a bibliographic citation. To bound my memories within the composure of a quietening narrative. To stop, hopefully the daily toil of positioning, explaining, myself to myself. A vain hope, I suspect, especially as until now I have not approached any of this as writer, as ethnographer or anthropologist. I have not studiously observed, taken notes, jotted down nascent analyses and critiques. Rather I simply lived, then remembered, then grieved for

Karen. As do millions of others who likewise plainly shuffle through life, turning now and then to virtuously trace their footfall in the burnt ashes.

I am also attempting to take hold at a time when memories, remembering, recall have all had bad press.<sup>3</sup> Psychologists, historians, life writers and commentating others all jostle to declare that memories are only ever partial, selective, emotive, fragmented. Not to be trusted. Memories, the disclaimers protest, speak of coherency and intent, when turmoil, chance, bricolage should be shouted from the rooftops. Memories are not reality as lived. Are not actual. Are fashioned primarily by the remembering – by those who personally remember with purpose or via intuition – to create imagined, false, idealised histories. Past that often seek to justify, affirm a desired present, a current you – the one who remembers. The one who is forgetting.

And in this just disparaging of remembering and recall we often forget that memory is always a gift of prior experience that generates our present. That the abruptness of the current, no matter how vibrant and arresting, is always simply the remembered acted out, sometimes in dynamism, though mostly via unconscious habit and routine. All presents, all nows, are only ever a hair's breath from the past, from the constraints and limitations of remembering. Although those of us who grieve the death of an intimate are compelled, are persistently badgered, into living the present as a past without future.

We also forget that all our thoughts, utterances, representations, renditions of the present – like all our expressions of memory and recall – are also necessarily distanced or abstracted from the immediacy of action. Are always one step behind the immediate, the now – are as we think, utter, speak or depict already on the first step toward being a past. Are like memory – gap. Not the real thing, but an abstracted conception, expression, depiction of the real thing, yet not.

In fact the present can be so overwhelming and grand in its exaltations, in its energy, nuance and verve of immediacy, that it routinely escapes exacting conceptualization and representation. That all our words fail, our imaginings flounder and pictures do not suffice. Similarly, memories may also be flaccid echoes, pallid portraitures, stuttering recalls of lived experience – albeit poor cousins, thrice removed, by the genealogical vagaries of time, remembering and telling. Condemned to exist always in the contrivance of eulogy and in the post-knowing of nostalgic reflection.

But lest we not remember, the present is also condemned to exist in the contrivances of knowing. All our knowings – whether present, past, remembered, anticipated, imagined,

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Barclay, C.R. et al (eds). (1988). *Truth and accuracy in autobiographical memory*. John Wiley & Sons, London; Radstone, E. & Schwarz, B. (eds). (2010). *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. Fordham University Press, New York.

desired – are constructs, exist primarily as the stories we tell ourselves and each other and which we agree upon. In the rightful disclamation of memory and remembering, life as lived in present, as the now, as immediate thought and action, is however frequently cast and privileged as the real. As truth inviolate. As truth revealed. The real thing. I'm an anthropologist and I am so fond, so habituated in telling my students that everything they experience – life, death, memory – is mediated, known through social and cultural learning, that I forgot to listen. That is until I started to think about and write my remembering of Karen.

What we first know is learned from those prior to us. From caregivers, grandparents, parents and older siblings in the first instance. What we come to know is therefore already largely agreed upon by those already generating and current in social and cultural life. Knowing then is always a dynamic of learning from, and remembering alongside, others. From family, in cohorts, with friends, as lovers. In collectives we continuously agree on, create and recreate reality. The truths, the ideal, the dystopic, even the disagreements between us, are fully our creations. And we especially agree on those big categories of meaning, of understanding, that underpin most of our routine actions and interactions. Thus we learn and concur that a fox is not the moon. That a fox is for hunting. That the moon is for looking, perhaps for dreaming of cheese also. And when we learn this. Even better when we remember this. Learning and remembering as infants, as we surpass toddling. As we totter on the edges of social and cultural competencies. As we secure footholds in mature knowings, in the habitual capabilities of adulthood. We learn money, mortgages, marriage and the mayhem of identities – individual, local, ethnic, national, human. And underpinning these complex learnings are the basics on which we agree. Thus we all silently watch the moon and shrewdly hunt the fox. And everyone nods, claps their hands, and says yes, yes, yes. And everyone watches, everyone hunts, in union, in communion, with each other. Apart but together.

And we keep up this collective pretence, this social consensus of the imagined and of the practised, with such alacrity and guile that it readily feels normal, instinctive, like the real thing. Rarely worth our reflection. Rarely warranting any comment at all, except from those pointy-head academics cloistered away from the real world in laboratories, tutorials and lecture theatres. Ignore these annoying boffin types and the living comes easy, comes freely. Exists in, exists as unravelling language, as unexamined stories, that we persistently speak, tell and retell. Exists as a life rich with known, shared and agreed truths.

Until, that is, we meet an idiosyncratic someone, encounter a vexing, contrary context, or bump into a group holding to different truths. Until, that is, some rat-bag proclaims that we should watch the fox. Photograph the fox. Gawp at all foxes. That we should instead hunt the moon. Build rockets and spaceships and carry a large net. To capture the moon, perhaps even dissect it or build a new home there. Until, that is, someone, somewhere, somehow shoots at the moon

and gazes wistfully at the fox. Then we all plead no, no, no, in union, in communion. Together but apart.

And for a terrifying moment. Or two. Hopefully not three. Our known, our truth, our real world is ruptured. Corrupted. Collapses and expires.

But only for moment, or two. Hopefully not more. For then one person, then two, a cohort followed by a crowd, all stand up and retort with accusations of madness, foreignness, the end of the world as we know it. As we want it. Until that is I, you, we, all quiet our crumpled brows and work together to reassert our shared truths, our shared known. We may choose to reaffirm our fidelity to the old truth of the fox and to the old truth of the moon, opposing thereby the radicalism of the new. Or we may choose to run with the new and begin reverently shooting at the moon and gazing at foxes. Either way, we resolutely resume hunting and watching in union, in communion. We again agree on the basics. Together not apart.

Fox or moon. Moon or fox. Either way, our world of alignment, of consensus, of shared truths is reasserted and any arguments, contestations, disagreements are once again properly confined to the realms of opinion, belief, morality and ethics. To the realms of the personally held or the group rallied, seemingly far, far away from our world of absolute truths. Amen. Shake hands with the Little Prince. Love the rose. And refocus your telescope on Pluto as a dwarf planet, formerly the ninth planet from the Sun, previously unknown until February 18, 1930 – the year incidentally that Louis Armstrong became the first Black American to host a nationally broadcast radio show in the USA.

I am under no illusions. I learnt Karen. I learnt her body, her sex, her emotions, thinking, values, actions, intimacies, desires. I learnt her pain. Learnt her pleasure. I learnt new truths and new fidelities. And Karen learnt me. We learnt and we fashioned an each other. And in the process we constructed ourselves anew. Shifted consciousness, practice, expectations, ideals – some seismically, others deftly – to accommodate the rupture of each other. To tell new stories unfolding. Firstly, as illicit lovers. Then as partners, as parents. As Karen's confidence, passions and sexuality grew consummate. We learnt daily as colleagues. Karen worked in the anthropology department as an administrator and regularly tutored for me. She was my sounding board, my first response critic. We learnt as scholars, researchers, writers. Karen was the audience that I strove to convince, seduce. Our various projects, thoughts, notions quickly became an everyday, collusive fare of unfolding discussion, interrogation, conspiracy. At the university, around the dining table, in bed, we were unceasing. Recurrent in identifying, analysing, progressively re-crafting a symbiosis of truths – sexual, romantic, intellectual, familial, self in other. Ever questing for the enhanced knowing.

Then we were forced to learn anew. As Karen fell ill. As she was dying. Learnt to anticipate impending nothingness. The truth of endings. Learnt of hyper-intimacy, acute attachment, life as pending. Then Karen died. And I, the children, all who had ever cared, were left alone to learn how to remember. To learn how to forget. Without Karen to consult, as enrichment. Without Karen as a warm, responsive truth. Sans Karen as corporeality to embrace as touchstone. No mind or body from which to generate I, much less us or we. Learnt of truth reduced to the faithful atrophy of memory. To the solitary labour of remembering, the seclusion of forgetting.

The disparity between memory and the present is not simply due to the size of the passing time, the gaps in knowing, telling or experiencing. Nor is it due to the temporal or the experiential immediacy of the now. An immediacy that so often requires instantaneous reaction and response, which interestingly dismisses the contemplative, narrative time available whenever one is polishing memories. No, the disparity between memory and the present is also a matter of sociality.

When memories and recounting narratives are significantly shared the opportunity exists to enrich, embellish, contest each other in recollection. To create a community of grief. A community of known (agreed or disputed) loss. Of agreed or disputed memory. But when memories are left to exist without sociality, without the insistent consensus, checks and balances of collective social interaction, they inevitably evolve, expand or atrophy in voids of agreed truth, in the empty rifts of dissociation and detachment. This is painfully evident whenever one's memories are spawned within the gnawing absence of an intimate other. For the most part such memories are recollections, imaginings of a previously known and shared closeness. Experienced and shared exclusively with one other; another now dead and non-existent. A lack entire and eternal.

Left bereft, such memories inevitably become solitary, isolating affairs. The primary referencing, the polishing, the remembering, is something survivors alone are condemned to recreate. There is no sociality, no intimate other, no one else who can verify, nod and say yes, yes, yes. There is no one who can shake in certifiable disagreement and say no, no, no. No one else with the footholds of experience, the finger grips of certitude to either validate or invalidate, enrich or diminish. The intimately bereaved are always left alone in the raw telling. Besides, sharing only highlights the solitude. Stresses the truth of one and highlights the gaps, the fading, the platitudes of the crowd. Though plaintive crying in the exile of the present, in the seclusion of memory, may be better than having no voice at all. The walking grieved.

This therefore is my remembering, my truth, my narrative of Karen. Just as the children – Alana, Dylan, Corinna and Estlin – are left with their rememberings, their truths.<sup>4</sup> As other family, friends, acquaintances, and even adversaries, are left with theirs. All generating a personal version of Karen. And as in death, was in life. My experiences of Karen are not those of her children, her friends, her others. We may have shared in similar or even common experiences – sharing breakfast foods and morning conversations. Yet everyone will have their own perspectives, desires and recollections of what occurred and of the role, actions, intent, consequences that Karen played. I doubt (pray) no one else saw Karen wickedly proposition me from across the kitchen while I was chomping on my toast or across the garden as I mowed the lawns. This was something she frequently did, expecting and receiving responses in both appreciation and kind. If anyone witnessed these intentionally blasphemous displays, they didn't say anything (what could you?). Karen and I, however, laughed ourselves silly, revelling in our running tease like teenagers.

This is the nature of all memory, life, all experience. The nature of self and other. They, we, I, are always dynamics of the social. Are created in the ways we engage and negotiate others. How others – intimates, strangers, civil and uncivil others – engage, calculate and negotiate us. I used to wake every morning beside a sleeping Karen and think I'd won a prize, the lottery of life. Still do, on a good day. Although Karen no longer lies sleeping quietly beside me, every now and then emitting a slight phuh or sigh. The heavy cloaks of grief and loss are now my constant bedfellows and I willingly live a schizophrenic existence – buoyed by the exaltations of knowing a great passion and trust; traumatized by the cold, certain purity of endless loss. Love and grief, the concurrent ordering of my everyday.

Memories also exist in the ethereal. Are reproduced without the necessity, without the persistent reminders of material constraint and enablement. In my mind's eye Karen is rarely bloated with a volatile mix of tumours and steroids. Her eyes are not drained, pale, opaque. She does not hobble in her movements and her breathing is not laboured or fearful. Although there was a time when the only image I could muster, could imagine (remember?) was horrific, darkly skeletal. Karen as witch. An image definitely at odds with the physical realities of her cremation. Deprived of the life-blood of sociality and materiality, memories can quickly become static, dead, deadening, enriching but rarely enriched. Reanimated but never animate. Responsive to the whims of imagining as atrophy, to the boastings of embellishment. Although even after ten years, an unanticipated smell, sound, glance – often tangential, at an angle to another – and the memories immediately sharpen capriciously to cut and delight.

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<sup>4</sup> Karen gave considerable thought and time to drafting her last will and testament in the year before her death, explaining to me her intent once she had completed this. Her eldest children – Dylan and Alana – contested Karen's will in the High Court and then later in the Court of Appeal. Both courts upheld Karen's will in its entirety. See D. A. & A. L. Hutt vs. The Public Trust & P. J. Howland. Court of Appeal CIV-485-2004-585.

Memory, life, the present, the past, also persevere as stories. As beguiling, bewitching, confusing tales that we murmur, sometimes shout, to ourselves, at listening others. Tales that we reveal to intimates, that we perform for strangers. Full of crafted purpose, aspiration and justification. Narratives, that like memory, frequently seek to silence the chaotic, the partial, the malformed, replacing this with the coherent, rational and comprehensible. And which cast our identities as fathers, lovers, individual as tellingly real and worthwhile.

As is the case of this book; I knowingly perform a self through what I choose to narrate as my story of remembering Karen – and just as importantly through what I am capable of skill-wise and what I feel I must audience-wise. And we don't just narrate, but continually re-narrate. The me, the Karen, the us that I think, utter, narrate at this very moment was not the same as I thought, uttered, narrated last year, last week, yesterday. Nor will it be the me, Karen, the us I narrate next year. We create and recreate continually. Are always ensnared within a perpetual process of becoming, within the evolving ebbs and flows, the social flux of telling, of performing self to others, as we variably perceive them. Permanently negotiating the gaps, the mutuality and unmutuality, that underpins all social relations. In shifting – sometimes subtle or incremental, at other times dramatic and radical – social performances that others accept, embrace, query or reject, sometimes within the same breath. In other words, we are what we make of others making us making them... or at least we are what we are prepared to tell each other of this making.

The flipside of narrating a self is clearly narrating an other. Our perceptions of others typically exist as caricature, as a representations that foreground certain characteristics and overlook others, ever more so when a significant gap such as eternal absence characterises our interactions. As C.S. Lewis puts it: 'Talking and acting not to the man himself but to the picture – almost the *précis* – we've made of him in our own minds? And he has to depart from it widely before we even notice the fact. In real life – that's one way it differs from novels – his words and acts are, if we observe closely, hardly ever quite 'in character', that is in what we call his character. There is always a card in his hand we didn't know about'.<sup>5</sup>

In memory, narration, in sporadic, shallow or the absence of any sociality at all, the potential – as one anthropologist has described – to be 'radically wrong about one another, or wonderfully empathic and understanding, or prejudiced, or downright stupid'<sup>6</sup> are exponentially increased. While the inverse capacity for social consensus, for collectively lived out truths, are diminished. Intimacy with another exists therefore whenever the gaps between representation, narration and experience are significantly lessened. Love of another exists

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, C.S. *ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Toren, C. (1999). Compassion for One Another: Constituting Kinship as Intentionality in Fiji, p.136. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5(2): 265–280.

whenever the intrinsic gaps of self and other are known and cherished. While memory of a lost, intimate love can only ever be a widening gap, a perpetual rifting to nowhere soon.

Karen lived for forty-four years and then died from secondary or metastasised breast cancer. Born October 21<sup>st</sup> 1958 in Port Townsend, Jefferson County, Washington, USA. and named Karen Frances Neele. Died January 27<sup>th</sup> 2003 in the Mary Potter Hospice, Newtown, Wellington, New Zealand, still named Karen Frances Neele. An arbitrary, illogical number of years that encompass and obscure a lifetime, define a death. Probably several. So why not? Why not forty-four rememberings, reflections, stories and rants inspired by Karen, in a magpie homage to every lover, to all bereaved, to anyone who knowingly awaits death – their own, or those close by. Why not a capriciously irrational, essentially whimsical number of fragmented, partial, selective, clustered, jumbled, swirling eddies of thought, recall and narration that mark my understandings of life and death. Arbitrary yet finite. In this sense opposed to the perpetually of remembering and forgetting. Arbitrary yet teeming with the coherency, meaning making, the narrative rhythms of articulated memory, of told and telling selves.

Rememberings and utterings written mostly as I live them. I did not keep a diary or write field notes of medical procedures, social encounters or personal responses at momentous or even banal moments. Though I am assisted by the few official documents such as death, birth certificates and newspaper clippings that are scattered around the house and have obtained Karen's medical records to present as an institutional biography of illness and death. I am also assisted by my recent reading of the grief, death and love narratives of Didion, Barnes, Barthes and Lewis<sup>7</sup> in a quest to find 'my literary voice'. Works that have at times prompted, evoked, harassed my core. Assisted also by my reading, research, teaching, experience in anthropology, sociology and history. Although this is not a scholarly work and readers should not expect a review or even critical engagement with death studies in these areas.

In reality this is a text about me signified through my scribblings of a recalled Karen (if only), our relationship, her illness, death and the aftermath. It is about my telling of a double-helix existence, of living concurrently in the transcendence of love and in the ordeal of loss. Told in the now quinary gap that exists between myself, Karen, experience, narrative and memory, which is equally a poor, even pathetic, substitute for the real thing. As C. S. Lewis again cogently notes: "The earthly beloved, even in this life, incessantly triumphs over your mere idea of her."<sup>8</sup> A cold comfort willingly embraced when memories of another are all that remain.

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<sup>7</sup> Barnes, J. (2009). *Nothing To Be Frightened Of*. Vintage Books, London; Barthes, R. (2002 [1977]). *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Trans. R. Howard. Vintage Books, London; Didion, J. (2011 [2005]). *A Year of Magical Thinking*. Fourth Estate, London; Lewis, C.S. (1996 [1961]). *A Grief Observed*. Faber and Faber, London.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, C.S. *ibid*, p.56.

I have written with a candour that reflects the relationship that Karen and I purposefully crafted and knowingly sustained. Written also with a pragmatism that reflects that I used to be a journalist; am tired of protracted legal proceedings; and that Karen charged me with stewardship of a family home. And with a disciplined nod toward the contemporary protocols and ethics of civil representation. Julian Barnes argues writers should write as though their parents are dead,<sup>9</sup> though I prefer to write as though my children Corinna and Estlin are alive (which wonderfully they are). I have some responsibility, have played some small part in the formation of their analytical and moral sensibilities, while I can make no similar claim on my parents. Besides the book is primarily written with Corinna and Estlin in mind, so they might recall their father recalling their mother in requiem. And given the caring of Karen, it is done also in the hope that my naïve efforts will resonate in some way with any who have loved, are facing an ending or who are bereaved, with all who daily labour to remember, forget, stay close. A telling replete with all the errors, omissions and complete misremembering that any recital, all memory, all life and death necessarily entail.

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<sup>9</sup> Barnes, J. *ibid*, p.109.

1. 'It's not time yet...'

Karen lifted her left arm, heavy, swollen and put it comfortingly around my shoulders.

I wiped my tears. Put my arm around her waist.

Karen smiled weakly and closed her eyes.

We waited.

I sat next to Karen on the fold-out couch that had been her bed for the past five or so days. Ever since it became apparent that her breathing was increasingly labored. Her body was bloating with the fluids emitting from a puissant concoction of tumors, steroids and morphine. That climbing up and down the many stairs that wind through the center of our Dr Seuss home was no longer an option.

A squat beige oxygen machine chugged away, uniformly reassuring and foreboding in its constancy, in the life-affirming, clear plastic tubing that snakes across the floor, in the nasal prongs intruding, the nasal prongs masking. The home nurse delivered this medical cuboid a week ago as Karen's breathing had become increasingly anxious. Positioning it in the second lounge meant that Karen was never more than eight stairs from a toilet, from the kitchen and dining room, from the first lounge with the television and computer. From the daily living core of our home.

Separated from the night of bedrooms. From the outside world. By now substantial, narrow, contrary stairwells of thirteen or more steps. Down or up depending on the walker's intent. Though for Karen there was no escape either way.

I hastily erected rails and curtains to ensure Karen some privacy. Shelter also from the bright summer sun that rushed through the large picture window in the morning. From the opaque glow that stole in at dusk with the nocturnal cloaking from Wellington city hustling far below.

Karen was sitting on the side of fold-out couch. Her dying bed in the living room. Fading in. Fading out. Labouring with breathing anxious. Refusing the requests of others to lie down, to rest. Karen had long been disturbed by a story of a woman of similar age. Beset by a similar illness. That had overwhelmed her. That was now overwhelming Karen. Aggressive breast cancer. One. Metastasis. Two. Invasive. Three. Terminal. Ching, ching, ching, lemons in a row. A narrative first encountered when she was fit and well. When enthusiastic in the 'lit. review' stage of her research into the agency of individuals with terminal illness. When research goals could willfully exempt the compulsions, the necessary physical, biological regimes of a pathological death pending. Frame them as negotiations to be engaged as pragmatically, as reflexively, as possible by the dying individual. In desire. As personally able.

Karen was troubled in the lingering by a storyline of intimate sorrows, false endings, by the fear of repeating the same 'mistakes' of the dying woman. This woman. The woman who had wished to die at home. She had lain in a bedroom surrounded by family and friends. She had let out a sigh and had stopped breathing. A husband. The husband. Her husband who was cradling his dying wife called out. 'She's gone!' or some other similarly desolate lament. And the assembled crowd of family and friends gasped as one. Some began to cry. To sob. A collective dirge that roused the dying woman. That woman. Who opened her eyes, stretched out an arm to her crying crowd and attempted to lift up her frail body in reassurance.

The husband. Her Husband. On seeing his wife's distress immediately moved to comfort. Her. Everyone. Told his wife that it it was ok to let go. That everyone, assembled and grieved would be ok in the aftermath. Consoled her so that the women. His wife. Could relax and die in silence, with gasping and breathing abated.

Karen was troubled in this story long before she became ill and then, as her prognosis turned terminal, it became a cornerstone of her staunch desire to die in the hospice. Assumed the mantle of a guiding parable, which in contrary aspiration provisioned an ending to be avoided in Karen's real. A cautionary to live as normally as possible, for as long as possible, at home. To then die in a hospice in silence to the lament of departure. Surrounded by her children. By her husband. By her family. In mute pause.

'I don't want our home to be the place of my death... not for the children as they grow up. Not for you.'

As much as Karen angered at the cancer. Feared the unknown. Grieved in waiting, for a life she was obliged to forgo. For the full loss of her children, her husband, her passions and love. And as much as she grieved at being compelled to step away from guiding, witnessing, her youngest, Estlin, grow into a lover and conscience in his own right; Karen entirely despaired at the pain her dying, her death, would cause in the immediate. To her children, to her husband. Karen, accordingly, did not want to see. Did not want to hear. Our hurt, our laments. As she died. As she was forced to let go.

Karen had been fading in and out for a couple of days. Closing her eyes and intermittently sleeping. At first I found this disconcerting, disorientating. It threw me. My life with Karen had always been filled with insistent talk. With her quick-fire responses, her constant, uncanny ability to sum whole situations, the actions required to enhance or rectify, in one or two succinct proclamations. Delivered typically while I was still waffling. Still attempting to identify, articulate, analyse the 'Fourteen key points' (as Karen used to laughingly describe them), contributing variables, alternative perspectives, speculative consequences, and so on.

That Karen was muting. Fading out and away mid-sentence, mine and hers. Was something I had not anticipated. Had not plotted. A non-Karen, existing as lack. Present as absence, before the aftermath, prior to sans Karen. An ending incomplete, straggling. Mute Karen threw me. Dislocated my sense of self, us, Karen. Threw me until I realized Karen's heart, lungs, her physical selfhood, were being forced to work ever harder to sustain life in a body overwhelmed with tumors. In a body bloated with the successive fluids of tumorous cancer and of prolonged, heavy steroid use. That in the regressive deprivation of oxygen transmuted as life-blood, Karen was being intermittently denied talk as existence.

Until I realized Karen was still Karen listening. That if I demonstrated patience and waited a moment. Or two. Three. Our conversations would resume without acknowledgement, any indication, of pause. Without Karen having an awareness, a consciousness, of her broken attendance.

'Did I?' she said with voice rich with the warm haze of waking when I told her that she had fallen asleep mid-sentence.

'Are you sure? Or were you just not listening well enough?' she smiled.

Until I changed orientation to embrace Karen passing in, not from, time. As slippage. Accepted fragmentation as the whole story, unfolding in lapse.

I was explaining to our daughter Corinna, who had pulled up a chair facing us, what had happened during the morning. Why we were now waiting for the ambulance to take Karen to Mary Potter Hospice in Newtown.

I was sitting next to Karen on her makeshift bed. She had momentarily faded out and had been refusing the nurse's, others', behests to lie down. To rest. I didn't ask as I knew. Knew that Karen was afraid she would be unable to get back up. Afraid that she would be physically entrapped, forced to die at home. In place but outside intent.

I was explaining to our daughter Corinna, who had pulled up a chair facing us, what had happened during the morning when I started to cry. To sob.

Karen awoke immediately. Turned toward me and fixed me with a look of love and dying. Her eyes watery, blanched of colour, weary although emboldened with resolve. She lifted her bloated, heavy arm and hugged me around my shoulders.

'It's not time yet... You have to be calm and you have to be strong.'

Her gaze was unwavering. I stopped crying. I put my arm around her waist. Karen closed her eyes. We waited.

2. Five past two.

Walked into the large, brick-lined MacLaurin lecture theatre where two hundred or so, chattering first-year students, sat expectant and fresh. Not wholly cognizant of where I was or what I was doing.

Stood behind the lectern and looked up to where Karen had often sat listening, sometimes smiling. My tutor, my lover, as I 'turned it on', attempting to seduce her time and again with what passes for my intellect, rhetoric, charm.

Looked and thought what am I doing here? Who the fuck am I without Karen? Tried to remember a time when I was an academic before Karen.

Found nothing.

The first years knew nothing of this inner dialogue, although they began to quieten as I continued to stare at, then beyond, the place where Karen often sat. My tutor. My lover. Tried to find my bearings. To locate the theatre, the students, my lecture.

The lecture theatre fell completely silent.

I waited a moment, gathered myself and then launched.

'I am your Anth 101 lecturer and four weeks ago my wife died.'

Felt myself starting to choke up, but that wasn't fair. They were just babies by comparison. I marshalled, then ploughed on.

'My name is Peter and I don't want your sympathy.'

Another gathering pause.

'What I want you... What I want is for you to know that anthropology is about life as I, you, others, others that we know and others that we will never meet, others who lived long ago and others who live far away, choose and are forced to make it.

It is about how we love, how we die, how we grieve, how we think, how we feel, how we act and how we interact in all our richness, complexity and absurdity, in all our positives and all its negatives.

It is about life, death and everything in-between, and for some cultures, also seemingly beyond in the realms of ancestors, ghosts and deities.

Anthropology then is the study of everything human...'

At least that is what I hoped I said.

3. (*Extracts from Karen's draft M.A. thesis: "TRANSITIONAL AGENCY" TO THE GRAVE AND BEYOND, (1996), unpub.*)

## **NARRATIVES OF DYING**

### **Introduction**

"The whole point of living... is to find the spark... if you found the spark, it wasn't an answer... it meant meaning was here...The meaning wasn't that I was going to die, but that I was still alive... I play the proper music...and it is so sad, and it is about the dying, and it makes me so clear." (Spoonface Steinberg, NZ Radio, 1998)

Spoonface Steinberg, a young autistic girl converses candidly about her impending death while the haunting music written to commemorate the extinction of six million Jews (Gorecki, Symphony No. 3 Opus 36: 1976) plays in the background. Juxtaposing the individual with the masses reflecting the transcendence of humanity and exploring the questions about the meanings of life when death is imminent.

In this thesis I explore the question of how individuals negotiate life and death transitions. Why some people today when they know that their lives will end within the "near" future attempt to take control of the process of dying, the celebration of their death and finally how they will be remembered after their death. My research focuses on how individuals are empowered to express their personality in life and death transitions.

I am interested in this aspect and time of life because as an only child in a large extended family of elderly, immigrant, Latvian, atheist, communists growing up in 1960's America our family talked about death and dying to a great degree. An incredible amount of power was given to the family member who was the most aged and considered the 'next to die'. Conversations about possessions to be bequeathed were serious agendas and after a wonderful family feast the stickers/tags would be brought out in order for family members to stake their claims to favorite heirlooms. Controversy surrounded every tag and the raucous display of who was getting what always seemed an exciting part of visiting to me. As I got older, the power of these aged and dying relatives became more apparent in my life often making it explicitly known that they desired you to behave in a certain way. For example, learning a musical instrument, attaining good grades and living close to home because your relationship was tenuous because they would soon be dead. Often these wishes would be granted quite graciously, but over time I became more circumspect as sometimes those who were 'next -in-line' lingered while others clearly not even beginning to queue unexpectedly died.

Subsequently as a student of anthropology I noticed that the majority of research surrounding the topic of death and dying focused on how society copes with death in terms of the grieving individual, but very little research existed about the dying individual and the process of dying from their perspective. Anthropological studies of death have focused exclusively on the social, from communal to universal, responses to death.

“When reading through the anthropological literature in one large sweep, one is left with the impression of coolness and remoteness. The focus is on the bereaved and on the corpse, but never on the dying”.

(Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984:385)

I also became increasingly aware of an interest in death over recent years in the mass media, popular literature, and various organisations that deal with death and dying such as hospitals, hospices, funeral homes, incorporating as well religious leaders, secular celebrants and euthanasia advocates. In part this is because of the improvements made by the medical profession to humanise dying because of greater medical advances in prognosis and palliative care. However there is also an incorporation of the post-modern ideal of the ‘sacred’ individual and the personal ‘good death’ (Walter: 1993:265).

Personally I have encountered many dying individuals that wish to talk about their experience of coming to terms with dying and contemplating how they will live the rest of their life. It seems that the inherent ‘taboo’ or concept of ‘morbidity’ deems that Western society in particular find discussing death and dying difficult. I believe that this stems from fear, the fear of the loss of oneself, the loss of others, the pain, the unknown and saying goodbye. My research is an ethnographic study of the New Zealand dying individual...

It is an important element in this thesis that my ethnographic descriptions focus on the emotions of the individual and how they actively proceed with their lives when they know they are dying. To categorise a dying individual within strict boundaries would create a model of routine rather than illustrate that there is a menu to be selected from which enables a wide variation of expression and creativity...

In my research I have found that the dying wish to talk about their experiences as this is a time where they reflect upon their lives lived and yet still contemplate and negotiate the rest of their life which incorporates how their dying should proceed. A major factor in this desire to “talk” is the social ‘isolation’ experienced by the dying which is a common feature in waiting for death. This is similar to the social isolation experienced during a non-life threatening illness, but magnified immensely because of the ambiguity of prognosis’ and the taboo surrounding death and dying, “...it was assumed that dying was the last thing a dying person would want to talk about” (Kastenbaum:1991:79).

Many dying individuals are preoccupied with the physical toil of dying, however this is often very close to the actual event. Dying individuals can also become detached contemplating their death, but for the most part my research has shown that the dying are articulate in their contestment of being treated as alive until the time they have died. Field (1989:147) found that often terminally ill patients were neglected as 'persons' and treated as passive receivers of expert care. Similarly in my research I found that my dying informants were also socially being treated as the "cancer" person or "how long have you got" rather than a person in their own right, the person they were before they were 'dying'...

#### 4. 'Death's a failure'.

That's how the oncologist responded. A medical mantra almost blurted out when Karen spoke of her research into the agency of terminal individuals. Spoke also of her rapidly developing perspective that living a good life, and equally having a good death, were the measure of a worthwhile existence. Life and death as good was THE goal.

It was August 1999 and we were sitting in the consultants' office at Kenepuru Hospital as she informed us that the lump that Karen had found when self-examining in the shower; the lump that our local G.P. had insisted was a cyst formed most probably during or after Karen's breast-feeding of Estlin who was born three years earlier; the lump that Karen, who had suspected breast cancer based on the fact her mother and grandmother had contracted the disease at the same age of forty – and not having a great deal of faith in the GP's initial assessment (he took sneaky smokes outside his surgery and wore tight waistcoats) – had privately biopsied; was cancerous, 'small', less than 2cm in size, and could be treated with a lumpectomy and radiotherapy.

'Not a mastectomy then?' Karen inquired.

'No, at this stage a lumpectomy and radiotherapy are the recommended course of treatment.'

Karen went in search of another second opinion. Contacted, online, a specialist in the States and explained her history. Explained her mother's and her grandmother's cancer, their elective mastectomies, their survival to old age. The local diagnosis, the local treatments, were confirmed as optimal. Yet Karen was understandably vigilant.

'I'm the poster girl for breast examination – little good that it's done me,' Karen told me in 2001 when she received the diagnosis that the cancer had returned. That a mastectomy and chemotherapy were the next cabs off the ranks of recommended treatments. Karen went in search of another transnational opinion, which like the first confirmed the local specialists' diagnoses and treatment plans.

'Now don't panic...' Karen told me '... there is no need to come home.'

It was early January 2002. I had just settled into my office at Victoria University when Karen phoned. My first morning of a new lecturing contract; joyed by the warm summer weather, by the cheery remnants of a wonderful Christmas. Also by the 'fact' that Karen's latest chemo treatment appeared to be working, had reduced the size of the tumours in Karen's surviving left breast and under her left armpit to the point where they were almost undetectable to touch.

To Karen's and her consulting doctor's touch that is, as I could not respond to Karen's lively invitations 'to have a feel'. To caress her breast, her scars, yes, but to knowingly search, under her skin, to seek out and finger those hard, invasive marbles of disease and destruction was one step too far for me. By contrast Karen almost cheerfully found the lumps, rolling them under and on her fingertips. Buoyant especially when the lumps became more difficult for her to find, harder for her to discern position, size, mass. Positive in the waning that our lives appeared to be tipping toward balance again.

Although I had surprised myself in one regard, albeit not in a conscious way. Not in the way of thanking God, the stars, the fox and the moon, for mercifully overcoming a previously held fear or trepidation. But rather in how I almost primitively responded to my one-breasted beauty with lust and desire that was unchecked, unfettered. A boisterous sexual craving that was only eclipsed by an equally strong protective instinct to transcend the deep purple scars, the dark slashing wounds, which now punctured the right side of Karen's chest. Worried briefly that I might have a fetish for surgically disfigured woman, but then I shrugged and remembered that it was Karen fully, Karen as person, as lover and friend who continued to arouse my devotions. And besides, what if I did?

'Now don't panic, but the cancer has returned.'

I said I would be home immediately.

'No, there is no need to come home, stay at work. I will be alright.'

Karen started to cry. My office began to swirl, contract, dissolve. A flooding, emptying anxiety made me weak and unsteady. I grabbed my wallet, my keys and stumbled out the door. Our world collapsing inward again.

'Was I too vain?' Karen enquired of me shortly after she had been informed her cancer was terminal, terminating, invasive to the point of void. A life force ending.

Karen's mother, Mary, had elected to have a double mastectomy and she was soon to outlive her only child. Her grandmother had a double mastectomy and had lived into her eighties.

'Was I too vain? Should I have chosen to have a mastectomy, even a double mastectomy as a first response?'

I told Karen all I could. That she had been diligent, the poster girl for breast examination; that she had followed prescribed courses of treatment; had received both good care and mediocre; that perhaps a new or experimental drug would be developed; perhaps she could get into an experimental trial in the States; we could sell the house; that we shouldn't give up hope; that I loved and lusted for her with two breasts and with one. That I would always love her.

By Karen's reckoning. Drawn from discussions with her doctors. From reading about her disease. From tales of other women with similar conditions. She had 'at least two years'.

She got one and a bit.

5. In the year before Karen died we talked openly about how this could be, if not the last, then most probably the penultimate Christmas we would enjoy together.

Christmas was important to Karen. In January she would begin her search for suitable presents for family and friends, a protocol that continued for the next eleven months. She would also start collecting cardboard boxes of various sizes in which presents would be placed, before being meticulously wrapped in gold paper, decorated with various coloured bows and then positioned in geometric splendour under an equally elaborate Christmas tree. The tree always looked as if it had been lifted pristine from the pages of a Sears catalogue or alternatively from Kirkcaldie & Stains' Christmas store (which knowing Karen it may well have been). In January Karen would also indulge in her annual ritual of purchasing a new Christmas tree decoration, expensive but on sale, before repeating this sacrament in the Kirk's sale when buying new linen and towels for the year.

With Karen's death pending, the motivation to be generous was pronounced. Aside from the frivolity of hand-made chocolates and summer reading books, I gave Karen a beautiful, peacock-coloured, textured glass vase by Koda, commenting that after she died I would use the vase to honour her memory with fresh flowers – might even build a new house around an entrance foyer that would show off the vase sitting on her great grandmother's round side table. Estlin and Corinna gave her an Italian oil lamp that they said they would light in remembrance.

Nor did Karen shy from acknowledging her approaching mortality. For my birthday in November – and shortly after our family holiday to Brisbane when I had an epiphany of child-care competency in correctly diagnosing illness in Estlin despite Karen and my mother insisting he was just 'peeky' – Karen gave me a copy of *The Family Encyclopedia of Health*. Inside the front cover she inscribed: 'November 11, 2002. Hope this book will answer any

questions that pop up in the future! All my love Karen'. For Christmas she gave me several more books and in each wrote similar inscriptions detailing the date, Christmas, and her love.

She failed however to write an inscription in one book – Michael Cooper's *Wine Atlas of New Zealand* – which I particularly coveted and had directly requested when shopping with Karen a couple of months earlier. The book had just been published and appealed to me due to my PhD topic which focused on the entangled constructs of rurality, leisure, wine tourism, class distinction and individual identity in the nearby 'wine village' of Martinborough. Although my PhD had been regularly suspended during Karen's illness and I worked fulltime lecturing to support our family, I still retained an enduring interest in the topic although I wasn't at all sure when, or if, I would return to my research.

After receiving the book on Christmas morning and shortly after noting that it was sans notation from Karen, I asked her why she had not inscribed this text. Was it because I had openly asked for it and had been there when Karen purchased it? Was it because it was already 'PERSONALLY Autographed' by the author as the gold sticker on the front cover proclaimed and which the author's silver signature on the inside title page verified?

'No, not all', Karen replied laughing. She had simply forgotten and would inscribe it soon, 'After lunch or later after we return from Christmas dinner with your Mum and Dad.' Satisfied I shambled off to find another Christmas mince pie.

Karen's omission was, however, curious. She was always diligent in her gift-giving and her gifts were frequently extravagant and empathetic. Karen's gifts always enhanced my being and personality far beyond what I was initially conscious of or could appreciate. One time she gave a set of antique, coloured crystal wine glasses. I don't recall exactly the occasion other than it was when we were living at Rose Cottage, that Karen had been paying off the glasses for months beforehand, and that she said she was giving them to me 'a day late' because I had upset her the day before – although she wouldn't tell me what I had done: 'You should know why. Besides that was yesterday, today you should be enjoying your glasses.' I of course didn't know why, possibly it was Valentine's Day and I had forgotten. What is more I didn't initially appreciate the import of her gift - although through using the glasses I quickly realised how these quirky, individually coloured vessels not only reflected my eclectic personality, but also resonated with the distinct personalities of those with whom I most enjoyed to share good wine, food and conversation. A perfect gift.

This was one of a few times that Karen withheld information – normally she was blatantly honest and open, which meant not only that you knew what and why you had got it wrong, but more importantly you could trust in what you had got right. Another time was on her last Christmas when days beforehand Karen had discovered that the tumours under her armpit,

which had drastically reduced in size in response to 'last chance' chemotherapy treatment, now appeared to be growing again – a circumstance that meant that her cancer was terminal. But Karen didn't tell me. She didn't tell her doctors either. She kept this grim news to herself, wanting everyone to enjoy Christmas and especially her eldest children, Alana and Dylan, who were joining us for the first time for Christmas lunch. This was Karen's greatest gift to us that year – a Christmas without fear, without despair. A Christmas in naïve joy and good tidings. And it was.

More usually Karen withheld nothing – or at least nothing I know of. In fact she castigated me for one of my gifts that Christmas – a necklace consisting of a black silk choker from which hung a silver cage designed to hold a fresh rosebud. I had given Karen the matching earrings for her birthday early in the year. Although I knew Karen loved gold jewellery, it certainly displayed pleasingly against and set-off her bronzed skin, I was also certain she could also wear silver well. Besides, I knew Karen loved flowers and the organic nature of this jewellery was intriguing. Furthermore our gifts had often challenged in their enrichment. Karen listened to my reasoning and after wearing the earrings a few times, declared that she loved them. The necklace, however, was a step too far. Immediately after unwrapping my gift, Karen retorted: 'What are you thinking Peter? I have tumours growing on my neck and I don't want to draw attention to them.' This response didn't faze or upset me, it was simply Karen in honesty. I replied that, aside from wanting to complete the set, I just didn't see, didn't think, about the tumours. That I only saw her beautiful. Karen nodded, tried the necklace on, looking at herself in a mirror, then she said 'Nope, it just doesn't work. The earrings are ok, I like the earrings but the necklace just isn't right, it's too gothic. A bit morbid don't you think?' I had the penultimate word, dressing Karen in both the earrings and necklace after her death. Although the last word was saved for her and the fires of cremation.

There was also an eccentric honesty and openness to Karen's own gift-giving. Most often she would get so excited the night before that she would sit up in bed, squirming with anticipation and smiling to herself. If I was asleep she would shake me awake and then blurt out what my birthday or Christmas gift was. 'I just can't wait...', she would say before divulging and collapsing her carefully crafted surprise. Aside from the wine glasses the only other gift I can recall Karen giving me in surprise was an anniversary present. I had been out with friends in Wellington, returning late one night to a sleeping Rose Cottage. After skilfully avoiding the creakiest floorboards in the hallway, I entered the back lounge and switched on the light. At first I thought it was a to-scale poster, but no it was the genuine article – a large figurative oil painting titled *Aimee & Nina* by the Taranaki-based artist Marianne Muggerridge. The painting skilfully depicts a young, lithe, blonde-haired Pakeha girl sitting cross-legged, in profile, and next to an older, petite, raven-haired Maori woman who meets the viewer's gaze head on. The foothills of Mt Taranaki play backdrop and the painting is a wonderful portrayal of feminine,

generational and bi-cultural interplay. I had fallen in love with *Aimee & Nina* when it first appeared in an exhibition of Marianne's work at Athene Gallery in nearby Greytown. Unbeknown to me, Karen had covertly made an offer on the painting – a very loving and bold move considering we had only grocery money in the bank. Karen had, however, dejectedly reported back that 'an American' had, via the internet, offered exactly the same amount in US currency, thereby nearly doubling our offer. Charmed by Karen's gesture I had visited the gallery for the next month to look at the painting, drink coffee with the gallery owner – my now good friend Ian – and to complain about this new form of net-enabled, exchange-rate American imperialism.

Suddenly Karen was at my side, her eyes sleepy and warm, smiling enigmatically. 'Happy Anniversary babe – hope you still like the painting.' A gift? How? When? Did Ian hang it? How much? How the hell are we going to pay for it? Karen just smiled and said 'I will tell you all about in the morning – but for now it's time for bed', upon which she took my hand and turned off the lounge light. After making her original and unsuccessful offer Karen had – in seeing my deep longing – once again secretly returned to the gallery and offered a thousand dollars more, still several thousand less than the American offer. However this proved enough to clinch the deal, although Karen had to put the painting on her Amex card, which hadn't seen the light of day for some time. We had just three weeks to raise the funds to pay it off – a move facilitated by a mortgage and a new double garage.

I met Nina – the Maori woman depicted in the painting – on the day of Karen's funeral. She had been visiting Marianne the artist, who had also become a family friend and who told her of Karen's death and our association with the painting. Nina kindly accompanied her to Karen's funeral and I was standing nervously outside Old St Paul's greeting people when I saw her walking up the driveway. I pointed a knowing finger in her direction, declaring – 'I know you! You hang in our lounge!' A bright encounter on what was a harrowing day.

Karen's gifts always enriched. Were always meticulously planned and thoughtful – even if prematurely disclosed. Which is why the lack of a personal inscription in the Michael Cooper's *Wine Atlas* irked a little and I asked Karen on several occasions when she was going to write one. Every time she smiled and said, 'Soon, soon. I'll do later today, I promise.' Then we received confirmation that her cancer had definitely returned. Karen phoned me in my office, telling me 'Now don't panic' and a missing inscription quickly became the last thing on my mind.

A year or so after Karen's death I decided to return to PhD studies. I turned to the *Wine Atlas* as a gentle way of re-orientating myself to the history and development of the wine industry in New Zealand. As with all hard-cover books, I removed the dust jacket, putting this on the book

shelf for safe-keeping. I opened the book and there, on the inside of the front cover, under where the dust jacket fold sits, was the following inscription from Karen:

Merry Christmas 2002. Cheers! to my darling yes you will curse me & finish your thesis.  
All my love Karen.

6. Karen announced one afternoon that, 'I'm off to the hairdressers to have my hair cut off.' A short discussion on her reasoning took place as she walked through the dining room and upstairs toward the front door, with Karen firmly asserting that she was not going to 'simply wait for it to fall out piecemeal. Better to have it cut off professionally and then wait for it to grow back... I'll pick up some groceries on the way home.'

She went, she returned, without fanfare. Without recrimination or lament. It was shortly before her first round of chemotherapy; shortly after she had recovered sufficiently from her mastectomy operation to drive the car.

Karen returned an hour or two later to reveal a virgin white scalp; a perfectly round cranium; and a couple of berets she had bought to combat 'the cold wind' now blowing around her naked head. She unpacked the groceries.

The family regarded Karen's denuded head as a resplendent, luminous orb that none of us could stop rubbing, given its smoothness and exactitude; a crisp ritual of familiarity and novelty that was reinvigorated when her hair began to grow back as a fine, tingling fuzz a couple of months later.

Some weeks after Karen's visit to the hairdressers, Estlin (then five years old) drew a picture of his mother as part of a class activity at school. The picture still hangs on the wall of our kitchen, just above the sink where Karen proudly blue-tacked it. Estlin's crayon drawing depicts his mother dressed in electric blue and standing proud with arms and fingers spread wide, smiling broadly with a full head of long, dark hair that jauntily curls up at the ends. At the bottom there is a typed caption: 'My mum used to have long hair. Now she has short hair. By Estlin.'

7. Karen thought her 'lack of hips' – of the curvaceous Scarlet Johansson kind – were her 'worst feature'.

From my perspective Karen's full breasts, her strong shoulders, her even stronger, nimble fingers – that could make you cry in ecstatic pain with massage, that at other times gripped me so tightly that the boundary between us fused inaudibly – were more than compensation for this alleged deficit. Besides Karen could certainly work what she had and I could spot her distinctive hip-swinging gait, her thick, dark hair swaying in union, in jaunty celebration, from a long way off. Around the filtering byways. The gloomy nooks of the university.

This vision in the distance, most often glimpsed as Karen stepped lively ahead, caught me unaware every time. Every time arrested me mid-sentence, in mid-thought. Would lift me above the humdrum with a startling burst of crystal joy. And as I hurried to catch up, all would dissolve into background. Into discard.

I would call out her name. Karen.

Call out. So that she would stop. Would turn. To greet me with a smile that always started in her eyes. Impish green, flecked hazel. That illumed her lips. Her face. That coursed through her body, then mine. Picked me up entire, renewed, complete.

Karen holds my gaze directly. Is my intent, my double helix.

'Hey babe'.

'Hey you'.

Karen's hand reaches out and press lightly on my chest.

8. 'How would you feel if we lost our rings?'

'I'd claim the insurance.'

Knew as soon as I'd said it I had got it wrong and badly. Changed tack.

'I'd be devastated of course... also.'

But it was too late.

My first response exposed a marked, even intuitive, lack of sentiment. A blatant poverty of romance and caring. Although I was sure Karen would at the least recognize, would at least appreciate, the spontaneity of my pragmatism – something I had constantly learned from her, perhaps most memorably when Estlin was born on July 2<sup>nd</sup> a tick over a year from our Independence Day hook-up. Planned yet six week's premature. Just day two after we had moved to Rose Cottage, a homely, three-bedroom, circa 1861 cottage in the South Wairapapa. Our personal idyll.

I should have realized Estlin's worldly arrival was imminent when Karen insisted I leave off unpacking boxes and arranging furniture and redirect my energies to taking down all the ceiling light fittings so she could clean them. A short debate ensued over the merits of cleaning light fittings amidst a sea of unpacked chaos, but Karen was adamant. This task needed completing before she could rest easy for 'another night'. I agreed without any real resistance; after all, an easy-resting, near-eight-months pregnant woman is a blessing in any home, let alone one to which you have just moved.

But I should have realized.

I found a ladder in the wood shed and had positioned this to take down the first fitting – the one in our bedroom, figuring this was one that would be the most conducive to appeasing Karen’s restfulness, when I heard her from the kitchen exclaim that her waters had broken. She then calmly walked to the hallway phone, telling me as she passed the bedroom doorway ‘to be careful up there’ and called the local mid-wife to inform her of events. Karen had spoken to the midwife for the first time only an hour or so before to schedule an initial meet and greet for later in the week.

Once off the phone Karen told me she didn’t think the midwife had believed her, but that she would be around in twenty minutes ‘in any case to check me out’. I asked what I should do, expecting clichéd instructions about hot water, clean towels or at least to get the motor running. But Karen said she had already packed an overnight bag and that there wasn’t much to do but wait – after all, we didn’t know where the closest hospital was. Then she asked me to set up the TV and VCR. ‘What?’ I replied incredulously. ‘I don’t want to miss *Seinfeld* just because we are occupied at the hospital, wherever it is.’ Karen laughed mischievously, her face alight with calm excitement. I stammered out an acquiescent ‘Ok’ as Karen turned and waddled back to the kitchen to continue her meatloaf preparations.

The midwife duly arrived to find Karen bent over putting a meatloaf in the oven and me attempting to disentangle the multi-coloured wires at the back of the VCR. ‘I’m trying to set up the VCR so we can record *Seinfeld* before we go to the hospital,’ I explained. ‘Oh ok,’ the midwife replied, ‘Let’s just see will we’ before introducing herself to Karen. The two of them then disappeared into our bedroom to ‘see what’s up’.

The midwife clearly thought we were a couple of naïve ‘city types’ who had over-reacted or panicked in some way. But I knew better. Karen already had two children and her mothering of Corinna had been not only constructive, but was frequently proactive, one or two steps ahead of the game when I was still unaware we were on a field of play. My money was on Karen.

A couple of minutes later the midwife returned ashen-faced. ‘She’s eight and half centimeters dilated. We have to get to the hospital now!’ I asked her where the closest hospital was. ‘In Masterton, but they are not equipped to take six-week prems. You will have to drive over the hill to the Hutt Hospital.’ It was mid-winter. Night was falling and the temperature had dropped fast and the radio had warned of possible snow on the Rimutaka Hill overnight. I was trying to get my head around a forty-minute, twisting drive back over the hill road with an eight centimeters and counting Karen. Assessing if my rallying driving skills could break free from the imagined and actually get Karen to the Hutt Hospital on time when she appeared at the doorway.

'NO... We won't make it. I reckon we only have about 20 minutes, so it is Masterton or here.'

A brief discussion later we were desperately trying to keep up with the midwife. She had careered off into the darkness at 100km plus. Forgetting perhaps that in despite of Karen's calm decisiveness and my VCR connection skills, we were still rural newbies and to us the unlit, night dark roadways were foreign territory. Although we did manage to keep her blue flashing light in sight, a luminary excitement all the more enhanced by us likewise cutting the pitch night with our alternating hazard lights.

By the time we reached Carterton – ten minutes from Rose Cottage, another ten from Masterton – Karen said 'I'm holding it in.' Although she still had enough presence to request I find a decent music station on the car radio to keep her 'calm'.

Within minutes of arriving at the hospital, Estlin was born. It was a particularly busy night in obstetrics with four women giving birth at the same time and the birthing unit had a distinct air of keystone cops. Nurses were running everywhere. Instruments were being dropped, clattering on linoleum floor. Even the attending obstetrician, who had a no-nonsense, nurse-intimidating, sleeves-literally-rolled-up demeanor of a busy vet during an epidemic, became unsettled as he counted off the number of times the umbilical cord was wrapped around Estlin's neck: 'Twice...three... ah four!'

Through all this. The mad nighttime, unknown roadway dash to the hospital. Estlin being rushed to an incubator. Amid the hurried assurances from nurses that the baby was ok, although he and Karen would have to stay in hospital for a few days' observation. Karen was serenely unruffled, matter-of-fact. She did not cry out and only grimaced a couple of times with what, aside from the large bump in her front, could easily have been confused with heart burn (Scientology eat your heart out). Even at the moment of birth, she simply squeezed my hand and bore down as instructed. And for the most part I simply followed her cue (though an attending nurse commended me on my enthusiastic 'cheerleading' especially at the bear-down juncture). My major concern was Karen's wellbeing, although I had complete trust in her instincts.

And then Karen yelped.

A sharp, unexpected cry of pain and surprise.

Caused by an attending nurse who, without forewarning, had plunged a needle into Karen's thigh, injecting her with syntocinon to help expel the placenta.

'Yes... there it is!' I called out, fist-pumping in celebration.

The nurse, Karen, the pediatrician all looked at me quizzically.

'Sorry... I thought that all American women cried out when giving birth... at least that's what they do in the movies... I've been waiting for it, that's all.' I smiled goofily and Karen smiled back with ironic understanding.

'Go and get me something to eat. I'm really hungry and it looks as though I'm going to miss out on that meatloaf.'

This was classic Karen. Pragmatic, controlled, cogent. Quickly summing up a situation to identify the immediate, necessary responses.

Ten days later I received a call from Karen telling me they had been discharged, that I could drive up to Masterton and collect her and Estlin. And I panicked.

Partly in excitement. Partly due to some form of delayed, pent-up stress from events ten days prior. I couldn't find my keys. Wasn't sure if the baby seat was in the car. Suddenly worried that I could not remember the way to the hospital, even though I had driven there for ten consecutive days.

I dashed out of the house. And as I did so I inexplicably, without any logic, reason or rhyme, picked up a cardboard box filled with unpacked, flattened boxes and placed it on top of the wood-burner. The wood-burner that I had lit earlier that morning and which had had a roaring, house-warming fire ablaze all day.

I drove excitedly, distractedly, until I reached Carterton when another thought hit me; I needed some screws for a bookshelf that Karen wanted fitted. I pulled an illegal u-turn, drove quickly back to Rose Cottage, unlocked the front door to find the hallway filled with smoke. I immediately recognized my stupidity and ran to the lounge to find thick grey smoke billowing out and around the misplaced cardboard box. I picked it up and ran outside. As I got to the front door the box exploded into flames. I threw and the box landed safely, harmlessly, alight on the lawn.

I couldn't believe my idiocy (though I can hear psychologists muttering about suppressed animosity and rage toward impending fatherhood overcome in my unconscious by an enduring desire for Karen's sexual and intellectual enrichment – hence the screws and the bookshelf). Yet I had read *New Zealand's Burning*<sup>10</sup> and I knew how many of the pioneers' wooden, weather-board homes and buildings had been lost to fire. If I hadn't forgotten those screws, Rose Cottage – more than a hundred and thirty years old and spark tinder-dry – would have burnt to the ground in minutes. And Karen would have spent just one chaotic moving

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<sup>10</sup> Rollo, A. (1994). *New Zealand's Burning – The Settlers' World in the Mid 1880s*. Victoria University Press, Wellington.

night in her dream country cottage. All our possessions would have been lost. There would be no home for our new child.

I set off for Masterton Hospital again, parked the car and rushed to Karen's room to breathlessly tell her of my misadventure. In my garbled telling I managed to convince myself that Rose Cottage was still not safe. That I could not trust my extinguishing efforts. So I dashed out of the room, yelling I needed to check the house again. That I needed to ensure everything was alright before taking her and Estlin away from the hospital.

Another maddening mercy dash, this time back to Rose Cottage. Ran from the car, into the house to find... everything was fine, of course. Then the phone rang.

It was Karen.

'Everything ok?'

Before I could reply.

'Good, because what are you thinking? I've been here for ten days and I want to leave now.'

'But what if Rose Cottage had burnt down?' I stammered by way of justification.

'If the house had burnt down we would simply book into a motel... So you have twenty minutes to collect me and Estlin or we are divorced.'

A necessary slap across my consciousness that immediately released me from the grips of a delayed, illogical, panic. And which spawned another sprint to Masterton to bring Karen and Estlin back safely and securely home – though not before I stopped to buy cake as a gift of appeasement.

And yet here I was seven years later telling Karen, the woman who resolutely kept me on the straight, narrow and exciting, that if we lost our rings – lost her diamond vined engagement ring, our two inscribed wedding bands – that my first response would be to claim 'the insurance'. And what is more, I was telling a Karen who had been dead for near eleven months.

It was just before Christmas 2003. Estlin and I were at Rose Cottage readying it for homestay guests who were booked in for the Xmas-New Year period. I was mowing the browning lawns, enjoying the warming sun and the physical labour. Wearing earmuffs to ease the industrial clatter of the mower. My mind was turned toward thoughts of impending summer droughts when I heard Karen's voice clear and composed.

'How would you feel if we lost our rings?'

'I'd claim the insurance.'

No, wrong response. 'I'd be devastated of course... also.'

What? Karen? Me? Actual? Projecting? I stopped pushing the mower. Attempted to make sense of what had just happened. I had heard Karen's voice many times since her death. Knew frequently it was me simply projecting, though this did not worry me as I was confident that my intimate understandings would always ensure an authentic rendering of Karen in absentia. Besides I was always comforted by the notion that Karen was still guiding me – or at the very least that I was guiding myself via faithful, pertinent, impersonations.

However this was different. I had no idea of where, why, what circumstances had prompted this bizarre question about losing rings. I struggled to recall where I had last seen the rings. Remembered they were sitting in an ornamental jewellery box on top of our bedroom dresser. However, only knew for sure that only my insurance reply was wrong.

I recommenced mowing, still trying to figure out why Karen as opposed to 'Karen' would be asking me about our rings. I shook it off. Decided I should be pleased to actually hear Karen's voice although, for the moment I would have to accept that I could not decipher her meaning or intent.

Then I heard Estlin calling me from the back door.

'Dad, Dad!'

'Huh,' I removed the earmuffs. 'What?'

'The police on the phone. The police from Wellington. They want to talk to you!'

Our home in Highbury, Wellington had just been burgled. The police reported that a passer-by had found Karen's credit cards (all expired), driver's license and purse-sized photographs of the children strewn along a footpath of a nearby road. Fearing a robbery, mugging or something even more sinister, they had firstly phoned Highbury and now Rose Cottage. I told them of Karen's death early in the year and that the cards etc could have only come from her purple *Country Road* handbag that was sitting on the sideboard where she had left it. On the day she was taken to the hospice.

We drove over the hill and returned to Highbury. Found that someone had broken in through the French doors and aside from Karen's handbag, they had also stolen our computer and presents from around the Christmas tree. Yet for some inexplicable reason they had not ventured downstairs. Down to where they would have been completely sheltered from neighborly eyes. Where our rings, all of Karen's jewellery, sat on top of our bedroom dresser. Just one swift grab. One pocketing away from prying hands.

The police quickly nabbed the perpetrator, (he was a young electrician who had been working on the property next door and was already on a curfew awaiting trial for stealing and fleecing car radios to *Ca\$h Converters* to finance his recently acquired P-habit), although they were perplexed why he hadn't gone downstairs.

'Something must have disturbed him,' they said.

Karen perhaps. After all she was constantly unsettling me.

9. Karen is standing on the cobbled pathway leading to the old anthropology department at Victoria University. Accosting me as I head out the doorway into the gathering dusk, shoulders hunched and homeward bound.

Karen is standing hands on hips, impeding my progress so she could deliver the forceful message that had brought her to the university at this hour when typically she would be at her home. Typically cooking, cajoling her children to complete homework. To wash their hands. Set the table.

In my mind's eye Karen is wearing the wool-lined, Californian denim jacket she wore when we first shared an anthropology tutorial and several brief conversations some years before. Her long, dark hair enfolds the jacket's thick woollen collar and shelters on her shoulders with the animation of speech.

This, of course, is a false memory.

Karen didn't own or at least didn't wear the denim jacket when we began our affair some years later. Nevertheless there she is, wearing blue jeans, the denim jacket, gold rings and gold bracelet flashing against the bronze skin of her hands, wrists, in the darkening evening light. Standing determinedly akimbo, ready to accost, confront as soon as I left the department. Delivering her proclamation with a force and passion that were soon to become our daily diet of love, sex, care and talk.

'Look, it is as simple as this. I will be better for you than any woman you have ever known and any woman you will ever know.'

In evoking the denim jacket, my memory has tumbled back to the time when I was first attracted – albeit from the tentative, many would claim sly, social distance that enables the appraisals and assessments of the male gaze – to Karen's married, nonchalantly elegant and seemingly unattainable feminine aesthetic. These memories are hazy at best. Exist primarily via recollections that Karen conveyed after we were coupled.

To when Karen first talked to me as we stood on the pale red, cobbled pathway that leads to the front door of the department. I had spent a youthful year making such cobblestones at

Firth's in Waikanae, finishing the day with face, hair, forearms coated in red and black cement, thirsting for a cool beer. It was afternoon and just after we had shared an undergraduate tutorial, though I can't recall what paper we were taking or the lecturer. It may have been a 300-level paper on Anthropology methodologies. I don't remember Karen at all in the actual tutorial, just talking to her outside. I don't remember much of what she said. Nothing of my reply. However I do recall Karen wearing the sheep-skin-lined denim jacket and have a vague memory of her saying she had to leave to get ready to decamp to Paekakariki for the weekend, which I didn't really comprehend. So it was possibly a Friday. I also remember thinking that Karen was a 'bit flakey' and did not form any understanding that she wanted to talk simply because we were both mature students. Thought that she primarily wanted to discuss anthropology, but did not know how or what to say.

*Gaps, gaps and more.*

I had started undergraduate studies in 1989, a mature student who had previously enjoyed, then endured, a brief but interesting career as a journalist working for the tabloid *Truth* in Wellington and Auckland, even more fleetingly as a sports reporter (rugby and athletics) in Cardiff, Wales before giving the boss 24 hours notice, reading Marx, and orchard/pub working/travelling for a few years. My then wife, Isobel (also a journo, although the kind that can spell i.e. a sub-editor), suggested I go to university (she had already been) and that anthropology would suit the way my mind works. At this time I didn't know what anthropology was or how to spell it, so I owe a debt of astute insight and support to Isobel who is one of several women who have known me a lot better than I know myself.

Karen started her university career in the States at the University of California in Santa Barbara on a scholarship provided, I think, by the California Department of Fire Protection. Her father, Frank (Francis) Joseph Neele Jr., Karen's all-American hero. Had been a fireman in the Indio Fire Department, Riverside County, California, for five years when, in May 1971, he died of a heart attack while fighting a fire in a 'boxcar' caused by 'sparks from the brakes of the east-bound train' on the Southern Pacific Railroad. He was forty-five. Karen was twelve. A pupil at the local catholic school, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and most probably asleep when her father was pronounced dead at 9.55pm at Valley Memorial Hospital 'despite attempts at both mechanical and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation by other firemen'.<sup>11</sup>

Frank had previously served in the US. Navy as a Chief Petty Officer for 20 years and after World War II as a diver engaged in bomb and mine disposal. We have a photo of him encased in his bell diving suit, smiling broadly, handsomely, with his brass helmet sitting on the wharf and a leggy, swim-suited blonde sitting on his lap (I mistakenly, yet appealingly, told Karen's

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<sup>11</sup> From various newspapers clippings – undated or referenced – that Karen kept from this sad time.

mother when she visited that I thought that it was her in the picture – instant brownie points). Apparently the men who carried out underwater bomb disposal were drawn mainly from the ranks of the Blacks, Indians and other lowly ranked individuals in U.S. society at the time. Both Karen's fathers, biological (whom she never met) and adoptive (Frank) were Indian. Frank was born John Snow in July 1925 and had been adopted himself as a four year old, a 'minor child... indigent, destitute and homeless' in 1929, the year of the Wall St crash. He had apparently been 'abandoned and deserted by the father' and his mother, Betty, was unable 'to financially support said child [and]... Believing that the welfare of my child will be promoted by placement in a good home'.<sup>12</sup> Karen's mother, Mary Ann Neele (nee Hanlon), was from a family of Latvian immigrants, many of whom Karen said were staunch communists and atheists. They were, she said, purposefully disinclined to bring children into a world corrupted by rampant capitalism and McCarthyism, and as a result Karen had no blood cousins, grew up as an only child of extended family of elderly relatives.

Influenced no doubt by her heroic father, Karen had wanted to be a marine biologist early on and was herself a certified diver who had a varsity job diving for abalone. She even attended a month-long dive school in 1976 run by Jacques Cousteau's son, Michel, based on Wuvulu Island near Papua New Guinea, before starting university.<sup>13</sup> Karen told me that around this time she started an affair with a married, with two children, and fifteen or so years her senior, professor. He later wrote to Karen when we were living at Rose Cottage in South Wairarapa suggesting they rekindle old passions. He said he was still in 'good shape', had left his wife several years previously, and was eager to span the gap, if not chasm, of decades without communication, of life courses lived. He had nice penmanship and like many men (myself included) could clearly carry a torch without any recourse to the reality of another (I am after all intensely in love with a dead woman).

Karen was patently riled at receiving this missive and grumbled about abuse of a position of trust, of being a vulnerable and 'under-aged girl'. The legal age of consent in California was, and still is, a surprisingly conservative 18 years. I thought Karen's comments were a bit harsh, especially as the relationship lasted, however sporadically, for more than a year. Moreover affairs between older men and younger women are common and furthermore by my reading of American popular culture affairs with professors were almost a rite-of-passage at that time. However clearly Karen's perceptions, her notion, her presentation of self as woman and now a mother of a teenage girl, had evolved over the intervening twenty plus years and she wrote back saying 'no thanks' in equally good penmanship.

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<sup>12</sup> Adoption Release, Rebecca Talbot Perkins Adoption Society, Inc, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1929.

<sup>13</sup> *Daily News* (Indio), April 17, 1976, p.4.

A marriage and a child (Alana b. 1980) in the States, a move to New Zealand, and then another child (Dylan b. 1983), interrupted Karen's studies, though she eventually transferred to Victoria to complete a B.A., majoring in anthropology in 1994. I completed my B.A., also with a major in anthropology, one child (Corinna b.1990) and several years working as a part-time racing sub-editor for the *Sunday Star Times*, in 1992.

Karen later told me the reason she had initially sought me outside the Anth Department was because I had spoken warmly about my daughter in tutorial discussions. As Corinna was born in January 1990, it is likely that Karen and I shared an undergraduate tutorial sometime between 1991 and 1992 – probably the latter as I am not particularly fond of infants, so can't imagine 'talking warmly' until Corinna was at least walking and talking warmly herself. Besides I took off the second half of 1990 to be Corinna's primary caregiver. All I can say is she survived.

Although the real kicker, to deploy an apt American colloquialism, is that one reason my first memories of meeting Karen are opaque, is that she had found me 'too intense'. Indeed after a couple of post tutorial interactions she took to expeditiously hiding behind bushes, or around building corners, in avoidance if she spontaneously happened on me around campus. All Karen had wanted was to share some of the trials and joys of being a mature student, a parent, running a household, all while attempting to keep up with varsity study. And all I talked about was 'have you read' such and such, ideas for assignments, and the latest anthropological notion I had encountered or dreamt up. The last things anyone would want to hear, especially when 'simply getting to varsity was difficult enough'.

That I was insensitive to Karen's purpose is not without reason. Firstly I assumed that anyone at varsity wanting to talk with me, and especially an attractive, elegant woman, could only want to discuss 'ideas'. And secondly, my time at varsity was precious as I barely had from 9am to 3pm most days as Isobel worked the night shift on *The Dominion*. Besides in anthropology I had found a home for my playful, evolving Marxist intellect and I was very excited (still am in many ways), so babbling enthusiastically was definitely on the cards. Although none of this alters a now agreed truth that our first encounters were marked by Karen first contacting and then studiously avoiding me. A response that exposed a pronounced gap in our knowledge and comprehension of each other's circumstances.

*Mind the gap.*

Not surprisingly, back on that evening when Karen stood determinedly akimbo, denim-bound, her beautiful dark hair fanning angelically in the breeze, and delivered her best woman proclamation, I was so impressed, so enamoured of her confidence, the blunt, candid surety of

her desire and aspiration, that I bundled my life up in a neat, slightly lumpy parcel and gladly handed it over to her waiting arms.

*Gap closing.*

I have vague recollections of a halo emitting around Karen's head at this moment. Most likely it was the sun setting over the yardarm of the university library and settling into healthy dose of hagiographic remembrance. In any regard any thoughts that Karen was a 'bit flaky' had been resolutely pushed in the background.

*Gap smitten.*

**10.** 'No, Peter, you can't...'

'Can't what?'

'You just can't give me that look anymore.'

Karen was standing in the kitchen, leaning against the breakfast bar that has never been used for that purpose.

'What look?' I replied, as I walked down the stairs toward her, genuinely unaware.

'The LOOK,' she smiled secretly. 'I just can't do it anymore.'

So I stopped.

The look was one of love and lust that preceded me whispering sweet everythings into Karen's ear. Whisperings, which at this moment, were the only form of lovemaking Karen was physically capable of as the cancer was beginning to spread throughout her body, was depressing her breathing, stripping her energies. Even so our sweet everythings were the ludic charm in my plot to orgasm Karen back to health. To force the cancer climatically, humorously, null. At this juncture it was the only extraordinary ability we had. Together, that is, with keeping life as normal, as possible.

Our lovemaking had taken many evolving forms over the years, some surprising, all exhilarating and each honed, decisively ring-fenced. Oases of indulgent pleasure and escape. This form. Stopping. Despite the outward appearance of absence and contradiction. Would be just as right.

Some weeks later Karen said she was worried. Worried about me. Worried about stopping. I told her our lovemaking had always been right, whatever the form it took, whatever the circumstance. Getting it right mattered above all else.

So I stopped. Karen stopped. We stopped.

Stopped 'The look', which until I was asked, I didn't even know I had.

## 11. Revelation is fretful.

In writing something intensely personal, I have struggled, balked. Struggled with revelation. Written, rewritten. Tossed, turned, returned. Balked. Sacked my memory. Found, filtered, then stashed secret delights away. Seeking what, how, why to reveal?

Everyday we are constantly moved to choose, to risk, to create and recreate moments of revelation or concealment. To tell full, then half, then quarter, to make no disclosures at all. Keeping it tight, mostly in public. In front of witnessing, in front of assessing, in front of judging, others. The them. The they. Purposefully maintaining a 'But, it's all good' ideal, hoping few will see, will sense the cracks. Will recognise and exploit our anxieties.

Many lie. Repeatedly. To others. Often. Most tragically to themselves. And everyday millions trek homeward. Millions open, then close and then mercifully lock front doors shut. They hang jackets on hooks and throw keys on to kitchen benches. And then their shoulders slump. And then they sigh – sometimes deeply, sometimes in overture to weeping. To letting it all go. At least until tomorrow when suits are again buttoned shiny tight and hair is again combined shiny bright, and everything, all is good for another day. What to divulge? To conceal? Embellish or veil? Choice and risk, but play the game. Everyone is playing. Everyone is striving. Mute your losses, exaggerate your wins, feign disinterest, affect excitement. Reveal or not, but stay in the game.

I worry about readers. Mostly of trusting unknown and unknowable others with my revelations, with my truths. Of being consumed, dissected, regurgitated as their truth. As their illusions, justifications or aspirations. As fodder, as gap. Some will accept and embrace. Others will reject, castigate and vilify. Yet all will be striving valiantly to create and recreate themselves in and out of pact. With me. With Karen. With an us as narrative.

I have examined firstly the habitual revelations of my now everyday. Have I become more brazen since Karen's death? More barefaced in the telling to keep alive what has been unflinchingly downgraded to plain memory? More blatant as I attempt to keep myself going, alive as remembering, as widower alone in a society obsessed with coupling. Critiqued my revelations as self-indulgence. As life blood. As a justification for my pallid appearance, my waning existence – personal and social.

Struggled also with an understanding that revelations in text are different to those voiced in conversation. Are intimately linked to the current expectations, norms and contradictions of

memoir.<sup>14</sup> Worried whether my intentionally crafted and re-crafted, performed and presented renditions will be regarded as truthful and properly tactful? Do they conform to the shifting ethics of self-presentation in contemporary New Zealand; amidst the vexing noise of the chattering middle-classes, Facebook confessionals and E-tainment exposés? Or will they be rejected as self-aggrandising, deluded, pitiful in exploiting what should remain private? Even worse, will they be contemptuously dismissed as boring, uninteresting, as a sorry insight into the entrapments and despair of the pathologically grieved.

On top of this I am tendering revelations into the burgeoning industries of autobiography, memoir and life-writing. Industries that currently are fuelled by a voyeuristic clamour for insight into the marginalised, debased, the addicted and traumatised. Into those who, through dint of personal insight and fortitude, heroically fashion a recovery. Who heart-warmingly experience emotional, social and spiritual redemption. Industries that are equally invigorated by furtive glances cast into the lives of the rich and powerful, the innovative or merely famed. Yet I can claim neither ignominy nor renown. Have endured and contributed to an existence that is as limited in its public triumphs as it is in the scope of its private failures. Nor can I offer a story of redemption or recovery. Karen died. I grieve. Nevertheless the pressure to disclose details, events, commentaries that are in some way extraordinary, are in some way salacious, is palpable – if only to be deemed publishable.

And when it comes to revelations in text I find myself consistently confronting the paucity of my literary skills to effusively convey. More importantly though, I find myself also confronting the permanency and added significance that is frequently accorded the written word. And I have floundered. Baulked. Realised that in the spoken telling, whenever brows furrow or eyebrows raise incredulously, one can easily rewind and explain it all to perplexed listeners. Likewise, you can emphasise with intonation, gesture, facial expressions. In other words, in the dynamics of conversation it is much easier to pitch and advance your cause. Also, that in the spoken telling and retelling you can change, retract, elaborate or deny any narrative aspect at any given moment. Which is probably why many lecturers I know, myself included, are frequently far braver, more critical, innovative and mischievous in their lectures than we are in academic text. Often unconsciously responded to the fact that slander is more defensible than libel.

And all of this is without considering how I will be read hot by insiders, by parents, by Karen's children, her friends, my friends, distant and close associates. I am aware that most will smile and cry. Some will recoil and a few will no doubt fling barbs. Understandable reactions all, especially when we are all urgently attempting to hold on to, or forget, our own memories, our

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<sup>14</sup> For example see, Eakin, P. J. (2008). *Living Autobiographically: How we create identity in narrative.*: Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London; Lejeune, P. (1989). *On Autobiography.* Theory and History of Literature, 52. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

own perceptions, partialities of Karen. All desperately trying to remain faithful to our own truths.

And what is my purpose in revelation?

In part it is a desire to reveal what was lost, and not merely the loss and its aftermath as tends to typify other grief narratives I have read. Narratives where the love for another is frequently assumed, apparent chiefly in the authors' heart-wrenching utterings of grief. Stories, which as Barthes notes, lack an explicit discourse of love that is not derided by the authorities of science, rationality, analysis and political endeavour – so much so 'that the lover's discourse is today *of an extreme solitude*'.<sup>15</sup> To fulsomely bare so that the loss may be frankly equated, assessed as truthful and as void – and especially by Corinna and Estlin who were daily beneficiaries in our fated romance.

It is also as a foil to the cynicism of many who believe that all passionate entanglements ultimately run aground. If not on the boredom of routine and daily living, then through atrophy or through rifting and conflict; unless of course the parties concerned agree to settle for benign companionship. I suspect this reflects a fatalism that holds that all good things eventually pass. It also reflects a widely-held notion that all things social – from strangers to friendship, to family and beyond – are inevitably mired in the vagaries of up and down, of good or bad, of enrichment and of disparagement. Will at some point end in tears. Hence our abiding interest in the stories, in the moral tales, of coping.

'And how are you coping?' people kindly ask. 'How are the children managing?' 'How are you managing with the children?' And rarely, although far more pertinently, 'How have the children managed you?' Genuine concern. Kindly care. Sympathetic connections one and all. Although not once has anyone asked, 'So what did you lose?' I know this is done to spare my feelings, but I suspect it is done also to spare theirs. For in asking such a question following the death, the departure, any upping of sticks, by a loved one we tacitly assume any answers proffered will be in either one of two registers. The first is garlanded with quixotic lies, with omissions of fact, or with the sort of tactful silences that underpin most idealisation of eulogy. The other will, by contrast, contain unpalatable truths. Heart-felt statements of relief, of freedoms hard won, of good riddance. Truths that easily shatter our collective illusions of romance and which potentially hold up an unflattering mirror to our own experiences. Either way, laudable delusion or estranged reality, our belief that all things social can never genuinely or enduringly be all things good is confirmed. The measure or worth then, of individuals, of relationships, of sociality, is not what we aspire to. Nor is it necessarily what we actually

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<sup>15</sup> Barthes, R. *ibid*, n.p.

achieve. Rather it is how we cope with, how we survive, move on from, are strengthened by, the certainties of discord, rupture and failure.

And I empathise.

I have been stupidly responsible for intimate hurts and failures past. Will most probably shoulder the burden for similar disappointments future. Though after loving and losing Karen little fazes me. I'm no longer stressed by likely tensions or points of breach in relationships – and especially those in the occupational, the institutional realms of existence. Besides I'm exceptionally lucky to be surrounded by particularly supportive family and friends, so any discontent should be kept mercifully minimal.

And Karen died. Our sociality, no matter how intimate, how passionate, ruptured. Was terminal in its corporeality, in its grounded practice, though seemingly endless in the ashen wash of memory. An unending ending. Of course, that is, until I die. Our children die. All who knew Karen are dead. Then our relationship – both material and in memoriam – will be terminated twice and for all.

Yet if loving Karen taught me anything, even when experiencing a form of hyper-intimacy and care when we knew her time was limited, it is that the failure or atrophy of things intimate, things passionate, is not an inevitability. Will terminate at some point for sure. However, that all good things must end should not be translated into a fatalism that all good things must falter or fail. Besides we must always ask just how much? Just how many? Of our social disappointments that can be fairly attributed to the dominant emphases and structures of our routine lives. Even if we accept the human condition is contrary. That we are innately programmed to get it socially wrong, just as surely as we are innately programmed to get it socially right. Genetically inclined to fight or to care. To compete and to cooperate. To create foes and to make friends. If we accept this as an innate continuum of the human condition, then clearly it is the type of society we fashion that will necessarily be the deciding factor in whether we err to the left or err to the right. Ultimately it is the type of society that we accept that routinely makes us the people we are. And in a feedback loop, it is we as the people we are, who make the society we accept. If a society – and especially in terms of its economic and political structures – expects its populace to be competitive, proprietorial, exploitative, atomistic, individualistic, mobile, then what price enriching relationships? What price enduring relationships? Should any of us be surprised by contemporary rates of divorce, domestic discord, glib *Facebook* friendships, stranger danger. Yet if loving Karen taught me anything, it is that you don't fool around with love. You don't fool around with passion or trust. Get it right or live alone. And as few of us truly desire to be solitary figures, alone or lonely, the pressure is on – on individuals and on society – to get it right.

Badiou has recently argued that love is a form of rupture that problematizes the truth of one and supplants it with the truth of two:

To love is to struggle, beyond solitude, with everything in the world that can animate existence. This world where I see for myself the fount happiness my being with someone else brings. 'I love you' becomes: in this world there is the fount you are for my life. In the water from this fount, I see our bliss, yours first. As in Mallarme's poem, I see:

*In the wave you become*

*Your naked ecstasy.*<sup>16</sup>

Badiou also argues that love, as awareness, as empathy and commitment to the truth of two, is the basis of egalitarianism and communism. Yet the truth of another is always mediated through the lens of the self and however empathetically rendered remains fundamentally a truth of the self. Love is therefore the perceived truths of the one creating, and thereby encompassing, the truths of two.<sup>17</sup> In addition the truths of one, of two, of many, are always mediated through how individuals are positioned as social, economic and political subjects with concordant identities, aspirations, values and ethics. This is why many relationships forged within the heady ideals of lust and best-behaviour dating quickly flounder as the truths of another are fully disclosed. Are revealed as incompatible, incommensurate, or even as truths of the self that have been assumed and then tendered onto the other in the fervent ardours of desire, optimism or delusion.

Although as Badiou notes it is empathy, it is awareness and the constructive shifting in response to the truth of another, that are the keys to enduring love. And shifting includes everything from jettisoning previously held personal or social truths; adopting or adapting the truths of another; generating new truths in coupling; or simply accommodating the truths of another that may contradict your own. I would add that, more than this, love is also the capacity – generated in experience or based on critical intuition – to trust an other is acting in your and your relationship's best interests even when you disagree with them. And ensuring you do likewise. Even when in fundamental agreement with yourself.

Early on, and without recourse to Badiou, Karen and I had through purposeful reflection and discussion, decided to swear off the routine tensions that marked our past relationships – experienced or observed. To deliberately relinquish conflicts over toilet seats, nights out, money, and all those irksome concerns that often reflect a relationship in perpetual crisis. As a

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<sup>16</sup> Badiou (2012). *In Praise of Love*, p. 104. Profile Books, London.

<sup>17</sup> One can only know another through the mediations of the self – accordingly egocentrism and ethnocentrism are unavoidable aspects of the human condition. The best we can hope for therefore is to be aware of, and constructively respond to, their influences. Thanks Yadana for reminding me of this.

result we spontaneously committed to forgoing and to modifying personal behaviours we believed might vex the other. In other words we habitually acted in constant mindfulness of truths of the other. I found myself starkly aware of, and abundantly thanking Karen for, the many routines of care she reproduced on a daily basis. Understanding fully for the first time (and quite shamefully) just how much affection can underlie the mundane, domestic acts of another. In fact I lived in constant awe of Karen's immense capacity for love, sex, care and can only recall us having three arguments – all early on, all concerning how children should be raised and behave (as would be expected in any attempt to reconstitute a family), and all ended in us progressively accommodating each other's parenting (the children learned quickly which of us to ask what questions). Even if I'm eulogising. If I have banished any minor disputes and conflicts from my angelic memories. It still remains as great a way to remember as it was to live.

Sounds a bit fuzzy. A bit new age, I know. But in reality the conscious aspects of our relationship were forged in the analysis of Marx, Foucault, Goffman and comparative anthropology – all of which generate a critical awareness that all expressions of self, other, sociality, are arbitrary yet historically contingent. More importantly they always result from the enactment of differential capacities and from the enactment of differential power. Accordingly power with any relationship is inescapable. The trick therefore is to consciously choose what capacities and what powers manifest, to what purpose, and with what consequences. Karen and I accepted we had different, yet often complementary capacities and powers, alongside different desires, aspirations, experiences and skills. And not those of the glib *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* variety, but rather garnered through vigorous, critical examinations of personality, foundational raising, existent proclivities. Then we purposefully ensured that these were routinely and ebulliently deployed in the satiation of self, other and our coupling (*Superman* – Nietzsche in comic-strip red and blue, complete with an 'I am the walrus' moustache, God, Krishna – might have all been templates here). Those capacities, those powers, that didn't pass this muster, were jettisoned without reproach.

However, given the constant structural, public, pressures of everyday life it is likely that our particular form of intentional, constructive romance could only ever be sustained within a nurturing enclave of intimacy. Certainly living in the idyllic rurality of Rose Cottage – free in the formative years from the disciplines and demands of servicing a mortgage and within short driving distance to a decent cake shop – provided an ideal platform from which to positively explore the intricacies of affection, to acquire the truths and embodiments of the other. And all the more when Estlin started pre-school. Though perhaps our primary driving force was one of complete weariness, typical maybe of those with social maturity on their side, of getting it so wrong in the past. I for one was thoroughly sick of my intimate selves. Thus embracing the best

truths of Karen, even better generating new truths in our coupling, was as much relief as it was a revolution.

But what to reveal of our constantly evolving passion? What generalities? What details of practice? What would Karen think of revelations in text, in the seeming perpetuity, the apparent fact of bibliographical citation? The latter I cannot answer. It is not something I discussed with Karen. Although when alive Karen often delighted in, or at least indulged, my public stories of us. Smiled widely when I hustled our good friend Christy, weary from driving from Mokateu to Greytown, into Rose Cottage to proudly show her the hole I had punched through the bedroom wall with the sole of my foot during one particularly amorous afternoon. While Karen herself had shown off the 'rug burns' on her knees to an old friend of hers. This was something I learned somewhat bizarrely, but in some ways comfortingly, while conversing with this friend at the Mary Potter Hospice and standing over Karen's corpse as we waited for the funeral directors to arrive.

Besides this is my narrative, albeit one I could not write without knowing a Karen. It is, therefore, my decision and I have chosen a lesser cowardly way out. That is to divulge some of the most personal without full confession or detail. And to do this in morose realisation that I too, at the end of the day (God I hate that phrase, the lazy naturalisation of subjective assertion), conform to the collective mechanisms for anxious, polite, muddling through life, death and every in between. So curse Barthes. Curse Marx. Curse the fearfulness of the middle-classes. Curse me.

So here is what I reveal and be done with it...

12. When I first encountered Karen intimately, she appeared to me sexually naïve. Experienced in the fleeting ordinariness of sexual activity as she conveyed it. Told me also that she had been raped after being pushed down a flight of stairs when living in the States.

Karen told me such things typically when we were contentedly watching television and something piqued her. I got to know when it was coming. Her face would cloud downcast. Eyes would darken. Then the revelation would come, together with the anger and the apportioning of blame, from which she never excused herself. Although by my reckoning she was only ever culpable of suffering, of feeling ashamed, and at times of accepting gilded apologies instead of legal redress. Karen's unrelenting honesty was refreshing, vitalizing, scarring. But she was sexually naïve nonetheless.

By contrast I caroused in the (more often than not theoretical) pursuit of good sex. This has something to do with my interpretation of the Catholic precept, in which I had been formatively raised, concerning the prohibition on sex before marriage. As a child of the sixties, an infant of individualism and secularism, I recast this as an obligation to pursue the best sex

you could before, as, and once you had 'settled down'. A commitment to seek out better and better sex, or to stay at home chaste (at times I wish I had). Just prior to Karen I had arrived at the conclusion that most heterosexual sex was ejaculation-centric, that male ejaculation was the implied, if not the ardently assumed goal of most heterosexual encounters – a logic that underpins the profitable release of Viagra and other erectile remedies. I theorised therefore that once ejaculation as an ultimate goal was taken off the table, out of bed, away from kitchen benches, that everything and anything could be cast as sexual, could become a passionate achievement in and of itself, including paradoxically ejaculation in a heartbeat, delayed over hours or days, or not experienced at all (not an original thesis I know, the Tantrics have known this for centuries, however I was quite proud of my DIY awakening).

So sexually naïve meets sexually theorizing.

Naïve eagerly embraces theorizing. Theorizing embraces naïve in return.

Naïve is keen to learn anything and everything that theorizing knows (or would like to know).

Theorizing is happy to educate and to learn in the process.

Naïve quickly becomes multi-orgasmic and insatiable.

And leaves theorizing in her wake, desperately trying to keep up.

The confines of the bedroom were summarily usurped and anywhere and everywhere became our playground. Which is a comparatively restrained, though admittedly revealing, way of saying that it was akin to being ferociously and repeatedly run over by a freight train; that there were times when I was physically afraid. Then after a couple of years Karen became hyper-orgasmic,<sup>18</sup> so much so that anything and everything physical could, would, result in her bliss (for fun we once set out to determine just how many, variably-sourced, orgasms Karen could experience – we lost count in the mid twenties).

Understandably Karen's passion became mine (as if I had any choice), although as you might imagine I strode the everyday world of work, shopping, queuing, the mortal mundane as a colossus in certain knowledge that I was party to the happiness of a beautiful, intelligent woman. Everyday concerns such as my PhD research, academic development, career networking, all became an anaemic backdrop. By contrast, however, the minutiae of everyday

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<sup>18</sup> Komisaruk et al (2006: 199-225) report that atypical orgasms – which occur 'under atypical conditions, apparently independent of genital stimulation' (p. 199) – have been recorded by men and women during daydreaming, as 'phantom' orgasms by individuals with spinal cord injuries, via electrical brain stimulation by sufferers of Parkinson's disease, and during epileptic seizures. Women have also reported experiencing orgasms 'just by thinking', 'from breast or nipple stimulation', 'stimulation of the mouth or anus', 'of the ears, lips' and so on (ibid: 3). Karen certainly fell within this category, although given her multiple, varied and essentially 'typical' capacities, I prefer the term 'hyper-orgasmic'. Komisaruk, B.R., Beyer-Flores, C. & Whipple, B. (2006). *The Science of Orgasm*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

personal and familial intimacies – cooking dinner, weeding gardens, building fences, washing clothes, eating hearty tuna, sunflower seed, gherkin and mayo sandwiches – were flung into sharp relief as other potent aspects of making and re-making love.

Then shortly before Karen was diagnosed with her first cancer, she became so hyper-orgasmic that physical contact became unnecessary and I could simply whisper sweet-everything's into her ear – tell her how much I loved and how much I lusted after her (in the imaginary or in the remembered) – to bring her to almost immediate climax, typically within twenty to thirty seconds. Made supermarket shopping a lot more interesting, though anyone watching would have thought Karen had taken faint as I would have to move quickly to hold her up as her legs, body, collapsed with pleasure.

Hence Karen's exhortation that I stop 'The look'.

It had apparently got to the point where simply the look that preceded the whispering was more than enough, in fact was too much. So I stopped. Stopping was simply the next truth. The next manifestation, the next fidelity of trust and love that we had to embrace. Stopping was not only right, but was equal to any other form of lovemaking we had enjoyed.

And this, in part, is the void from which people constantly tell me I 'must move on'. I try to explain that I am unable to see anything worthwhile to move on to. That I cannot envisage a relationship, let alone another creation of myself, that could generate equivalent, or even comparable, degrees of trust, love and passion. Indeed it is only recently I have not intuitively, physically recoiled from the looks, the touches or kisses of other women (not that they are actually queuing up). Not because I worry about betraying Karen, but more that I know in moving on I will betray myself as a former, as a lesser, as half the man I was. Half the man I will ever be. I cannot simply comprehend that I would not, in the first instance, cruelly expose, confirm in the definitive, that when Karen died I had in many ways perished beside her. That I would not confirm in practice, in the actualities of intimacy, that Karen is dead also.

The walking grieved.

Moving on would therefore require me to mourn twice and lastly. To accept my death – social, emotional, lustful – alongside that of Karen's. Would also steal me away from the soothing balm of triumphant memory, elated remembrance. Return me, without ceremony or fanfare, to the shores of the everyday. Marooned on the solo mundane. Bereft of Karen and a world of memories that sustain. Stranded on the limitations of myself as humdrum. Perhaps then shifting sideways is the best I can do. The best I can hope for. To continue to accept Karen as lack, existent only, primarily, as exultant memory. As my life breath.

So leave me to my delusions, my memories I plead. After all ten and counting years of remembrance, of aggravated celibacy by an errant Catholic whisperer must be telling, even to the most cynical of observers. But few seem able to comprehend. Freud and his band of psychologizing misfits<sup>19</sup> could easily claim that I am pathologically bereaved. That my identity, ego, libidinal self, are all entrapped in romancing a dead woman. Which leaves me hamstrung like an unrequited teenager. Atomised when I should be meaningfully connected to another, to an intimate, romantic replacement.

A new band of crusading bereavement scholars and counsellors<sup>20</sup> now advocate for more individuated, nuanced and eclectic grieving processes that reflect the contemporary post-modern turn and which are based on personal searches for meaning. They encourage survivors to personally comprehend the death and to then fashion new identities, ideas and practices that somehow incorporate the deceased in their ongoing lives. Yet even this enlightened band rarely, if ever, conclude that the deceased enriched beyond measure, made life and society bearable. Rarely, if ever, do they conclude that the loss is in fact irredeemable, that any new survivor identity, ideas and practices must accordingly be one of unremitting lack, of being lesser, of accepting never-best as the norm. I have contemplated and fashioned a personal rationale for survivorship – fortunately it was found within the courage of my children and the wonder of living in their routines of breakfast, school lunches, homework, holidays, in their growth and maturity. Fortunately it was the wonder of remembering Karen. It is out there, even if only in my memory.

And they could all rightly proclaim that moving on or adopting new meanings, new identities and new intimacies was appropriate grieving if it is assumed – as many psychological diagnoses do – that the society we experience is normative and not a surreal distortion generated by the combative interests and tensions inherent in any stratified system. If standard bereavement leave was not ‘three (3) days’ paid leave in the event of the death of the employee’s spouse, parent, step-parent, child, brother or sister, grandparent, grandchild’.<sup>21</sup>

Three days and the grieved shall rise again. Will move on. Will resume their devotions as productive, as consuming, individuals. Sovereign within our feel-good society. Forget to rise. Neglect to move on. And you risk being deemed occupationally profane in the first instance, in

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<sup>19</sup> Freud, S. (1984 [1913]). *Mourning and melancholia*. Pelican Books, London.

<sup>20</sup> See for example, Dennis, M. R. (2008). The Grief Account: Dimensions of a Contemporary Bereavement Genre. *Death Studies*, 32, 801-836; Neimeyer, R. A. (ed) (2001). *Meaning Reconstruction & the Experience of Loss*. American Psychological Association, Washington; Walter, T. (2005). Mediator death work. *Death Studies*, 29(5): 383-412.

<sup>21</sup> Extracted from my permanent employment contract with a national tertiary education organisation in New Zealand (2010).

psychological default in the second. Especially if you choose to indulge in grief for any prolonged length of time – a fiscal year perhaps?<sup>22</sup>

And in my particular case they could claim I was pathologically bereaved if I wasn't simultaneously so enraptured by, yet out of step with, the exemplary truths of exemplary intimacy, trust, and coupling. If I wasn't so willing to move forward within a lesser life. The walking grieved.

Besides this is not the worst of it.

Not by a long way.

Because what I miss most of all is not the passion. It is not the sex. Nor is it the everyday excitement.

Because what I miss most of all is the talk.

**13.** Subject: RE: quick hello

Sent: Monday, July 15, 2002 12:21 PM.

Hello my dear!

Nearly birthday time for you – and I will miss our lovely dinners.

It is cold and horrible here.

So how's the new tub baby?

I have used your present\* once now very posh – I must say – Thanks.

And now you know you can never have too many wooden spoons.

If I can make it to your part of the world I definitely will be at your porch.

I'm quitting work this month and taking it easy.

I have hair! Nice when wet and with product at night very fuzzy and thick on top reminiscent of a baboon. It only takes Peter to look deep in my eyes and tell me how beautiful I am to fully appreciate how ridiculous I must look.

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<sup>22</sup> 'The American Psychiatric Association is considering making a significant change to the definition of depression in the upcoming 5th edition of the DSM, which would specifically characterize bereavement as a depressive disorder. In removing the so-called bereavement exclusion, the DSM-5 would encourage clinicians to diagnose major depression in persons with normal bereavement after only 2 weeks of mild depressive symptoms. Unfortunately, the effect of this proposed change would be to medicalize normal grief and erroneously label healthy people with a psychiatric diagnosis' (Friedman, R.A. (2012). Grief, Depression, and the DSM-5 M.D. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 366: 1855-1857). Accessible at [www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1201794](http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1201794).

Gettin a new computer for home so may have a new e-mail. I'll let you know.

Love...

(An email from Karen to Sandra, a good friend of hers in Canada).

\*Sandra's present is a slim, sliver cigarette holder set with a purple stone, impulsively sent to Karen to use whenever smoking cannabis to relieve her pain and the side effects of chemotherapy. The gift came in a small white box, filled with crumpled pink tissue paper on which the holder sat, together with the following note: 'For a true friend with true elegance! – Love S'

The cigarette holder sits now with other intimate, familial memorabilia in our glass-case coffee table, a performative site positioned strategically in the living room to invoke memories or conversation with un-familial others. It sits alongside the old snakes and ladder board Karen purchased on one of her second-hand shopping trips, the faceless Amish doll, shells collected with the children from a beach on the West Coast, the three fat, bone-carved Buddhas we bought from Chinatown in Melbourne on our last couple holiday, the beautiful, delicate, off-white ceramic tea-cup and saucer festooned with orange roses that I bought Karen one Valentine's Day, and the philosophers' 'trading cards' gifted to me by our great friend Yadana on a birthday following Karen's death.

The box sits in a drawer with other emptied detritus of Karen's life. With an empty, star-shaped perfume bottle – Angel by Thierry Mugler. With squeezed tubes, plastic pots, lotions long past due, expired. Sits in one of the dark corners that embrace and rattle with Karen's loss.

**14.** Sitting with Karen.

On the narrow stairwell that links the fifth to the fourth level of our Dr Seuss, nook and cranny, Roger Walker house that tumbles down a steep hillside in Highbury, Wellington.

Karen's sandcastle home.

Fourteen steps.

Sitting and talking on each one.

Karen was attempting to return to the third level. To her makeshift bedroom in the living room with the large picture window that frames Aro Valley, Government House, the northern tip of the airport, a glimpse of the harbour entrance and the magnificent expanse of the Orongorongo Ranges.

Karen had been sleeping upstairs for several days, ever since her breathing had become laboured. Her body bloated with steroids, swollen with tumours that infested the entirety of her chest and had begun to crawl up her neck.

We had discussed, had agreed on Karen's insistence, that I would continue to sleep in our bedroom on the sixth and bottom floor. Agreed so that I could sleep undisturbed by the squat, beige, rhythmic oxygen machine that pumped, reassuringly and forebodingly, all day and all night. So that I would be refreshed, enabled to assist Karen, the children, throughout the day.

An agreement I usurped each night by surreptitiously tip-toe climbing up the three flights of stairs to watch, listen, ascertain if Karen was still breathing in union with the machine.

Karen would quietly call out 'I'm ok... Are you ok?'

'Yes I'm fine, do you want a drink of water or anything?'

And we would kiss, hold hands, hold each other. Whisper in the dark until Karen fell asleep again and I made my way soundlessly downstairs for a few hours rest.

But this morning Karen was especially unsettled. Wearied by the drugs, the painful, debilitating spread of the tumours, by the effort required to simply physically negotiate the day. Wearied also by sleeping disturbed on an unfamiliar bed, in an unfamiliar room with an anxious husband checking on her every couple of hours or so.

I suggested she go down to our bedroom, to shower, to sleep in our bed. I had set up a television in our bedroom and everything she needed would be on the one level. No stairs. Karen agreed and I carried down the squat, beige oxygen machine.

Seven minus thirteen minus eight.

Karen was fretful. Scared without saying by the physical effort required to negotiate the three flights of stairs, even as downward. Fearful, also, of being stranded, bedridden on the bottom floor. Entrapped and condemned to die at home. Absenced from her makeshift bedroom, only two short, but increasingly tiring flights of stairs up (seven) or down (seven), from the everyday of the kitchen, the dining room, the other living room (the one with the television and computer desk). The heart of her home.

But she ventured.

Stopped and had a bath on the fifth floor. Eight steps away from our bedroom. A bath because she was worried she would not be able to withstand the force of the water in the ensuite shower. Asked Alana to help her in and out. Help her dry. I assumed Karen still did not want me to see. Though she would offer late on, after her bedroom nap.

Then she luxuriated in six or seven hours of straight, unbroken sleep (I know. I checked). Curtains firmly drawn against the strong January sun. Awoke refreshed, the spark revived in her paling grey eyes. In her smile. Told me how right I was. Asked how had I known that was just what she needed? To sleep in her own bed. In our bedroom. In one of my old tee-shirts. But she was fretful, anxious to return upstairs.

A chair from the dining room was placed on the landing between the fifth and sixth levels 'just in case'. I lifted the squat, beige oxygen machine was to the fifth floor and its long snaking tube with the aerating nasal prongs draped down to Karen sitting on the bed readying.

She was fretful. Anxious. Willing herself the effort.

I said I would be with her all the way and she walked slowly up the seven short steps, arms outstretched, steadying herself against the stairway walls, talking cheerfully about what a good sleep she had enjoyed. And what a beautiful summer day it was.

Karen sat on the chair, slumped and breathing heavily.

'I just need to rest a bit,' she gasped for breath.

I said, don't hurry, we have all the time in the world. All the time to tackle the fourteen, steep, narrow steps to the dining room.

How had I known?

After one stair navigated, conquered, her arms outstretched gripping, steadying on the stairwell walls, Karen had to sit down.

'I need to stop. I need to rest.' I could see the fear in her eyes.

I said, don't worry, if you can't walk, I will carry you. I had been lifting weights in anticipation.

How had I known?

Karen smiled wryly. Told me not to be so foolish. The stairwell was too narrow; her tumours too extensive for her to be physically manhandled without pain; my weight-training, while well-meaning, was only a faint echo of a time when I could lift her effortlessly in acts of making love.

I said, don't worry, if you can't walk up the stairs we can bum-shuffle. One at a time. Then rest.

So we began. Bum-shuffle, stop, rest. Resting so Karen could find her breath. And every step a new conversation.

Stair one and we talked about the house. How I was initially unconvinced when Karen suggested we buy it. Thought the toilet rooms, doorways and spaces were too small to be comfortably engaged. Had insisted on returning three times to sit in the smallest toilet and imagine a future.

One. Stop. Talk.

Stair two. Karen had known the house from when Alana and Dylan were toddlers visiting for a children's birthday party. It had had black beams, orange formica and shag-pile carpets. A generation away from the clean white lines, coloured, textured feature walls and polished rimu floors. Karen had immediately fallen for its quirky architecture and was delighted when it came on the market. Laughing about how I now loved the house, but that Karen now hated the stairs. The same had happened with Rose Cottage. Karen was the first smitten. Me, at first uncertain, then hugely saddened to leave.

Another. Stop. Rest and talk.

Stair three. The children. Of Alana and Dylan who had joined us Christmas past, their first and only with us since we had coupled seven years earlier. How Karen was pleased that Dylan, from whom she had been heart-breakingly estranged for some time, had appeared to be at ease when he discovered he could 'simply walk through the door'. Without reproach. Into a welcoming family.

Karen passed no comment that my suggestion she sleep downstairs, in her own bed, in one of my old tee-shirts, was now maliciously negated. 'How had I known?' she had applauded. She made no admonishment, passed no criticism. Not once in a hour of bum-shuffling up fourteen stairs to the kitchen, where we stopped, as everyone does, for a cup of tea and replenishing cake. Karen never mentioned that her fears of a bed-ridden entrapment were well founded. That they were only being overcome, vanquished, one step, after one laboured step, after another, at a time.

How had I known? I knew nothing.

The next day Karen was carried up the short flight of stairs between the two living rooms and then up the tight, circular stairs (eleven) to the front door by two amiable, straining ambulance officers.

Carried up another ten steps outside, sitting grimly in a purpose-made, ambulatory chair that clattered, staccato as it was wheeled across the wooden slats of the car deck to the ambulance parked near the road. I could see the jarring staccato rattle Karen's head in short, sharp movements. Sensed shards of intense pain rushing through, amplifying in the hollowing network of connecting tumours that was now her body. Saw Karen grit in stoic determination.

I went to cry out stop. Stop, you must be hurting her. Please lift the chair again. Stop the jolting and carry her over the deck, to the safety of the ambulance, on a cushion of strong arms. But the men were exhausted, sweating, breathing heavily and before I could gather my thoughts they had hoisted Karen into the ambulance. Suddenly everyone was scurrying to their cars to follow. Corinna travelled with Karen in the ambulance. Estlin with me. Alana and my parents in their own cars.

The ambulatory chair clattered with the same staccato I hear every time a suitcase is wheeled up or down the car deck.

Leaving or returning.

The urge to cry out stop still catches in my throat. Stop, lift that bag, the jolting pain must be intense.

I try to stop myself. Stop and lift my own bag. But I bully myself instead. Force myself toward understanding that wheeled suitcases are normal. That Karen is long dead. That her pain has long since gone. Tumours, Karen both dead and cremated. That staccato is normal on a car deck. This car deck. That leaving to return is life.

15. We met for a 'second time' in 1995, shortly after Karen commenced her honours degree. I was working on my Masters.

Karen shared a room – affectionately and practically known as 'the dungeon' (a small basement room, lined with painted concrete walls and only one small window, which meant oxygen deprivation was a real issue in winter when the window and door were shut tight against inclement weather) – with several other honours students. I had experienced a similar arrangement two years previously. Though for some reason in 1995 I had an office to myself on the top floor, with a desk by a west-facing window that captured any afternoon sun and afforded a view of students, lecturers and others making their way to the front door of the Anthropology Department. I may have been the 'head tutor' for Anth 101, or my intellectual mentor, Dr James Urry whose office was opposite, may have simply arranged it. Karen was still married with two children, one teenager and one on the cusp of teenage-hood. I was by this time separated from Isobel, separated from anyone but my daughter, and had been single (for the first time in my adult life) for some months.

Again I noted that Karen was a good-looking woman, but as she was married I was content again to simply take pleasure in the distanced aesthetic. Besides I was enjoying the quiet calm of socialising with male friends without any necessary recourse to the opposite sex. I was also heavily involved in the Post-Graduate Students' Association (PGSA) and especially in organising seminars and annual conferences. With this in mind I had invited the current crop

of anthropology honours students to attend various PGSA events and to mix with other postgraduates in the Staff Club on Friday evenings. Although if I'm really honest these invites were also, in part, a subconscious subterfuge to provide proximate opportunities through which I might get to know Karen under the cover of a crowd. Like playing Lotto. The odds of winning are astronomical, indeed a near certainty of losing, but to win or lose you have to be part of the 'in' crowd.

And besides Karen had been poking me. Or at least that is what she told me she had done. I have no memory of this ever happening. Apparently we had been in the photocopying room at the same time and she had poked me several times in the lower back while I was copying a journal article. I did not respond. Did not turn around. Did not acknowledge her presence, let alone enquire why she was physically prodding me. In Karen's telling I simply finished my copying, turned and looked at her in surprise, said 'Oh... Hi' before walking back to my office. I had a particularly sore tooth at the time, courtesy of a botched extraction that left several fragments of broken tooth in a bleeding gum. Likely then a pre-occupation with this was skewing social interactions with others.

Then Karen twirled my hair. I had shoulder length, curly hair at the time and was sitting in the Staff Club engaged in an intense philosophical discussion with another postgraduate. I wasn't even aware Karen was sitting beside me and had turned slightly to the left toward my conversant. After a short while I became aware of a tugging in my hair. Initially I ignored this, thinking that my hair had simply snagged momentarily on my collar. Then I most probably moved my head slightly in an attempt to free the entangled curl. However the tugging continued and got more intense. I turned to find Karen twirling my hair into long ringlets around one of her fingers. She was engaged in a conversation with someone to her right, so I said, 'Do you know you are playing with my hair?' Karen turned toward me and fixed me with one of her thoroughly mischievous smiles, hazel, flecked green eyes glinting with playful wickedness, and said in a matter of fact tone: 'Of course'. Not knowing what to reply, I simply said 'Oh ok' and returned to my conversation.

And Karen continued to twirl until I eventually turned back and started to converse with her. I can't recall what we talked about, although I was starting to suspect that she might be attracted to me. At the very least I knew she was inclined, at times, to twirl curly hair.

- 16.** Alana and Corinna describe times when Karen was cranky. Short-tempered. With them and with Estlin also.

Was angry as part of coping. With terminal illness, with the physical pain, with loss incremental, loss pending, Future as death. With coping.

Corinna tells of Karen angrily lifting her top. Flashing her tumour-infested chest in the days before her death. Knowingly shocking in response to a grievance long now forgotten. In a life lesson fuelled by Karen's desperation and resentment. Consigned to a past, though still recalled. Enacted in the form of diligent breast checks, completed to reassure, as much to fend off dread.

The children understood. They still understand.

I witnessed Karen berate only once. A quick, vicious savaging of one of the children – I don't recall which – that clearly vented from a deep place of cavernous hurt. I put my hands on her shoulders, looked at her directly, and said: 'We decided that we weren't going to do it this way.'

Karen's eyes flashed with momentary, crystalline rage. I could see her thinking through the permutations, working through the logics, the flaws. Following my words into circumstance.

Her body relaxed. Eyes softened with acceptance. With a resignation founded in a knowing presence of self. Equally within a knowing, an awareness of others. Both of which had always corner-stoned me.

'I know... I'm sorry.'

'There is no need to be sorry...'

None.'

17. *'A avocado apples art a. C cream carrots cinnamon clothes candles R. rice Rose Cottage I ironing ice V vitamins vinegar Valentine J jam jewellery W washing Woolworths B bananas bread biscuits bath S. stock sauce swimming summer Salvation Army sheets D dinner dances dressing – salad K kleenex kisses k. X L love lunch lice lavender E. eggs Edmonds Cook book T. tampons tins towels F. fish fruit flowers U. umbrella M music mushrooms milk movies magazines N New World nutmeg No Y years yes you G gravy!! gardens grocery list H ham homework housework home O oven Z. P potatoes periods pasta pizza Paintings'.*

Some months after Karen had been adjudged terminating, I asked her if she would write me a 'life journal' of her reflections and guidance on how I should raise the children, run the household, attempt to live in her absence. The above index, in verbatim, is as far as Karen got. Written in her tight, spidery script at the back of her 2002 diary, over adjoining pages toward the back that contain a foreshadowed 2003 calendar, and clearly drafted as topics occurred to her. On the 2003 calendar she had also circled the headings of *April* and *October*, writing above each month 'winter clothes' and 'summer clothes' respectively.

Some time before Christmas 2002 Karen hesitantly showed me her draft headings. Apologising that she did not have the emotional strength to continue. 'It's is just too difficult Peter... I just can't imagine life without you', tears welling in her eyes. I put a comforting arm around her and looked at her notes with concern at first, but then with increasing elation. After a quick scan I triumphantly proclaimed 'But you don't have to finish it – I know exactly what you want to tell me just from your headings!'

To prove my claim I selected a couple of entries and rattled off 'her advice'. 'No' for example meant saying no to the children when necessary – no eternally to a *PlayStation* or *Xbox* in the house; no to staying up past designated bedtimes during the school week, and so on. Whereas 'gravy!!' referred to the family's abiding love of the gravies Karen produced to accompany the sumptuous, frequently regal, roast dinners she cooked on the weekends and which, much to her ironic vexation, were greeted with even greater acclaim – I once rather imprudently declared that it would be pure bliss to simply drink her gravy sans roast. Karen was not impressed.

Since Karen's death I have told numerous willing, and many more polite, listeners about her unfinished 'list' often citing the entry of 'meat' as an example of our mutual, synergetic understanding. This is where Karen reflects that New Zealanders typically eat their meat too fresh, so look for cuts that are off-red, without moist blood; when buying steak look for the thickest cuts (New Zealanders are also mean in their cuts) and also for intense ribboning with fat; and when you find a good butcher be sure to compliment them on their cuts at the point of purchase and later after eating. Although in reproducing Karen's list for this narrative I am forced to concede, somewhat bemusedly, that her 'meat' entry is missing. That this entry my memory alone, or is at least mine empathetic. Either way, I'll take it.

Karen had purchased an unlined, hardback book, with a front cover depicting an art-house apothecary of painted hearts, in which to record her 'life journal' entries. It sits eternally blank in my dresser, stowed snugly under my shorts and jeans.

Empty yet near at hand. A portal ever ready to invoke memories – true, imagined, aspirational, clearly false – with a flick of any discreet page.

**18.** 'You know you have never once said that you wished it was you.'

Karen was looking at me plainly. Asking me, in inference, why? Chiding, in part, why not? This was probably the most critical comment Karen ever made to me – in retrospect I clearly enjoyed a charmed, sheltered existence in her embrace.

'That's because I have never once wished that it was,' I replied immediately.

Karen was crestfallen.

I moved forward, put my arms around her and explained why. Firstly, I said, the notion that the cancer was in some form inevitable. That one of us was compelled to suffer its cruelties. Was simply not logical. Although it was an understandable notion born of her longing to be free and healthy again. Even at this distance I can hear how hollow and trite this response was. Just what you want to hear from your life partner; that you are not logical in your dying. Reminds me of another time when I sought to comfort Karen as she was crying, lamenting the life we were about to lose as a couple. This time I replied that as we could not predict the future we did not know if we would be together in old age, thus lamenting the lose of an imagined future was speculative at best. As such we were better advised to keep focused on the life we actually had – another gem that basically told Karen that if she ever had the good fortune to live a long life I would in likelihood desert her. Men and logic, I shake my head in disbelief too.

Later, after some reflection, I revealed another truth and told Karen that I simply did not have the same courage as her to live in the deepening shadows of an imminent death sentence and to respond by living wholly, fully, in joy of the everyday. That I would gladly take on her physical pain if I could, but of her impending death – I simply wasn't up to the task.

I explained this scenario to Karen's eldest, Alana, a year or so ago and she replied (kindly I think to assuage my guilt) that 'If one of you had to die, it was probably better that it was Mum. She just wouldn't have survived you dying.'

Can I take any comfort in this?

That if the whole circumstance was in some way obligatory. That we were somehow celestially chosen to fulfil the roles most suited to our existent personalities.

Karen to die with grace and courage.

Me to survive and grieve.

**19.** Discovered.

After Karen and I had been together for some time.

Photographs of Corinna as a blonde, curly-haired two year old, sitting atop a pile of books on a long table. Taken at a book fair held in one of those surprisingly cavernous sheds along the Wellington waterfront. Opposite the space now occupied by the sporting Tin Can.

The photographs were taken by a *Dominion* photographer, who knew Isobel, my former wife and Corinna's mother, and who had stopped us to get Corinna to pose for 'a possible front page picture.'

It never ran.

Nevertheless Corinna's all cute toddler-hood, dressed in a yellow skivvy, green corduroy pants (comically inflated in the bottom to accommodate pull-ups), red Mary Janes, and a thick yellow cardigan knitted by her Grandmother (my Mum, a prodigious knitter and pavlova maker).

Her mass of blond curls appears halo-like as it often did when background light filtered through. And she was depicted thoroughly engrossed in 'reading' a book.

Posing for the camera. Her first paparazzi experience.

Discovered.

When looking at these photos with Karen, shortly after we had settled down together and she was expecting Estlin, that she too was in the photographs. Standing in the background a metre or so away from Corinna. Genuinely engrossed in reading a book from the same table.

We didn't know each other then, so it was possibly mid to late 1991.

Yet we had all stood close as strangers at a book fair.

- 20.** A few months after Karen's death I was invited to join a group of recently bereaved widows and widowers, who as a cohort had been undergoing weekly grief counseling at the Mary Potter Hospice.

With a touch of morbid irony, the kind that routinely stalks the dying and bereaved, the groups' counselor had become gravely ill. Although put into the competent hands of a replacement, the group had found their dynamic so disrupted that they decided to forgo institutional sessions and support themselves instead by meeting regularly for dinner at various Wellington restaurants.

I had never felt any great need for counselling, not before Karen's death, nor in the aftermath. Moreover dying and death, Karen's terminal illness, were topics we had discussed as a couple intimately, as a family regularly, with others openly, emotionally, academically for years before she died. Although I did, following a recommendation of one of Karen's old girlfriends, take Estlin to *Skylight*, a non-government agency that offers counseling to children experiencing trauma resulting from the death of a parent, sibling, or simply from the disruptions of parental divorce. This had proved an inspired suggestion and of constructive comfort to Estlin, who learnt (most significantly from an independent third party) that his feelings of anger and despair were ok. Even more importantly he was not alone among his age peers in having a parent die (although throughout his primary school years he was the only student listed in the school's phone directory with a blank space where the entry of a contactable mother would normally be listed).

It was at *Skylight* that I met several widows and widowers in the sharing of cups of tea and stories as we waited for our children to complete their sessions. And it was in this context that I first realized how the grief arising from an anticipated, diagnosed and plotted death could radically differ from the blunt force trauma of a sudden, unforeseen death. This occurred when I met a man whose wife had died from a brain aneurism. She had set off to work as usual one Saturday to spend the morning completing their company's weekly accounts. He had taken their children to sports and then set out lunch in routine expectation of her return. Though the depth, the visceral, crude shock of his pain was obvious, I simply could not make a connection. Could not comprehend, could not see through, let alone break through, the quivering pelt of disbelief that had wrapped around and engulfed his persona, eclipsed his soul. I could summon no meaningful empathy to his pain. No meaningful consideration of the abrupt, throwaway rupturing of his wife's life, his life, his children dazed. Of existence in his orbit.

By contrast I struck easy banter, almost intuitive comradeship, with another recently sole parent. A widow whose husband had died after months of caring incarceration in Mary Potter Hospice and despite, due attention was nevertheless forced to leave behind a wife and three children under the age of five. She told me of her counselling experiences with the group from Mary Potter Hospice and invited me to join them the next time they dined. I agreed, almost jauntily, anticipating it would at least make for an interesting experience – more grist for Karen's research on the terminally ill (albeit wavering toward the ethnography of the terminally bereaved).

I experienced a reflexive jolt when introduced to this group a couple of weeks later:

'This is Peter and he is a widower.'

Aside from the obvious analogy with the mandatory *Alcoholics Anonymous* confessional, this was the first time I had been described as a widower. Was the first time I had thought of myself as such. Had allowed my rational consciousness to know and accept that now I inhabited a new, socially ascribed, role and status. Although had I ventured there prior to this first meeting my own introduction might have gone along the lines of 'Hi I'm Peter and I wish I was an alcoholic'.

I was publicly now a widower. A man alone with a wife departed. About to share a meal with other men and women similarly alone and deprived. Not marked, however, for any Government or similarly institutionalized support. Ineligible for the widow's benefit by dint of foundational sex and outmoded notions of who provisions parental care in bereavement. But nevertheless eliciting sympathy from virtually every affiliate of the so-called 'fairer sex' he encounters – including a couple of older ones who enquired, with the genuine charm and care that befits their generation: 'Are the children still with you?'

A widower in better and in worse.

I sat down and joined in conversations that rambled through everyday concerns about the weather, holidays, experiences of spouses dying, making and enacting funeral arrangements, returning to work, the social and personal rigors of grieving. And I experienced the sort of fellowship I imagine Estlin encountered at *Skylight*. These were now my kind of people. Recent widows and widowers, mostly around my age or slightly older, who had shared similar, albeit unique experiences, of the anticipated deaths of our intimates. A cohort for whom certain words, phrases, silences resonated with meaning, value, truth accessible primarily to the morbidly initiated. Who, without fuss or disquiet, accepted that a conversation started by one widower concerning the difficulties she had recently encountered when shifting a large, flat screen television – an acquisition her late husband had balked at pursuing (agency is severely truncated by the death of the agent) – down twisting, narrow stairs to her living room should morph naturally, fluidly into a group-wide discussion about similarly negotiating fraught hillsides and stairwells with coffins bearing departed loved ones (we nearly lost Karen down a three-metre hillside drop when her coffin was being lifted across the wooden railing to the narrow concrete pathway that leads to our next door neighbor – the spiral staircase to the front door simply was not an option).

Individuals contributed what they wanted or what they could, with many remarkably candid about their love, sometimes lack of love, of their dead spouses (one had just announced a serious intent to leave their partner when the diagnosis of cancer was pronounced); about the tribulations of their spouses' illnesses, treatments, deaths (one spouse was in a hospice for months and during this time progressively pushed their partner away – first insisting on separate beds, then on sleeping alone, finally returning their wedding band before slipping into a long coma – a process of separation that was courageous, hurtful, drawn-out in its farewell); about their fears and anxieties, past, present and future.

A number expressed a desire to establish posthumous contact. Some had sought out the services of mediums and spiritualist societies. I told of hearing Karen's voice and advice frequently, although I wasn't concerned whether it was actual or me simply projecting – both contained the truths I needed, desired. Besides I would be suspicious if Karen choose to contact me via a complete stranger as this would wholly contradict our lived intimacy, let alone Karen's exuberant capacity to speak her own mind.

And many told of their at first tentative, then increasingly resolute plans to travel overseas alone (often for the first time) or in the company of other variably single, unencumbered friends (again often for the first time). Eventually reporting back of successful sojourns in which their willful travels away somehow enabled them to return home anew, refreshed and revived as individuals sure of foot, secure survivors of the death of an intimate. Though just as

many talked of how they regarded keeping their homes fully supplied with toilet paper was a notable mark of domestic coping in the aftermath. Managing away and at home – the twin competencies of the stable, mobile middle-classes.

I owe this loose band of individuals, thrown together by the circumstance of private trauma – whom I affectionately dubbed the *Dead Spouses Society* – a debt of gratitude, especially as it was via their mediations that my own mantle of widowhood first started to sit easily. In their company I came to realize that my stories, perspectives, aspirations had the same validity, same saliency as others. And through their interactions and willing talk I started to inhabit, purposefully and in some ways defiantly, the social position of widower. As someone who experienced an extraordinary, if fleeting, passion and is by circumstance justly consigned to remember and grieve.

- 21.** It was dusk and the kids were somewhere behind me, probably still on the deck retrieving their bags and other school paraphernalia from the car.

I opened the front door.

Intuitively wanted to call out ‘We’re home’. Felt the words catch in my throat. Felt the jolt of loss that snags in moments that callously masquerade as ordinary.

I looked down from the internal balcony into darkened rooms below.

A dense emptiness rose, wordless, inert.

Realised at that moment that I was alone. Was solely responsible for filling the house with life. For the children and for myself. No Karen to surge off in the gathering darkness. Just me and my lapses. My frailties and limitations. Fully exposed. Habitual.

Everyday standing alone.

Then turning to find the light switch. To call the kids in from the cold.

**22.**

- 23.** Dirty, seawater brown clouds scudded across the Wellington skyline. Rain thrashed against the bedroom window in Saturday morning anger, as twigs and leaves set adrift by the wind hit the closed panes in the panic of enforced exile.

Karen was already up and dressing.

‘Oh your up. What are you doing?’ I asked sleepily, pulling the duvet cover up to my chin to ward off the cold.

'I'm off to the hospital. They are sending a taxi. I should be home about midday.' Karen was buttoning up her jacket. She bent over and kissed me on the lips. 'I'll tell you all about it when I get home. You stay in bed. It's a horrible day and the kids are still asleep.'

The night before had been draining, exhausting. We had held each other and worked through the ramifications, our responses – emotional, pragmatic, orientation – to the news Karen had received early in the day. News that her cancer had returned. That she now had to have a mastectomy, which would be followed by an eight-week course of chemotherapy. With nausea and hair loss. Aspiration as limbo.

For months beforehand Karen had, despite the administrations of skin and other specialists, endured an increasingly tender and blistering right breast. One day while at work at the university, and in pain and frustration, she had consulted a G.P. at the student health service. New to Karen's condition this doctor was immediately suspicious that her cancer had returned and advised Karen to contact her oncologist as soon as possible. Karen arranged an appointment for a few days later, where a biopsy was performed. Then yesterday afternoon, in a meeting with her oncologist and her newly appointed surgeon, Karen had been given the news – it was definite. An immediate mastectomy was recommended and Karen was booked in for surgery a couple of weeks later in March. The same week we were to move from our rental home in Brooklyn, Wellington, to our new home in Highbury. Managing this timing had been part of our late night meditations. Karen would be in hospital when we moved, as she was shortly after we had moved to Rose Cottage five years earlier. Although at that time Estlin was born.

Karen had had radiotherapy treatment on her right breast in September two years ago, shortly after undergoing a 'successful' lumpectomy operation. For six weeks – from Monday to Friday – Karen had, in the morning, driven herself and three-year-old Estlin, from Rose Cottage just outside of Greytown, across the tortuous Rimutaka Hill road, to the radiology department at the Hutt Hospital. A round trip of about a hundred and twenty kilometres, with Karen and Estlin returning early in the afternoon. I was lecturing fulltime, so was leaving early in the morning myself and not returning until dusk. My mother came and lived with us for the final two weeks to help out with cooking dinners, bathing children, household cleaning. Karen introduced her to the delights of a stiff gin, effervescent with freshly squeezed lemon juice, as a welcome treat for when the children were in bed.

Karen had told the radiotherapist on the first day of treatment that her skin was 'burning'.

He said that it couldn't be, that any burning sensations she was experiencing must be psychosomatic as the radiation dosages were small. Any actual burning would only occur

toward the end of the treatment regime when they would monitor the situation and alter the treatment as appropriate.

But Karen's a forthright woman and she told the radiotherapist it was burning on the second day of treatment. On the third day. On the fourth. Indeed throughout her treatment Karen remained steadfast in her belief that her breast was being burnt, despite the lack of outward physical evidence and only a little reddening of her skin toward the end of the treatment. Caught between belief, hope and institutional expertise, Karen persisted and completed the treatment.

A month or so later the blisters appeared. At first small, clustered, watery pimples akin to those commonly endured as a result of sunburn. Karen was put under the care of skin specialist at Masterton Hospital, given balms and assurances that the condition should settle down over time. Yet the blisters did not settle. Did not fade away. Instead they continued to grow slowly in size and pain.

Apologies were forthcoming. Karen had been right. Apparently she shared with other woman of Native American descent, and with some Polynesian women, a skin pigmentation that is particularly sensitive to radiotherapy. I should have known also. Karen knew her body and was, for example, adamant she had conceived and was pregnant with Estlin, from day one. And then more apologies. The blistering had definitely masked – we unbearably speculated, had caused – the fact that her breast cancer had come back more aggressively. An immediate mastectomy, immediate chemotherapy, Karen and I had held each other the night before in fear, crying and anger. Nascent plans were wrestled forth. Initial decisions outlined. It was not the time for reproach or retrospective blame, no matter how close at hand the delinquent situation. It was time for instant action.

Karen said she would seek assurances that her radiotherapists were in the future aware of, on the look out for, her type of pigmentation. Even more so, were more sensitive to women when they said they were burning. Besides Karen had found an advocate – Ruth Christie, her soon-to-be surgeon – an amazingly dedicated professional and mother of two young children, who had told Karen that she believed aspects of her treatment to date had been unsatisfactory. That as a result Ruth committed to being on hand to guide and advise Karen through future diagnoses and treatments. On occasions I picked Karen up from Ruth's office it was clear both had been crying.

Ruth performed the mastectomy and told us she was concerned whether she had removed enough mass, especially as Karen's breast was full and dense. She hoped she had, especially as the majority of lymph-nodes removed and biopsied from Karen's right armpit had indicated the cancer was on the move. Chemotherapy was the next cab on the treatment rank.

'Oh you are here,' Karen sleepily noted when awaking from the anaesthetic, reassuringly with a warm, loving smile in her eyes, the kind I had seen many mornings. 'Where else would I be?' I replied.

Karen returned drenched from her early morning visit to Wellington Hospital. Her hair and jacket soaked from the wild Wellington weather. I handed her a towel and gave her a hug. The children were watching television in the lounge, oblivious to the tempest battering the house.

'Where have you been? Was it a pre-op thing or something? You should have told me last night, I would have driven you, gone with you to talk to the doctors.'

'No, it was nothing like that. Ruth asked me if I would attend a Trans-Tasman oncology symposium being held in Wellington this weekend. Apparently my cancer is quite unusual in its presentation – especially with my pigmentation here in New Zealand, so I thought what could be better – a hundred or so experts examining my breast. You never know one of them might be able to suggest something new... besides if they can't help me, they will at least be aware of this type of cancer, my type of skin pigmentation, in the future.'

'Have you had lunch? ... No, ok let's tell the children what's happening and then have lunch...'

The morning after Karen had been told the cancer had returned.

The morning after a night of whispered fears, crying, of anxious, embryonic intents.

Early on a wild, wet, windy Saturday morning in Wellington, Karen had buttoned up and ventured out into a storm.

24. Karen at her bleakest, angriest times, of which there weren't many. Less than a handful. Blamed her cancer on the various hurts and pain she had suffered in her past.

'You can't got through all that without any negative consequences,' she said.

I never told Karen.

That, whenever she said this.

I only heard that my love, our love, was not enough.

25. It was my misreading of one of Karen's emails, filled with her reflections on everyday life, study, children and 'signed off' with increasingly lascivious poems by e. e. cummings, possibly the one with the climatic '*May I feel said he*' poem that became our personal favourite, that led, in part, to her and I becoming lovers on July 4, 1995.

In this missive Karen informed me that she 'had cold feet'. I interpreted this as having serious doubts about our blossoming relationship, which was clearly flirting with the boundaries of friendship and something more intimate.

An understandable reaction from a married woman.

Moreover we, together with a swag of postgraduates, had recently attended the staff club's mid-winter dinner at Victoria University and Karen had left at midnight, telling me she was disappointed to leave early but 'that it was complicated'.

I walked her to her car.

Nothing happened.

I interpreted this as another sign of uncertainty, doubt. Of Karen's pragmatic commitment to the conventions of marriage. Later she would explain to me the pressures she experienced that evening.

Nevertheless spurred by apparent evidence of Karen's emerging reservations I decided to make a definitive 'move' and sent her an email saying that we should 'really have dinner together'. Although I hedged by also inviting her out beforehand to drinks with friends, thereby giving her two options and myself a face-saving out, should she reject the dinner invite.

Karen replied that dinner sounded good. Game on.

I recall Karen wearing a black leather jacket. I had watched her enjoying playing pool with friends in a downtown pub, assessing all the time whether 'making a move' was really what I wanted. Had any chance of success. Yes and maybe were the conclusions.

Later at the Thai Restaurant I put my cards on table, telling her: 'I reckon I can rattle your cage.' Sounds like a B-grade Hollywood movie I know, but as Barthes notes the discourse of romance, sexual attraction, lust is routinely framed within this form of 'simulation'.<sup>23</sup> Thus the forlorn are compelled to cannibalise others. Clearly I thought a Humphrey Bogart pick-up line was appropriate for this classic American beauty. (And don't fret it gets worse or better depending on your inclinations.)

Karen fixed me with another of her looks, this one full of steely, no-nonsense determination, and said calmly:

'Why would you rattle my cage when you could bust it open and let me out?'

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<sup>23</sup> Barthes, R. (2002 [1977]). *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, p.3. Trans. R. Howard. Vintage Books, London.

Completely gazumped, my Bogartesque coolness floundering in a disarray of cliché, I responded by immediately choking on a hot chilli and spent the next few minutes unable to speak, face flushed bright red, tears streaming down my cheeks. James Dean eat your heart out!

Or at least that's how I recall this proposal, though it is just as possible that Karen's retort left me speechless. That an awkward silence, or some form of diversionary conversation, followed and I choked on the chilli only later when I had given up on all pretence of suaveness.

At Karen's funeral my intellectual mentor, and friend to Karen and our family, Dr James Urry, revealed that he was also at the Thai Restaurant that night and had spotted us sitting 'mysteriously in the corner'. Realising that something was up he did not interrupt, although he recalled thinking 'Ah ha... this won't last. Not so much Lady and the Tramp, but Lady and the Lad... How wrong I was.' Jim also said that in preparing his eulogy he had consulted his personal phonebook and discovered that he had listed all individuals separately, except for Karen and myself. He had catalogued us as a couple under two entries – 'P' for Peter & Karen and 'K' for Karen & Peter: 'Peter and Karen, Karen and Peter. Somehow the names just fit together – they grew together, around town, around the office, out in the Wairarapa... Peter and Karen, Karen and Peter – a natural combination.'

Later in the evening Karen and I were at my house in Brooklyn when I pulled another B grade Hollywood stunt. Just after Karen had taken off her leather jacket, was remarking on the great view of Wellington Harbour, I without warning, grabbed her close and kissed her deeply, passionately. I released my grip and started to unbutton her blouse. Karen caught her breath said 'I wasn't expecting... wasn't planning anything like this.' I replied 'shush' and kissed her deeply again, continuing to unbutton her blouse. With her full breasts, large dark areolas and nipples visible through an especially chic French bra, I remember thinking 'Jackpot!' and immediately started to caress her breasts, feeling Karen melt in my arms. I kissed her deeply again and then asked – as any great lover would at such a moment – if I could have a look at her teeth on the pretext that, as many Americans share a dental mania and consequently possessed good teeth, I logically wanted to ascertain how she rated. Karen laughed and opened her mouth for inspection before we made a bee-line to the bedroom.

Now I know that some will find this a bit boorish, corny, definitely B-grade. However aside from our obvious attraction for each other; aside from my very clunky referencing, strategizing and aligning of Hollywood and American middle-class dental regimes with the 'right way' to seduce Karen; what we both responded to in subconscious, but highly influential ways, were our own positive, foundational sexual experiences. Every time we interact with another – be it sexual, friendly, guests or as strangers on the street – we all, with varying degrees of awareness or intuitive reflexion, filter through our previous experiences of interaction (either encountered or learned via moral tales of declining sweets and car rides). This provides us

with a continuum (social and subjective, positive to negative) of how to respond. And in this instance one of my early teenage loves had similarly full breasts, dark areolas and nipples, while Karen told me that one of her high-school boyfriends had likewise caressed her whenever they would sneak out of drama club to 'fool around' – although apparently teeth-checking was a move unique to me.

In the morning Karen was visibly glowing from head to toe. I had never witnessed such a pronounced, embodied response before. Someone's whole being audibly sing with contentment. Karen told me, once we were reminiscently coupled, that she had never experienced such intense passion before that night. She had thought Hollywood movies, books, tales of impassioned lovemaking were illusions, aspirational exaggerations, not meant for the likes of her. I told her, although very happy to have been with her and able to recall the night vividly, I was a little disappointed, puzzled in myself, as I did not possess the controlled sexual passion I hankered for. Indeed I had experienced the most bizarre orgasm of my life – one which I didn't even realise had occurred (most probably due to being celibate for six months – God knows what I would be like now).

I told her also that my initial motivation was simply to have fun with an attractive, married, *Range Rover* driving (or 'detained' as I was wont to analyse) well-heeled woman – an arrogance and vanity that was irrevocably shattered when we made love a second time. When the immense extent and depths of Karen's desire first became apparent to me. When she sobbed inconsolably, wholly, telling me 'don't stop' whenever I enquired what was happening. At that moment I realised that my B-grade seduction and motivations, in fact everything I had ever experienced or crafted in terms of sexual, romantic interaction, was being royally eclipsed. And furthermore that this was only the beginning.

Although, as Karen was married, I could have no expectations. No game-plan based on the norms, the incremental territorialisation, the excluding routines, of singles dating. The gaps that existed between, that were nascent linking and enriching us, were liberating and terrifying in the same instance. Clearly I would have to grab tightly to whenever, however, whatever was on offer. Have no desires other than those of the instant, of aspiration, desire and imagination. And then be prepared for all it to evaporate in a rush. Perhaps without me even knowing why.

Unbeknown to me, however, Karen had a definitive plan from – possibly even before – night one. Was already heading toward accosting me outside the anthropology department to tell me she was the best woman I would ever know, while I was still thinking 'Gee whizz Buck Rogers'.

26. From: Sandra

Sent: Wed, Jan 29, 2003, 10.09:57 AM

Subject: Dear Peter

'Dear Peter

Once again my deepest sympathies for you who stands at the centre of this loss that touches us all. Thank you for the energy and love you gave to Karen. I have no doubt that her life was both richer and longer for your caring. I wish I could be there in Wellington to help with the big and the small tasks that still demand your time and energy now when you have already given so much. My thoughts are very much with you, Estlin and Corinna. You picked a good one.

I have written down a few words in a form that keeps ending up as a letter to Karen. Saying these things in the third person seems too impersonal, I know I will cry again as I type them in... but here's hoping Big Jon can get through them.

Dear Karen

You are so missed in ways I struggle to describe. For many years I have admired your elegance, your grace, your vitality... and of course your gloriously beautiful and luscious long hair. More recently, I have been struck by your courage – courage not only in facing the illness that has taken you away all too soon but also the courage to tell people that you loved them. To have mattered to someone who shone so... so brightly is one of the many gifts you leave us with. Thank you for your generosity of emotion, for teaching me to cherish both simple and extravagant things, and for the example of how to live beautifully and above all, fully'.

27. 'I suppose you want to have a look.'

I was puzzled. Not sure what Karen was referring to.

'A look,' she emphasized. Raising an eyebrow, tilting her head slightly to the right. My left.

I understood.

Ever since Karen's chest had begun to swarm with tumors that clustered along the fault-lines of her mastectomy scars. Which swelled, broke through her skin, emitting a sweet, sickly smell of decay. Karen had stopped undressing in front of me. Had kept the physicality of her disease private. From me.

She told me that in some ways the tumors were beautiful. Mysteriously luminous, poly-coloured, randomly growing, erupting, contracting in translucence patterning. That the marine biologist in her was fascinated by their somatic evolutions, their terminating trajectories. Fatal life form endings.

But she kept them private. From me. Shielded me. Reserved this sight for the medical gaze of doctors, nurses. For the local masseuse she visited fortnightly. For flashing errant children.

But now Karen was asking. Did I want to look. Before she died.

'Not if you don't want me to,' I replied.

Karen looked puzzled. I recognized her worry.

'Look, being open and honest doesn't mean everything has to be put on the table *carte blanc*. It can mean one of us saying no. Saying in all honesty that we don't want to go there. I mean I think we have earned that... Besides it really depends on how you want me to remember. Whatever you decide is ok with me.'

'Looking at my teeth wasn't of much use was it? Certainly didn't help you to pick a winner.'

'Don't agree – you still have great teeth,' I retorted. Karen smiled warmly.

It was the day before she was to be taken to the hospice for the last time and Karen was clearly settling outstanding concerns. Outing and leaving. In opposition to her nesting when Estlin was born. Settling away to die.

A little while later, after Karen had enjoyed a bath, was feeling relaxed and refreshed, and was sitting on the edge of our bed, she looked up and asked me another question. Her eyes were bleached of colour, washed grey, though still enlivened with mischief.

'I bet you wish you had peed on me now.'

I didn't understand. I looked at Karen's freshly washed face, her impish expression and the memory came flowing back.

Several years before when living at Rose Cottage, when Karen was fit and healthy, she was soaking in the old claw foot bath. I entered the bathroom not knowing she was there, wanting to use the toilet.

'Go ahead it's alright,' she told me.

'I'm not going to pee while you are in the bath, your head is right next to the toilet.'

'Go on, it's nothing. It is not as though I haven't seen you pee before and it is only pee after all.'

'Only pee? It's a bit disgusting don't you think, with you in the bath? Right next to the toilet. What about splash-back?'

'What about it. You pee in the shower don't you. It's no different.'

'Actually I don't pee in the shower. Do you?'

'Of course. There is nothing wrong with it . Pee is very sterile. I pee in the shower all the time. You can pee on me if you want. I don't care.'

Karen was smiling widely, with a cheeky, wicked look. One I was very familiar with.

'I am NOT going to pee on you – now that's truly disgusting.' I was shaking my head, chuckling. 'You do know that there are websites dedicated to that sort of thing, for people who get their rocks off by peeing and shitting on each other.'

'Nooo... You're kidding, no one gets off on peeing...on shitting... That's not what I meant at all. Just peeing, nothing sexual or kinky. Peeing – a perfectly natural bodily function that is perfectly safe and sterile.'

Karen was frowning. Her face scrunching with distaste. Imagining the weird permutations of sexual toileting. By now I was laughing. This was classic Karen – outrageous and naïve in the same instance.

'Well I'm not going to pee on you because it IS kinky and I'm not going to pee next to your head because that's also disgusting. I'll go outside instead.'

That Karen had recalled, had reinstated this conversation in her final days should not have surprised me as we had many conversations that rambled, discoursed over days, weeks, years. We lived a world of talk and it was the rolling silences after her death that I found most disturbing. Even when surrounded by chattering, supportive friends.

'Tell me your stories,' Karen would sleepily ask whenever I came home from a night out socializing. No matter the time.

Karen would half-wake, press her warm body around mine and dreamily ask for an update, new scuttlebutt, a story from the night. And she wouldn't let me fall asleep until I had told at least one. Or if I was successful in protesting extreme tiredness, a teaser with the promise of full disclosure in the morning. A promise she would always collect on. Usually over breakfast.

Karen also tried to tell me, on that penultimate day, what she thought of me. I couldn't listen. It was too humbling. Wasn't right. I deflected. Protested, pleaded with her to stop. She was the one dying. I should be singing her.

'You don't have to. I already know what you think. I just wanted to be sure you knew.'

I sat down beside her. We hugged.

'And I want you to remember me beautiful,' she whispered.

28. Karen told me, playfully, seductively, that she was upset.

Estlin was at pre-school, so was at least two years old. We were living at Rose Cottage, enjoying the freedoms of being childless from ten in the morning to three in the afternoon.

Karen told me, as she languished naked in our bed, that she was miffed that I had never written her a poem. Something I had told her I had done for lovers past.

Fully cognisant that my poetic talents are slight, especially when compared to the actualities of our life, perhaps even more so in light of the e.e. cumming poems Karen had courted me with, I nevertheless penned the following naïve effort:

**Midnoon freshments**

Cold apple. Back lit.

Captured. Contained.

the fridge croons

Chilled tiles.

feet unfurl

expand.

Sun searing

back legs

taut

Cool breeze

accents

flush, moist

balls, cock in

heavy motion.

With the essence

of you.

Enticed,

engulfed.

Turning.

returning

Padding.

Thighs catching.

Light shadows

chasing.

You lulled.

in calm sanctuary

turned within

sigh breathing

Cold apple. Cleaved.

Split parcel.

Precious

essence

flowering.

of

you.

- 29.** I could feel the anxiety. The familiar emptying, weakening of body and resolve increase as soon as I started to look for the car keys. I noticed I was holding my breath as I walked up the stairs, in suspense, concern.

I rapidly made the connections. Firstly the link to the shaky, fleeting apprehension I had experienced a few days before when the rendezvous was first suggested. Onward, just as quickly to the past, to before, when I had in increment, experienced Karen absented from our workdays at the university; from our playful collusions in the Anthropology Department; finally from the intimate leisure of preparing and then venturing downtown to eat out at cafés and restaurants. From our life together in the real world.

One hundred and one reductions as lack. A shuffling preparation. Training while waiting in those everyday moments inevitably tumbling toward required. Firstly comprehending. Then engaging. Then knowingly subordinating Karen as pending, as tracking reluctantly toward permanent termination. Adapted mostly because Karen was still existent where we wanted her most – at home. Living, resting, loving, taking immense pleasure in the everyday unfolding around her. We gladly made the necessary adjustments. Bit by bit assumed the roles and responsibilities that were Karen's everyday manifests of care. And by degrees Karen allowed us to assist. First in part by the sanctioning others to finish the preparation of meals she had started. Later in annex, equally happy to be served. Taking her pleasure, her worth, as she could. Insisting pleasure in washing pegged perfect. At the bottom and on the side seams of shirts, under the armpits of dresses, as her wont and by her husband.

'I'm ok. I just want to have a look. Just want to smell the washing, see how you have done,' Karen said, as she insisted on walking up the steep circular stairway to the front door and then upward again to the car deck to witness the washing on the line.

'Perfect,' she proclaimed, breathing heavily with the effort, lifting her face to hot January sun. 'Just perfect.'

I smiled at her approval. At her affirmation that we would be alright in the everyday of the aftermath. In the practical requirements of living sans Karen. Smiled also because on our last family holiday to Brisbane a couple of months prior I had experienced an epiphany of competency that had convinced me I would be able to muddle through. This occurred when I had insisted that our youngest, Estlin, was not well. In need of immediate medical attention, just as everyone was rushing in all directions to enjoy the faux delights, the interminable queuing, of *Movie World*. Insisted despite Karen's, despite my mother's, assertions he was just 'pecky' and would be alright once he got on the rides. But I kept insisting to the point of willingly skipping *Movie World* (more than willingly) to find and drive Estlin to a local doctor's where he was diagnosed with 'strep throat', a temperature of 39 and climbing, antibiotics, fluids and immediate bed rest. Was pleased I had noticed. Had insisted. And then had exulted, when the family returned to our accommodation at the end of the day, in Karen's, in my mother's, surprise that Estlin was diagnosed as so unwell.

But Karen was no longer at home. Would never again tell me the washing was hung perfect. That Estlin was fortunate I had noticed. Yet I still needed to act. Had to accept the invitation for a visit, for a coffee, perhaps even a glass of wine or two, with my good friend Yadana and her partner Stan. Had to leave home and venture to places in the real where I had not practised, had not anticipated, Karen absented. Where lack was an unknown, lurking, intensity. To drive past firstly the Wellington Hospital. To drive past secondly the Mary Potter Hospice. To get to Newtown. To enjoy a glass of wine or two. Past the place where Karen vanished lastly.

I found the keys. Walked up the stairs to the car. Started the engine and drove. Felt secure as I approached Kelburn, the shops, where Karen was known by many of the retailers. Who had offered their condolences, who had reminded me of Karen, of us shopping together. A safe place of known, practised lack. Of then later returning home with groceries garnered from Karen's list. Another practice in lack. Felt secure also as I approached the University, another safe place – though I hadn't been able to attend Karen's farewell. Could not cope with sadness, even worse the misplaced optimism, of colleagues. Karen then was still at home. This was something we could hold on to in surety. Look forward in journey between the university and home. University as lack had become accustomed. Then I was driving down roads familiarly traversed with Karen. When she was well. When she was unwell, when she was dying. Rendered now as unfamiliar, precarious, without reason, with Karen dead.

I drove up Taranaki Street toward the hospital with increasing apprehension, but as I alighted on Massey University I was inundated with wonderful memories of my first lecturing gig at the then Wellington Polytechnic; teaching introductory/ medical anthropology to trainee nurses, midwives and dental hygienists. Surged instantly with long forgotten memories of excitedly telling Karen how teaching these students – who were so engrossed in, so obliged to learn immediate practical skills – was revolutionizing my understanding of how anthropology should be taught. Of how it needed to resonate within, deconstruct and destabilise individuals' understanding of, their everyday existence before wandering off to cultures exotic and mysterious.

Joyed by this memory my apprehension began to wane. An unsteady confidence filled my mood and I started to think that driving on to the hospital, past the hospice, might not be so foreboding.

I drove up Taranaki Street, turned left into Wallace, then drove toward the lights at the intersection with Riddiford. The hospital was now a hundred or so metres to my right. I stopped on the red.

Looked tentatively to my right, apprehension, uncertainty flooding back in the reality, the pain, the fear of Karen at this place. My heart began to race. Something wasn't right. Suddenly I was pitched back to the day Karen was taken to the hospice by ambulance. Estlin and I had followed in our car. This car. I had no memory of driving up Taranaki Street, past the hospital, up Mein Street to the hospice. No memory other than frantically looking for a park. Afraid Karen would die alone because the car park was stupidly full.

Had I been working on auto-pilot? Blindfolded by dread? For a horrified instant I thought I had, in the same vein, forgotten to stop. In rising panic I checked the lights. Red. Checked my braking. Foot on pedal. Firm? I pushed down to assure. Yes. I had stopped. What then? I quickly

checked the position of car. Yes I had stopped before the white line, out of harm from passing, green-lighted traffic. I was ok. Everything was ok.

But not right.

I couldn't shake the feeling of disquiet, alarm. I desperately wanted to start moving forward into knowing driving. Something simply was not right.

Then I heard the scraping. A rhythmic scratching.

Inside? Outside? I didn't know.

I re-checked my braking. Re-checked positioning. Fine, fine. Yet something was skewing. Reality was syncing sideways, creating unease. What had I overlooked? The rhythmic scraping continued.

Then I felt it.

My left arm was reaching into mid air. My left hand was grasping recurrently. Bemused I looked down on my arm, my hand as though they belonged to someone else. I had unconsciously taken my left hand off the steering wheel and it was now independently extended, reaching toward to the passenger seat.

My fingers were clawing, scratching on the black plastic console between driver and passenger seat. A rhythmic scraping. What the hell was I doing? Had I stopped?

The light went green. My hand had stilled, although my arm was still suspended above the console. The car behind tooted impatiently. I was snapped out of my surreal contemplations and realised in a flash that I was in fact reaching for Karen. Reaching for her hand. To hold. Reaching out in an act of intimacy and care that had long since morphed into an unconscious, timely habit of being.

Understood in that moment. With an electrifying clarity. That whenever driving, and especially when stopped at traffic lights, we had held hands. Had engaged this act of momentary romance during the utility of driving – one of us in the driving seat, the other passenger. And not just when we drove toward the hospital – holding hands in fearful reassurance – as Karen had insisted on attending most treatments by herself or with Estlin as companion. But all of the time. Most of the time. Enough, at least, for it to become an unknowing familiarity. An intuition. A habit of connectedness.

Had Karen been aware of this? She used to absentmindedly rub her thumb across the top of my hand when we watched movies or television. Stopping only when I too became aware of this quirk through the physical pressure and discomfort her repetitive rubbing was causing.

Something we commented on in the beginning, but which later occasioned me only to gently still her agitated thumb, with Karen smiling and resting her head on my shoulder in response.

I don't remember driving forward through the green. Past the hospital. Past the hospice. My eyes were full of tears and joy. The anthropologist romantic in me was piqued that the micro, the habitual and the unconscious had been exposed as the actual. Yes, we had been close. No matter how the void was unfolding as aftermath. Nor where absence lurked in the real or how uncomprehending and how many people told me repeatedly that I had 'to move on'. Karen and I had been close. Close in the knowing. In eulogy. But even more tellingly, close in the unknown. In the minutiae, the unwitting of everyday habit. In embodied, companionate routines that only a confronted lack, sans Karen, could uncover.

Driving past the hospital. Past the hospice. In a remembrance revealed. This was the sort of moving on I could relate to.

I parked the car.

30. Karen loathed the journey metaphor. One that is often used to describe the varied trajectories that terminal individuals are compelled, sometimes freed, to travel.

She thought it was trite, shallow, obscured the realities – some enlightening, many harrowing – that mark the experiences of anyone tracking toward a medically anticipated, institutionally timetabled, death.

'Not all journeys are equal and the one I'm on is no walk in the park... In fact it is like being forced to walk across the desert with someone prodding you in the back with bayonet.'

I had met the then Director of the Mary Potter Hospice while visiting my publisher and friend Roger Steele in his laconic lair in Brandon Street. After being introduced I told him about Karen's circumstances and how impressed we were with the staff and services of his organization.

Karen had been electively admitted for a weekend assessment – a sort of get-to-know the place, the processes, the people in advance so that when you come for that last visit everyone is on knowing terms. We had enjoyed the thorough rationality of the drinks trolley doing the rounds, bearing oases of gin and tonic, shortly after morning tea. Had eaten a *Mediterranean Food Warehouse* seafood pizza, complete with baby octopi, for dinner. With Karen holding court over assembled family and friends. And had found the nurses and doctors very accommodating. One in particular, whom Karen thought was charming but in desperate need of a clean lab coat, asked her straight off what could they do to enhance her time in the hospice, when she returned to die.

'Drugs,' Karen replied looking at the doctor directly, holding his gaze. 'Morning, noon and night.'

The doctor chuckled. Put his hand on Karen's and said 'With lashings of ginger beer?'

'No, just drugs and lots of them.' Karen's gaze was unwavering.

The hospice director told me he knew Karen. That Karen was still very angry and what she needed to do was accept her impending death.

At this time Mary Potter Hospice ascribed to Kübler-Ross's<sup>24</sup> five stages of grief model, in which individuals informed of their terminal status experience episodes of denial, anger, bargaining (for a reprieve), depression and acceptance. Kübler-Ross's model of staged responses is not meant to be regarded as linear. Although Kübler-Ross did not advocate tracking through and negotiating each stage in consecutive order, calm and rational acceptance is nevertheless the ultimate goal (which is just as well as continued denial only leads to final disappointment).

In many respects Kübler-Ross's model introduced a healthy dose of emotionality and humanism to the medicine of dying and later on to the psychology of grieving. However, it still represents the era of post-WWII American modernity, rationality and self-reliant individualism in which it was generated. Accordingly the dying and the grieving individual needs to reach the logical nirvana of acceptance if they are to have any hope of successfully transitioning, or 'moving on', to fulfill their rational-given roles – one as a dead person, the other as a re-functioning member of society.

Little countenance is given, however, to death or society being senseless options in the first instance. Admittedly death is physically unavoidable, yet in our current world of secularism and resolute belief in the progressive elements of capitalism it is characteristically cast as a permanent end to the good life. Not as some form of transitional phase toward transcendent bliss or eternal life as promised by many religions. Consequently death now signals a one-way ticket to being a non-person, forever trapped in a non-life. A transition to nothing, to non-existence, to insignificance, to no value – earthly or divine. Furthermore the good life is promised, but rarely delivered by contemporary society. Many of us are, therefore, condemned to die anxiously, wondering if we have actually achieved any good, if our life was in anyway worthwhile; or if we have achieved the good life, in part or sum, then why we must now relinquish such hard-won gains. So on both counts – death and society – appear as disappointments, failures doubled. And as such, raging against both seems an appropriate stage to dwell in.

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<sup>24</sup> Kübler-Ross, E. (2003 [1969]). *On Death and Dying*. Scribner, New York.

On returning home I told Karen of my chance meeting and of the director's comments about her need to accept she was dying.

'But I have accepted that I'm going to die,' she protested.

'I accepted this fully shortly after they told me my condition was terminal. And besides Kübler-Ross is not linear. You don't go from denial through anger, then on to bargaining and depression to finally achieve acceptance and to die calmly. It is not about a simple signposted journey to death..

Karen was now angry.

'And, what's more, acceptance doesn't exclude anger, doesn't mean that I have to be happy about dying. Happy about leaving my family, leaving you, losing out on seeing the kids grow up. I have accepted... I know, and I am planning, that I'm going to die, and I am bloody angry about the whole thing.'

Dylan Thomas would have undoubtedly concurred with such a gentle rage.

- 31.** Karen was downstairs sleeping. In our bedroom. In the muted January sun. Curtains drawn, room silent in the mid-afternoon.

I was upstairs lounging. Biding time, with French doors thrown open to the breeze. Undertaking covert reconnaissance on Karen below, checking for signs of life and sound rest. Watching the cricket, then the races, the gleaming thoroughbreds of Wellington Cup day. Doing my bit to keep life tracking as normal, as possible. Waiting. Knowing the odds. Though not yet aware it was the day before Karen would be lifted out of home, away to the hospice, to die in the early hours of Monday, January 27 2003.

Bored with time. With the forty-minute gap between televised races. Between overs. With time elapsing, I decided to clean out the guttering running along the skiing-slope roof of the upstairs lounge, the one with the vistas of Aro Valley, Government House, et al. I had discussed this previously with Karen, who advised me to get a young student to clamber up. They would need the work. Had youth and agility on their side.

But now was not a time for young men. Karen was dying and I needed action, a task to complete, resolve. Karen was sleeping and I dutifully retrieved the extension ladder from the lean-to on the car deck, positioned it on the balcony below the roof and clambered up in shorts, tee-shirt and sneakers. Hoisted myself on to the roof before bum-sliding down to the edge of the guttering. Forgetting, in the process, that the midday January sun had heated the corrugated iron beyond sizzling. My knees and hands burned as I tentatively crawled along the length of the guttering, trying to avoid looking at the ten-metre drop to the roof of Karen's

bedroom, the further ten metres down to the bush. With palms starting to blister, knees heavily imprinted with corrugated lines, sweating profusely, I began to feel disorientated, panicky – a feeling exacerbated when job complete I attempted to swing my right leg off the side of the roof, back to the safety of the ladder. My left cheek, arms and chest burned as the ladder constantly slipped sideways in my failed attempts to find a foothold. I clambered back down to the relative flat of the roof near the guttering and pondered my options.

As I caught my breath I was struck with how my stupidity could easily result in me dying before Karen. Tumbling down exhausted and burnt on to the roof of her bedroom below. Landing with a bone-crushing thump that would awaken her with a nauseating start. Would cause her to call out my name to an empty house. To keep calling until someone, somehow discovered my fall and arranged for emergency services to remove my body. For a moment I felt that death would not be so bad – would certainly curtail the pain I knew was coming. In fact after Karen's death I no longer fear the terminal, the eternal void, figuring that in death I would be finally freed from the pain of loss, of remembering, and might even somehow be reunited with Karen. Either way in death I will draw a winning hand. Though the variable prospects of dying still incite anxiety, especially in terms of desiring to die well, without pain, in full mental faculty, still engaged in a life lived well, in love and with integrity. As I suspect Karen did, I also envy household cats that stealth away from home to die alone and in peace. Without hearing the cries of those condemned to survive and mourn. Yet at that moment the prospect of leaving Karen to clean up my mess, as she was dying, as she was attempting to stay at home, as normally as possible, for as long as possible, was just too self-centred even for me.

So I ran. Ran up the sking jump roof and thrust out an arm, a hand to grasp the speculative safety of the small, plastic coated flat roof of the upstairs lounge. Missed my grip and slid down, spread-eagled, toes and fingertips gripping on to the searing corrugated iron roof for dear life. Clawing firstly for Karen's sake, but in that instant of possible oblivion, for my own increasingly desperate existence.

I stopped sliding with my feet resting on the guttering. Kneeled and then stood unsteadily, hands on knees, breathing heavily, sweat stinging my eyes. Forced myself to take a moment to compose, to not panic. Told myself that I had to get off the roof or else Karen would never forgive me – not that I would necessarily know this being dead and everything. Morbid humour, there is a lot of it about when someone is dying. Has something to do with relieving the tension caused by the relentless pragmatics of a physical ending. I ran again, clambered upward and this time caught the flat roof with the fingers of both hands and with a strength one finds in complete desperation hauled myself up to the safety of the flat roof. All thoughts of death, pain, loss were instantly back-grounded as I collapsed, laughing at my idiocy, before shakily finding my feet and clambering down to front door deck.

Later that afternoon I told Karen of my 'adventure' while she was sleeping. She sighed, shook her head in mock exasperation, smiled and said, 'Well you didn't fall, did you?'

And at least now we have clean gutters.'

**32.** I fell recently.

Slipped on our inclined car deck, which was covered in fine early morning dew. Returning home in the dark, from a conference in Sydney. Fell and cracked my head. Fell flat on my back with my right arm pinned backward. Behind me. Still tightly gripping my twenty-three kilogram, wheeled, staccato suitcase. My left arm elevated upward. Holding up from harm's way the duty free in mocking triumph.

Detached the supraspinatus tendon from the greater tubercle humerus in my right shoulder and realised – upon being surgically opened up – I had also detached another tendon and part of my lateral deltoid.

For seven months I suffered from chronic, ongoing pain and use impairment as I battled the heedless bureaucracy of the Accident Compensation Commission, who claimed in their institutional wisdom (they do, after all, routinely warn us to take preventive care around the home) that what I was experiencing was little more than a 'previous condition rendered symptomatic'. Leaving me to ponder how I could have been so blasé about my detached tendon in the past. Especially when playing tennis and badminton without any symptoms or pain – other than those incurred in regularly losing.

Sleep at that time of necessity involved pre-bed doses of Codine, Voltaren, Panodol, Zopiclone and an elaborate configuration of supportive pillows for my right arm, all of which facilitated sleep on my uninjured left. However, after some months the physical pressure, and frankly the boredom, of sleeping this way proved too much. I arranged myself as best I could to sleep on my right. Fell quickly into a deep, exhausted, but fitful sleep through which I dreamt that the supportive pillows propped up behind my back were Karen snuggling up as she always had. The reality of her presence, mediated fantastically through the physical pressure of the pillows, was startling, electrifying, confusing. Exposed in the candid, the depth of my longing.

In my restless dream-state my rational mind knew I was caught between the fervent hope that Karen had returned and a sane need to comprehend the actuality of my situation. I desperately attempted to wake up. Yet all the time I couldn't understand why Karen wasn't wrapping her arms around me. Better still, why wasn't she getting frisky?

When I finally awoke I quickly realised that I had famously duped myself. As I lay in the dark breathing heavily, orientating myself to the dark and the realities of my wakefulness, I thought

how equally splendid and disturbing was my loneliness for Karen. A reckless yearning that could manifest in ways that were intense, piercing, astonishing and cruel in the same moment.

I also realised yet again that this entirety of conflicting, yet congruent, parts was my guiding reality. My knowing. My truth. A shifting of enduring love, perpetual loss. A constant parallax of desire and reality. Schizophrenic in time and emphasis. Obstinate warped, stretched, constricted, deceived by memory. Rendering a whole, never a full, portrait of a man in loving despair.

**33.** I have never shirked grief.

Never recoiled from sadness.

Never run from the pain. However immense, dark or unrelenting.

Though this has nothing to do with personal fortitude. Involves no courage. No heroism on my part. Rather it stems, in part, from a long-held pragmatic awareness, a fatalism even – one that many of us share, but few indoctrinated in the pursuit of the good life care to concede is normative – that life, no matter how well crafted, how idyllic or wonderful in its moments, will necessarily include pain. The vicissitudes of aging alone guarantee this. As do the inevitable mutations, illnesses and mortality of all living things. In essence then we are all naturally predisposed toward pain.

To live is to certainly experience pain, as it is to potentially experience joy, boredom, anger, frustration, lust, desire or any other socio-emotional response. Although of all human experiences, only life, death and pain are inevitable. We are all born in pain, in physical, environmental, emotional rupture, and as any of us can expire at that foundational moment, some will experience only hurt before they die. Pain as a sum life. A natural reckoning that successive societies, marked by stratification and territorialisation, have only added to by privileging the few and in doing so condemning the mass to lives – some short, some long – branded in enduring deprivation and pain.

Nevertheless pain that is unavoidable, that is irreversible, which emerges from the loss of a good – such as the death of a truthfully loved one – should be embraced and valued. Not merely as an echo or a converse of what was lost. But as a respected extension of the good, as a worthwhile endeavour in its own right. As part of the privilege of an experienced good. As good pain. Grief as love.

By embracing, celebrating, even pursuing such pain, we are firstly enabled to accept the necessity of loss and consequent hurt. But more than this we are cautioned about investing in and accepting second-best, less than good, in our everyday. Directed instead toward ensuring

that our births, lives, deaths are worth the inevitable pain that will follow. And likewise are admonished against wallowing in second-rate forms of avoidance, mitigation and escapism.

But we live in perverse times. Times when for many the original pains of birth are quickly surpassed by even more vexing experiences. By man-made, knowingly manufactured hurt and suffering. By structured pain. Times where we systemically build on the foundations of primal, diseased and degenerative pain to actively create the routines of poverty, coercion and inequity. Where we wilfully ensure there are vastly more losers than winners, whatever the *Lotto*, *Warehouse*, *Nike* adverts loudly proclaim.

At the same time edicts, promotions, mantras of the 'good life' dominate our noise-scapes. And happiness – perpetual, progressive, all-encompassing – is institutionally cast as the primary measure of individual worth or success. Is calculated daily in small blessings, in fragments of pleasure that fall from the grind. By toting up *Facebook* likes. Basking in the pleasures of new smart phone apps, seasonal fashion statements and in cyclical rounds of the spectacular, from the *Olympics* to *Wearable Arts* and annual coffee barista championships. And through ubiquitous assertions that 'as long as they are happy', everything is alright. Is content. Calculated so, even as the mass are compelled to be habitually unhappy, either in the absolute or in the relative. Are structurally obliged to struggle, to experience, re-experience recurrent pain. To lead unrewarded and unsuccessful lives. Then they die.

And where pain – fleeting or chronic, momentary or complete, emotional and social – is pathologized. Manufactured. Every deviation, no matter how minute or insignificant, from our constantly shifting, fashion-fadish constructs of perfection are problematized. Commodified. Are profitably treated with a myriad of interventional potions, pills, therapies and surgeries. Individuated. A double bind for the structurally unhappy, who can only blame themselves. Birth, aging, disease, death, all the natural indignations, all the natural pains, are swept up in this maelstrom. Are measured against an illusory normalcy of perpetual contentment, constant happiness, of zero sum hurt. A grotesque fantasy that leaves most of us stranded on the precipices of permanent anxiety. Of never getting it quite right. Of being found persistently wanting. Ill-fated. Condemned. Denounced.

And the guileless sadness that results from the break-up of a valued relationship is treated with a battery of chemical interventions and confessional counselling. Depression, which is surely at times a warranted, reasonable and potentially astute response to the enduring privations of one's life, is regarded as inherently aberrant and thoroughly scrubbed in an effort to restore contentment. And the persistent grief, born of irreversible, irremediable loss, is branded as detrimental. Is in direct contravention of the aspirational wisdom of three-days' bereavement leave and 'Trade Yourself' exhortations to [www.findsomeone.co.nz](http://www.findsomeone.co.nz).

Such is the awareness of a cynical old Marxist-cum-anthropologist.

Although my outlook, which effectively amounts to wholly embracing the pain and grief of Karen's illness, death and an aftermath of unremitting absence, stems mostly from another very simple, very grounded truth that likewise emerges from the inevitability of pain. That is no matter what. No matter how you duck and dive. Joke, deflect, deny, accentuate the positives. Practise or feign stoicism. Whether you stagger about in obscuring glosses. Or stretch out in the self-assuring, yet uncomfortable, truth that many are far worse off than yourself.

No matter what.

Pain and grief will hunt you down.

Will at some point hit you hard. Will rain blows to your midriff, cut you off at the knees, bash you around the head until you are senseless, out of breath, knocked down, sprawled on the ground hurting, bewildered in the dark, wondering why? Desperately searching for any meaning, any morality, any cause and effect that explains why. Why this reality above all else? Searching for a logic that justifies the must.

My most obvious experience of this was the moment Karen died. Although Karen's death was anticipated – she had been diagnosed as terminal just over a year previous. And we had endured dry runs. Practice. Hundreds of small deaths in following the oscillating fortunes of Karen's illness and treatment. A couple of 'near-misses' in the months before. Karen's death. The inviolate tyranny of lack. Vicious non-existence. Revealed a void from which there was no respite. No compromises, leeway, nothing. No beginning, dimension or end. A dominion absolute. Boundless nothingness that brokered no negotiation, bargaining, denials or compromise, imperious in its disinterest. Which was void. With nothing to grasp hold of, to orientate, but an invocation of pain in austere rage. All. Entire.

My only recollection of pain anywhere this intense occurred when Karen had an amniocentesis prior to Estlin's birth. I was unfazed by the large needle punctured into her womb. Had seen bones ripped through my skin in the past. Had coped. However I couldn't deal with the pain torturing across Karen's face, especially as I was not allowed to move. Confined to knowingly ineffectual words of comfort. I almost fainted then. But if that was intense, then the pain at the moment of Karen's death was fundamental, primal, archetype. There was nothing. No Karen. No hope of redress. No mitigating futures. Imaginary respites.

Except of course there was. There was family, the children, their pain, their distress and this pulled me back from the edge. They needed comfort. They gave comfort in kind. And then there was Karen's corpse. Lifeless but with aesthetic. Memory, eulogizing kicked in quickly. I asked everyone if I could have a few moments alone with Karen. I cried again. Told Karen of

my pain. Told her how well she had died. Attempted to tidy her up. Even as a corpse, I knew Karen would want to look as presentable as possible. I kissed her tenderly. Wiped her face with a damp cloth, but had not anticipated how heavy her head, which was slumped to one side, was. The nurses came in. I told them that I was trying to make Karen up. They said they would do it. And I knew. As they knew. That I didn't have the strength required to handle Karen's lifeless body.

And we had practised Karen's death. This was no unanticipated accident, no sudden heart attack. No sudden, bewildering death. No life as you know it changing irrevocably. Karen's death was anticipated, predicted, practiced and still the pain, the shock, the grief ran me over without breaking stride. Without acknowledgement, any tipping of hats or nods of accession. I was nothing in the nothingness of death.

And we had practiced this also. Once memorably was when Karen was in hospital on New Year's Eve and I was home alone as Corinna and Estlin were visiting their grandparents in Waikanae. The day before Karen had reacted very badly to drugs given in the course of draining fluid from the lining of her lung. She had looked so ill, so frail that I fully expected a call in the middle of the night asking me to return in haste or one informing that Karen had died and seeking instruction on the removal of her corpse. The next morning having endured a night of restless, anxious sleep we returned to the hospital in rising trepidation, pronounced dread – fully expecting Karen to be in an even worse state.

Yet she was sitting up in bed, perky, chatty to see us all, as though nothing untoward had occurred. And to her it hadn't. Karen could only recall being fatigued, nauseous and then falling asleep. Moreover with a change in medications, or a correction in dosage, Karen had quickly rallied and was now telling us of her night-time adventures. How she had been unsuccessful in attempting to summon a nurse to change her sweat, blood-drenched sheets. Had set off down the corridor with IV drip in tow until she found the linen store. Where she had helped herself to clean sheets, a fresh gown, and an additional pillow for good measure. Then after remaking her bed, had left the soiled lined in a pile outside her door to make a point. Also told us the food was truly awful and that she – and the kids – deserved a morning treat. Accordingly Corinna and Estlin were dispatched, cash in hand, to find 'a McDonald's or a cake shop'.

In their absence Karen asked me why I had looked stressed on arrival. I told her of how ill she was yesterday evening. Of my night-time fears. My now overwhelming relief that she was ok – even if only for the moment – and of my growing awareness of her regressive physical degeneration. Karen just smiled, gave me a hug and a kiss: 'But I'm doing ok now and that's what we mustn't lose sight of. We need to keep focusing on the ok. Keep living life as normally as possible, no matter how things unfold.'

Later that day the children went up to Waikanae and I found myself at home alone after staying with Karen until the end of visiting hours. Had not even realised it was New Year's Eve until I turned on the television and I was sitting contemplating what the future would hold – Karen's increasing incapacitation, how we could constructively accommodate this in our Dr Seuss house, her eventual death, and an aftermath of two young children. No Karen. We had talked a little about what the aftermath could be – Karen once giving me a frosty glare when I casually mentioned remarrying: 'No... There will be no marrying anyone. In fact no dating for at least three years.' She later told Alana she expected a minimum of five years. I had always admired Karen's directness, even in a context of jealousy in the imaginary she was simply asserting what she thought our relationship, her love, was worth. However that night I was thinking 'So this is what my life will be like. At home, alone. No Karen. Drinking tasteless beer and watching inane television. Could be worse. There could have been no Karen ever and then what would I be left with?'

Yet bravado only takes you so far and the enormity of what I, the children, Karen were about to lose began to crush and squeeze. I started to cry. Not great heaving sobs or loud wailing, but with tears that flowed plain in a seamlessness of unabated despair and grief. Tears that are, in such moments, sum you. I was wiping my eyes when the phone rang. I picked it immediately thinking it was the hospital.

'Hi babe, thought I'd give you a call.'

Instantly, amidst overwhelming relief, I was transported back to when we first courted. When Karen was still married to, living with, someone else. When she would 'sneak out' in the night, ride her bike to a nearby public phone to call me. When I had the same direct response. An unanticipated mix of immense relief that Karen was okay (without until the moment ever being aware of the depth, the repression, of my concern) and an illuminating happiness at simply talking – a similar elation experienced whenever I serendipitously spied Karen hip-swinging around the university.

I knew at this moment that I would survive Karen's death, the aftermath, anything, as all I had to do was listen out for her voice.

And, what is more, it didn't matter if it was authentic or simply my own mournful, eulogizing rendition. Didn't matter if it was truthful or a reconfigured memory. It would be Karen either way. That this was a truth in its own right.

No matter what the pain. Whatever the grief. Karen was my good.

Hence my fatalistic logic that the multitude of natural indignations, natural pains of nature are unavoidable. Are routinely added to by various man-made lunacies. Yet pain is still not

problematic per se. Need not be avoided at all costs. Rather pain should be attended to in its specifics. Relieved where possible – after all sitting on a sharp stick can be readily redressed by simply standing up. Just as endemic deprivation can be permanently overcome with a structural revolution.

However, when unavoidable and man-made. Such as when a loved one dies and can only exist through the pallid machinations of memory and remembrance. This pain should be engaged. Factored in. Lived as normal.

Not that pain will always track along the routine – at least not grief pain.

The shock of Karen's physical death, of her complete lack, left me dazed. Out of sync with life. In some ways it was similar to feelings invoked when falling in love. When first enraptured by the truths of another, when the umbilical joy of the first, primal embrace both transcends, and yet focuses in sharp relief, the banal of everyday existence. In which everything from saccharine pop songs to the smallest gestures of kindness, a friendly hand on your shoulder, a kindly glance from a passer-by, witnessing others sharing a joke, are suddenly brimming with evocative human meaning. With exigent significance. No longer mired in routine, in the vain protocols of habit. But profound, urgent, gregarious.

As feelings of love are one step above the banal, the shock and trauma of death grief are one vast step to the side. Parallel but incommensurate. Incompatible. The everyday babbles around you in masquerade. Milk cartons dew in fridges that hum at the back of corner dairies. Bus stops empty and alight. Office elevators inhale and exhale in muddling. And all without any reference, without any acknowledgement of your pain or loss. Without social or cultural rituals – no mourning garb or faces rubbed in ashen white – to symbolically mark the grieving, the you in pain, the you in grief are reduced to the inconsequential. The detached. Walking grieved.

In our society the daily rituals of commerce, occupation and civil indifference are the norm, are routines unfettered, uniform in habit and coercive in disapproving of any, of all, rupture or discontent. And so the grieved are simultaneously forced adrift into bewildering worlds of lack and irredeemable loss, and constantly fearful of being caught out swimming against the tide. Scared that someone, two, a gathering will see through their façades of walking, talking, scuffling in supermarket queues. Will point. Howl. Light torches. Will castigate you as abnormal. Aberrant. Out of step. Outed. The walking grieved to be corralled, shipped off. Secured safely away from the good times. Behind closed doors, weeping.

Lest we all remember. All reflect. Introspect.

And cry.

Life as you know it doesn't end with the anticipated death of a cherished other. Life as you know it already has death forecast. Pain, grief, the aftermath awaited, practiced. Although in many ways it would be great if it did. To lose everything completely. To be forced to reinvent, in entirety, a life, would be terrifying. Though the chance to refresh, reinvigorate anew would undoubtedly focus the mind. Would forcibly best grief with the novel, the possible, the immediate. Rather life as you have lived it continues as a muffled echo. A faint nonsense trundling on with an inevitability that at times is truly galling, absurd. A pauper with no clothes cheered on by kings applauding.

And the crude pain, the violent agony that routs every step. Every gesture. The simple mechanics of breathing. Are rendered invisible. Fantastical. Not real. Not important. So pervasively so that you soon begin to doubt yourself. Suspect your sanity of death and grief. Start to question life before. What is, what was, the true worth? Yours or theirs? Who is real? You or them? Until that is a known friend, a trusted associate, close family grieves with you. Then the pain rushes in. Inundates as only, as honest reality in the making. And the stability, rationality, reasonableness of your grief is mercifully asserted. When all that is good hurts, as it must.

I also experienced numerous awkward, affronting moments, in which I found myself suddenly, without warning or consent, pitched into forms of territorial dispute with liminal others. Who knew Karen, often as a university colleague, but who did not know me. Other than that I too worked at the university. Was Karen's partner. People who had only ever fleetingly, or indeed had never, engaged with us as a couple. Who would tell me of their pain, of their Karen. Of who she was. Not couched, not situated in context, but often disconcertingly as totalising statements of fact. 'Karen was... such and such.' Or 'Karen would always... such and such'. Assertions that appeared as a form of terrain stamping.

I was never sure of my role in these encounters. Was it to validate? Enhance with additional, pertinent recollections? Or to contest whenever their visions appeared to me slight, partial or self-serving in the telling? I simply assumed the persona of a nodding sounding board and when offered sympathy, accepted this with grace and civility. After all, who was I to know them knowing Karen? Besides they did not know me knowing Karen.

Others, especially women whom Karen knew through the connections of children at the local primary school, were easier. They recognised me as husband and as father when dropping Estlin at school a week or so after Karen's death. A week likewise after the start of the school year when stragglers were returning from extended middle-class holidays. Unaware of Karen's passing they would tentatively approach, enquire, then plainly collapse in tears and despair. At least I shared a fidelity with the spontaneous truth of their pain and could offer a shoulder, though little else as my own grief hurt left nothing in reserve for strangers of this kindness.

Then six or eight weeks later I was besieged by troubled visions, dark memories that literally haunted every waking moment. Racked sleep. And stubbornly resisted purposeful attempts to recall the good. In which Karen constantly appeared in my imaginaries as a weird witch-like visage, replete in skeletal form with black, tattered flowing robes. A mien sitting constant above my everyday. Infecting all rationality. Whenever I attempted to wilfully recall our coupling all I could summon were the three arguments we had had over children. Where the images and sounds of harsh words, raised voices. Of Karen's crumpled, defeated face dissolving into a grotesque gaping skull.

I started to doubt there was anything good in our relationship.

Started believing I had done nothing but fail Karen. And then she had died.

That I was at fault. No matter where or how I turned.

My rational mind knew this was rubbish, but I couldn't shake the darkness. It clung to me. Cloaked every daily moment and ripped my dreams with deformed fantasy. Mercifully Estlin was sleeping with me at this time, so when I awoke in the night, often drenched in sweat with Karen's distressed skeletal imagery screeching into my awake, this sleeping presence grounded me to the reality of our situation. We were traumatised but coping. Doing well in the circumstances.

There is a psychoanalytical theory that all close relationships are based on the first experiences that individuals have of intimacy – mostly with mothers – which in the primal, egoistic mind of all utterly dependent, utterly desiring infants assumes the concurrent forms of a 'good' provisioning mother and a 'bad' withholding mother.<sup>25</sup> And thereby establishes a universal dichotomy of love and loathing – both of 'mother' and of self for having such feelings. A contradiction that unconsciously underpins and determines the course of all future intimate relationships. Which at times of trauma, and especially at the death of a loved one, manifests in witchcraft beliefs – which themselves have remarkably universal characteristics of cannibalism (especially of infants), blood sucking, night-flying, haunting graveyards, fire from the genitals, nakedness, exaggerated sexuality and animal transformation.<sup>26</sup> The witch as archetypal 'bad mother', representing everything bad and destructive (though fiery genitals are intriguing). The presence of the witch serves the socio-psychological function of scapegoat, a mechanism of denial, deflection, repression that protects the individual and society who have both loved and loathed the departed. And who have both desired and grieved their death.

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<sup>25</sup>See for example, Klein, M. (1988). *Love, Guilt, and Reparation: and Other Works 1921-941*. Virago Press, London: Stephen, M. (1999). Witchcraft, Grief and the Valence of Emotions. *American Ethnologist*, 26(3): 711-737.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen, M. (1999). Witchcraft, Grief and the Valence of Emotions. *American Ethnologist*, 26(3): 711-737.

Was dark Karen my witch? I certainly loved Karen. Loved her living. And I undeniably loathed the withholdings necessitated by her death, by her illness – an antipathy that clearly displayed in the remembered bad of our arguments, of our darkest moments as a couple. But did I desire her death?

Of course I did.

Just as I supported Karen when she gave birth, I cheered her death. Held her hand and enthusiastically lied to her that it was ok to die. That we would be alright. I wanted her sufferings to end and when death became the only option, directed my energies to ensuring Karen had as good a death as possible. As she could imagine. That we could plot.

Do I loath this?

Of course I do.

When the best you can desire for you loved one is their death, then you are really up against a wall. Bound but not blindfolded. Steeling yourself to bark the order to shoot those you love the most – your lover and yourself. Would have smothered Karen with a pillow. Fed her killing drugs, if necessary. She was after all stockpiling her morphine. But I also know that this would have destroyed me and so my eternal thanks for the formal interventions of medical knowledge, health procedures, the institutional processes and care of hospices, for those who manage death – assume the pragmatic, practical mantle of physical, material love and loathing. Leaving the anxious bereaved to deal primarily with the social and emotional. Such is death social and death individual in our civil society.

After several weeks it was rationally apparent to me that dark Karen was neither a realistic, nor a sustainable, remembering. The disjuncture of these monstrously skewed, Goyaesque memories jarred with the remnants of our life, let alone with what had actually past. Disturbed Estlin sleeping. Corinna marching off to college. The love shown by Alana and Dylan who tenderly rubbed moisturiser on their mother's face and hands as she lay as corpse in our house. Offended Karen smiling in photos hanging on walls, in bedside drawers, on the 'life story' board displayed at her funeral. Now propped up against the lounge wall.

A truth no doubt. But nowhere near whole.

I allowed the post-mortem realities of our new everyday to wash over, to purify, cleanse, my ravaged psyche. And quickly found myself satiated in memories of the good. Of the very best. Awash in sharp, clear memories of our sexual adventures, our lovemaking. Experienced a reawakening of passions long suppressed, but now transcendent and newly manifested in the pristine ability to simply remember as a vehicle to intense, prolonged, non-ejaculatory orgasms – my Yang in memoriam to Karen's whispering Yin.

And life settled to fitful sleep, awaking frequently near 4am-ish when Karen had died, before waking fully most dawns with a ground-hog jolt. A momentary afresh, rasping realization that Karen was gone. Dead again. Of no return and all consequence. Of shedding tears, allowing the grief. Before getting up to live days increasingly sated by guiding, transcendent memory. In acclamation of what Karen and I had built together. What she had left behind. Had gifted to us in perpetuity – love, family, our beautiful, courageous children. Before night fell and the rigors of being in the day left me spent. Pained and buoyed that another daily had been lived and then expired.

And I came to accept, then embrace my schizophrenia. To being fitfully traumatised and elated. To allow sadness, exhilaration, grief, delight to tide over me. To be alone and to let in grief. To be alone and to let in elation. To be with others and feel both. To accept that the depths of my despair were now the heights of my rapture. Love and loss fully entwined. Two truths as one, though both have truly atrophied over time. Worn down by the habit. Defeated by the banal in which the harsh wounding of my own emotional, social, romantic death has been transformed into fading down.

Accept also, that my memories of Karen, of our intimacy, passion, our talking are better than anything I've experienced or witnessed since. That functioning, living, in fading memory is an enrichment even as it has morphed into the habit, the routines of forgetting. That if I couldn't keep Karen alive, I could at least make sure she was not dead, was remembered well. Although the diamond points of grief and elation can still cut recurrent. Rip, invigorate, bleed anew. Rouse me within. Rouse me without. And in doing so remind me, that if Karen knocked on my door tomorrow, and said: 'Hey babe I'm back...' – I would not hesitate.

**34.** 'No thanks I've already given to cancer.'

The street collector, who a moment ago had cheerily rattled her collection jar and politely enquired if I would like to me make a donation 'for cancer on Daffodil Day', looked askance, quizzical, confused.

I didn't break stride. My dead-pan, matter-of-fact voice did not betray any irony and despite the apparent incongruence of my response, I was still smiling courteously. My friend Yadana whole-body guffawed as only she can, momentarily bent double with laughter, uttered a quick 'sorry' with a shrug of her shoulders and then stumbled on.

'Well, I have, haven't I?' I asked Yadana as she drew level. She put a comforting hand on my shoulder and we continued our walk down Lambton Quay confident that this year we had indeed given to cancer – me a wife, Yadana a friend and mentor.

**35.** *Every picture tells a story.*

My first professor in anthropology once told me, in contradiction to the then current post-structural, post-modern turn in academia that accorded currency to all and every perspective in their minute, even unique, peculiarities, that just because something is a stereotype, a cliché or a generalisation, which obscures truth in the specific, does not mean that it is not, at least in part or in certain contexts, true – at least to someone. (She then took a breath as academics are wont to do.) Not necessarily a worthless, or even worse an inveigling, simplification.

*A word to the wise.*

I remembered my prof's insight when Karen was first admitted to the cancer ward, Ward 1 of the old Wellington Hospital. A shuddering Dickensian edifice, with paint peeling walls and illness scrubbed into the fabric of the floors, into the desiccating air of the corridors; made even more shameful in light of the gleaming, corporate lines of the new hospital.

Karen had been admitted for a procedure to drain fluid that was building up in the visceral pleur lining that encloses the lungs and to hopefully relieve her increasingly laboured, panicked breathing. The procedure had been successful and Karen was sitting up in bed, perky, pleased to be free (even if temporarily) from the anxiety that she was constantly drowning.

*In the midst of life we are in death.*

I mentioned to Karen that the woman occupying the bed next to her was not only strikingly attractive, but appeared very young. Karen had always delighted in my gaze, my appreciation of a feminine aesthetic. Stereotypical for my sins, but at least moulded through the minimums of experience and persona. By desire for the paper-faint quiver of a closed eyelid; the agile determination of small hands; the snap taut surety of slender wrists – porcelain-smooth on the radial pulse; the wanting flesh of an ear lobe. Breasts, thighs, calves, areola. A warm, disarming smile. All ideally wrapped up with a red bow and sitting atop a healthy respect for mischief; an easy capacity for timely, if not primal, insight; and a frank, demanding intellect. Karen loved my openness, detail, eclecticism. Delighted that its entirety, its minutiae and intensity, always settled on her as love. There was no honesty to be had in holding back at this point.

Karen motioned me closer and told me that the woman was in her early thirties. And that, with her husband, had been trying to get pregnant for several years only to succeed and be diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer, three or four months into her pregnancy. Her choices were blunt. Undergo immediate treatment and lose the baby. Delay treatment to ensure the baby went full term and put her own life at imminent risk.

*There's always someone worse off.*

Until that moment I had always thought this particular cliché was a sop to justify the monstrous stratifications, the Christian-based subservience, the master-slave relations, which have invariably led to, and which sustain, modern capitalism.

But now it resonated with an ordinary, grounded truth that was as disturbing as it was comforting. A parallax of truths.

*Blessings counted.*

36. Karen told me briefly, without great detail, and as we were developing a friendship, of her varied trials and tribulations. Of her plan to start afresh when she turned forty, in three years time, when her children would be nearing the end of secondary school. When they would be starting to fashion an independence of their own making.

I replied 'Why wait?'

'Why wait?... Especially if you are satisfied that you have given it your best shot and it is still not working. Besides you could be run over by a bus tomorrow and this would be the sum of your life to date.'

Karen told me once, when we were securely coupled and awaiting the arrival of Estlin, that I was the only one of her friends, of her associates, who had ever offered this advice. The only one to suggest leaving and starting anew. Immediately before the bus came.

I said I was surprised. I said that around the enclaves of academia that I inhabited, that this would be stock standard advice. Besides who in their right mind would wait?

Karen lived well until she was forty-four, until she was over run by cancer.

37. On October 16, 2011.

Some eight years, eight months and nineteen days later.

*American Express* issued Karen a 'Statement of Account'. I collected it from the mailbox. As executor, as bereaved husband, I opened the envelope.

It stated that Karen's *Gold Credit Card* account contained 0.05CR and had been cancelled. The statement urged her to '*Please call to apply for a refund if all charges have been billed.*'

Karen was the primary cardholder when she died in 2003. In response, and in accordance with *American Express* regulations, the company cancelled the account and annulled our *Airpoints*. We had been knowingly accumulating these in the hope of taking another 'last' overseas holiday. As the supplementary cardholder I had no recourse, after informing *American Express*

of Karen's death, than to settle the final bill. Which I did with a typical display of largesse, overpaying the required amount by five cents.

Then the monthly statements from *American Express* informing Karen that there was a credit of five cents began arriving. Month after month. Year after year.

Aggrieved that Karen and our *Airpoints* had been summarily voided, I decided to let the free hand of corporate bureaucracy sort itself out. Besides receiving the monthly *Amex* bill informing me that Karen was in perpetual credit was comforting and ironic in equal measure. And that it was costing the transnational giant at least fifty cents a month to generate her account was an added, albeit pitiful, bonus – one that I felt fairly reflected the corporation's regulatory inability to recognise our relationship, not to mention Karen's death.

Karen certainly knew how to 'max out' a credit card. There were times when my fulltime lecturing salary barely covered the monthly interest payments. Although once when living at Rose Cottage on an income consisting of my PhD scholarship and our joint student loans, we had stopped using the *Amex* cards for several months of unprecedented financial judiciousness. And the company responded with pre-crash, credit-card logic by offering us pre-approved *Platinum Cards*.

Karen's eyes lit up.

'We should get them, Peter. We could buy anything. A new car, a new house. There is no limit!'

At this time the annual fees on a *Platinum Card* were more than twelve hundred dollars and I had fun in showing Karen the math that, if we sold one of our kidneys, we could pay the fees, feed the children, and then be 'free' to use the cards – at least for a month or so before the first repayment was due.

In contrast Karen had a 'rule' of never spending more than \$20 at a second-hand shop. A self-imposed dictate that caused her to miss out, on at least three occasions, on acquiring the sort of old-fashioned 'lady's bicycle' she had long coveted. Although in the last weeks of her life she deviated from this voluntary, nonsensical frugality to spend one hundred dollars at the Johnsonville *Salvation Army* store to purchase a swag of pristine, still boxed, *Port Merion* (her personal favourite) cutlery and ceramic pieces, which she estimated were worth more than a thousand dollars. She even managed to collect a speeding ticket on the way down Ngauranga Gorge when returning excitedly homeward.

The posthumous *Amex* accounts kept arriving for years, although by the time they ceased I hardly noticed that my once-a-month, nickel and dime's worth of periodic delight and corporate revenge had quietly slipped away.

Still it was with a palpable sense of nostalgia that I received yet another 'Statement of Account' just days before what would have been Karen's fifty-third birthday on October 21, 2011. An unexpected, a belated, and an early gift from credit card capitalism... *Priceless?*

- 38.** Noted. Some months after Karen's death. In the envelope of photographs that sits in the drawer of my bedside table. A picture of Karen walking along a beach near Brisbane in the October sun before her death. Walking with Corinna, Estlin and Pearl (my sister's girl).

A 'last' family holiday taken while Karen was still in reasonable health. Chest, armpits being invaded with growing tumours, their decaying, sweet sickly smell detectable only to Karen at this stage. Masked to others by a heavy perfume,\* which then still excited, was still associated with Karen as life, as lust. But which now if detected on another women, as they pass by in the street, in the supermarket, nauseates, pains. Decay in the aftermath.

In the photo Karen's upper body is visibly beginning to bloat with steroids. Her hair is cropped in chemo recovery. But there she is still clearly swinging her narrow hips, her arms, in the joy of the Queensland sunshine, the beach, a forthcoming lobster dinner. In her delight of holidaying with family. In step with her life.

\* Angel by Thierry Mugler.

**39.**

**40.**

**41.**

**42.**

**43.**

**44.**