Overview: “The Year of Magical Thinking”
Writers Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne, married for decades, were at home getting ready for dinner just before New Year’s Eve 2003 when John had a massive heart attack and died suddenly. They were just back from visiting their only (grown) child, who was in a coma, at the hospital. What follows is the story of the next year of Joan’s life and how she copes with the sudden loss of her husband. Didion vividly portrays the multitude of thoughts and feelings that sometimes follow the death of a loved one.

Didion begins to experience the vortex effect—in which she is paralyzed by memories triggered by seemingly mundane circumstances—as she begins to come to terms with John’s death and her daughter’s illness. Memory turns into a vortex that at any given moment could suddenly sweep her away. For example, she could not shop at a local supermarket near a restaurant that she often dined with her husband because of all the memories that kept reminding her of John. Memories of that place came soaring back unconsciously to her every time she went there and before she knew it, she was grieving for her husband again. Have places and/or things launched you into a vortex of memory? Have you consciously done things to avoid this happening? Do you view vortex-like experiences as “normal”?

Didion first experiences the vortex effect when she visits her daughter in the hospital in New York. A flood of memories overwhelms her, temporarily taking her out her surroundings. Is this a bad thing? Can it be viewed as a coping mechanism?

The vortex effect becomes a deeply upsetting experience, and when Didion returns to Los Angeles she desperately avoids places and situations that remind her of former life. She soon discovers, however, that even seemingly benign triggers, such as commercials or calendar dates, are capable of setting off the effect. Have felt “blind-sided” by unexpected triggers?

Didion’s work has been described as “a woman's impressions from within the maelstrom of her grief. Things are not logical in its immediate aftermath; thoughts don't go to healing the wound; thoughts go (sometimes) to searing regret, or turning back the clock, or obsessively going over the last moment you spoke to the now-dead person ... trying to reverse time.” Such thinking can suck you into a different kind of vortex, reliving moments with hope of changed outcomes. Are these thoughts driven by regret, wishful thinking, or are they an attempt to control an out of control situation, if only in one’s mind?

Didion documents how she engaged in “delusional” patterns particularly through her magical thinking and experiences of the vortex effect, but she also shows us how she concealed her “insanity” behind an apparently rational, functional surface. Have you engaged in seeming irrational thinking, yet presented a different face to the public? If so, do you still? Do you think this helps you accept what has happened?

Only after Didion has rebuilt the emotional resilience to face her memories does the vortex effect begin to subside. This is consistent with the idea that grief is a state of temporary mental illness. Do you agree with this statement?

Though painful and disorienting, the vortex effect is an essential part of the process Didion must undergo to fully accept her husband’s death. Do you feel it is essential to conjure memories, either intentionally or through vortex-like experiences, in order to come to terms with what has happened in your life? Do you think there is harm if this part of the process is avoided?