

The Irrecoverable

At around six o'clock on the morning of March 10, 2018, a Saturday, my wife awoke to find three missed calls on her phone from her youngest daughter, Ruthie, who lived in the city of Guanajuato, Mexico. Julie had turned off her ringer the night before - unusual for her to do, since she has an elderly mother with Parkinson's Disease. Her mother is prone to falling - more and more often in recent months, as the illness progresses - and Julie wants to be available in case the caregivers at the residential facility need to reach her in an emergency. But for some reason, that night the ringer was off. Maybe she'd silenced it after her mother's bedtime, figuring that everything was fine for the evening; or maybe she just needed a brief respite from being on call 24/7.

For some time Julie had been worried about Ruthie, who'd finally acknowledged her drinking problem and was trying to stop. Ruthie had recently been experiencing strange spells where she felt weak, and was unable to stand or speak. Brain scans had revealed no abnormality, and her doctors thought the problem was psychiatric. A psychiatrist had prescribed Ativan for anxiety, and warned her that she could not have any alcohol while she was on

this medication; the Ativan was also to help her deal with the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. But she hated how it made her feel - groggy and loopy - and so took it only sporadically. Julie had flown down to Guanajuato for a week in January to be with Ruthie and see for herself how she was doing. Ruthie understood the dangers of the situation - especially the dangers of mixing alcohol and tranquilizers -- and knew she had to stop drinking. She talked about going into rehab, but didn't see a way to do it until May, when her two children - Caleb, 8, and Hannah, 4 - would be out of school, and could stay either with their father or his mother. (Ruthie and Quique had gone through a very ugly divorce a couple of years ago.) As far as Julie could tell, Ruthie hadn't been drinking when she was there, but after she got back to Seattle, she began to suspect that Ruthie had started up again - if indeed she'd ever really stopped. Julie's therapist felt that the best thing Julie could do for Ruthie right now, rather than pressuring her directly to stop drinking, was just to listen to her nonjudgmentally, and keep gently but firmly emphasizing the larger picture: the need for rehab and talk therapy. Ruthie's situation was further complicated by her worry that Quique, a high-powered defense lawyer in Guanajuato, might try to use her entering rehab as another

piece of what she believed was his long-term strategy to take custody of the kids, with the help of his mother, Araceli (with whom the children were close). Araceli and Ruthie had always gotten along well, and this did not change after the divorce. Araceli was a devoted grandmother, and she had no trouble cutting her grandchildren's mother some slack; but there could be no doubt whose side she was on.

When Julie woke up that Saturday and saw the three missed calls, she took the phone into the dining room and immediately called Ruthie's number. She'd spoken with her briefly the night before. Ruthie had sounded sober and subdued - maybe even a little down - but had assured her mother that everything was alright, and that she'd talk to her the next day. (That was probably another reason why Julie had felt OK about turning off her ringer that night.) But the person who now answered the phone wasn't Ruthie; it was a woman Julie at first didn't recognize. She was crying hysterically. Julie speaks fluent Spanish, but she couldn't understand what the woman was saying.

By this time I was awake, and I could hear Julie in the dining room repeating, in rising tones: "Quien es? Con quien hablo? Yo quiero hablar con Ruthie. Donde está

Ruthie?" And then, after a pause, "Non intiendo! Quiero hablar con Ruthie! Donde está mi hija Ruthie?"

The woman then identified herself as Ruthie's neighbor and friend Adriana, whom Julie had met when she was down in Guanajuato in January; but right now Julie wasn't taking anything in, and cried again, "Non intiendo! Quiero hablar con Ruthie! Donde está my hija?"

At this point I leapt out of bed, threw on a robe, and ran into the dining room, where Julie was standing by the table with the phone to her ear. I put my arms around her shoulders as she continued to shout into the phone, "Donde está Ruthie!" And then, in growing horror: "No! No está possible! Donde está mi hija! Donde está Ruthie!"

I felt my face contort into an unfamiliar expression as I held her tighter and she began to wail. It was a sound I had never heard come out of her before.

"Israel es allá? Quiero hablar con Israel!"

After a slight pause, Adriana handed the phone over to Israel, Ruthie's boyfriend, who was no less hysterical than Adriana. But through the panic, and the confusion of receiving unintelligible news in a foreign language, the horror now began to take shape. Israel had been with Ruthie that night. She had woken up in the wee hours, struggling to breathe, then collapsed, unconscious. Israel

had tried, unsuccessfully, to do CPR on her, then called emergency. As he waited for the paramedics to arrive, he quickly ran across the street to get Adriana. Together they continued to try CPR, without success. After about 20 minutes - 20 minutes! - the paramedics arrived, but they too were unable to revive her. She was gone.

"Dices que está muerta? Dices que Ruthie está muerta? No está possible! No, no, no!"

I held Julie tighter as she continued to wail into the phone; then, after a time, she hung up and crumpled, weeping, into a chair, still in my arms. We stayed like that for a while, Julie weeping, me just holding her in the chair as the sun rose and shone for the rest of the day in a bright, clear sky. At some point during that endless day, which was spent with Julie's two other daughters, Zoe and Erica - who both live in Seattle -- arranging for the funeral and cremation, and then the trip down to Mexico for the three of them - at some point Julie looked out the window and said, "It should be raining." I knew exactly what she meant. The sunshine seemed cruelly exposing and heartless -- heedless of the pain it was shining down upon.

That evening I drove Julie and Zoe to the airport. Earlier in the day, Erica had discovered her passport was expired; she would have to wait til Monday for an emergency

renewal, and so wouldn't be flying down until Tuesday. The funeral was scheduled for Wednesday.

I couldn't make it. It was the last full week of classes before spring break at the community college where I teach, and I'd already scheduled the final set of student conferences through Wednesday. I felt guilty about this. Shouldn't I be at my wife's side for the funeral of her daughter - every parent's worst nightmare? My son Zack had lost his mother, my first wife Diane, to cancer when he was 16. The night Diane died, I remember crying to myself, "Zack doesn't have a mommy anymore!" The thought of him losing his mother at such a tender age felt even worse than losing my wife. But Hannah and Caleb were at even tenderer ages. Zack mentioned later that he wanted to write them a letter, telling them he knew, first-hand, what they were going through. That kind of empathy was something I couldn't lay claim to; the least I could do was be with Julie at the funeral. But I knew how I would feel if I cancelled classes and tutorials the week before school ended for the quarter, and the truth was, I would feel even guiltier going than staying. Then there was Zoe's dog, Sasha, to be taken care of -- walked and fed -- while she was away. That was something I could do to make myself

useful, and also allay my guilt a little bit. It seemed a helpful task to perform.

While Julie and her daughters were down in Mexico, I was kept pretty busy between classes, student conferences and attending to Sasha. I spoke or texted with Julie several times a day; but it was the mornings and evenings when I walked Sasha that I had the chance to think in a more sustained way about what Julie must be going through. Or perhaps I should say "try to think", because thinking about it deliberately didn't work. I would tell myself to imagine what it would be like if Zack should die. (He was only a year older than Ruthie.) But my mind wouldn't go there; it shut down. It was as if that particular "thought experiment" were not permissible; such thoughts were not to be experimented with. The possibility remained a blank space in my mind. To even try to imagine it was unthinkable.

There was, however, another kind of thinking -- or rather, a kind of sad imagining -- that was permitted; and it had been hovering around my mind for years, long before I'd moved to Seattle, or even met Julie, when I was still living alone on Long Island. As I've already mentioned, Diane died a few months before Zack turned 17. (This was in 2004.) He went off to college in August of 2006,

shortly after I'd bought a house in Huntington Station, with the money from the sale of my father's house in Pacific Palisades - the house I'd grown up in. (My father had also died in 2004, only a month before Diane. It was a bad year. My mother had died in 1995.) As it happened, I would end up living alone in that house in Huntington Station for 11 years - the solitude interrupted only by Zack's periodic brief returns for the holidays, and the summer after his freshman year, when he tutored ESL students at the college on Long Island where I taught. During those 11 years, I had a few romantic relationships - two short-term, one long-term; but none of the women I was involved with ever moved in. Which, looking back on it now, was just the way I wanted it. When I was alone, which was most of the time, I could continue to mourn Diane and keep her with me in thought and feeling, and she could be an ongoing presence in my life.

During part of this time, I was writing a book-length manuscript called The Widower: An Afterlife. The idea behind the subtitle was that Diane lived on, in several senses. This idea was more than merely notional. In the months after her death there had been three incidents I can only call uncanny: two bizarre occurrences that were unnerving at the time, but that I eventually came to see as

just coincidences (though they continued to haunt me for months afterward); and one event - call it a manifestation -- that had seemed, when it happened, downright supernatural. The first incident involved a diner I walked past on the street in New York City, just after I had mumbled out loud, to myself, that I wished Diane had had a sister. The name, "Dag's Diner", was composed of her initials (standing for Diane Austin Gidding). The second incident was a license plate on a car I pulled up behind, that bore the name of Diane's term of endearment for Zack when he was a baby: "Mouschka".

The third event, which occurred only a few days after she died, seemed like more than mere coincidence. I heard a voice coming out of a walkie-talkie, saying "Hello Jojay?" (Diane's nickname for me.) The walkie-talkie was worn by a member of the housekeeping crew at a seaside motel in Montauk, where we were about to hold Diane's memorial service on the beach. The housekeeper was walking up a long set of stairs towards me, and when she finally came even with me, the message crackled out of her walkie-talkie - twice, in rapid succession. If this incident too could ultimately be explained as just a weird coincidence, it still seemed bizarre that a name that was also my nickname should emerge from the walkie-talkie at the exact

moment when the housekeeper carrying the walkie-talkie was walking past me. I was stone-cold sober at the time; and if it was some sort of hallucination, then it was the only hallucination I've ever had. (I've done hallucinogens - mushrooms - only once in my life, and that was with Julie, 13 years after the walkie-talkie incident. And they didn't even make me hallucinate; though it was a rather unpleasant experience for other reasons.)

Besides those three events, the subtitle of my manuscript was also meant to refer to the after-image Diane's life left on mine, as well as what my own life felt like without her. I spent the better part of 2011 writing most of it, during which time I found myself often revisiting, in imagination, the Los Angeles apartment house we'd lived in for 12 years, on Winona Blvd. in East Hollywood - five years before Zack was born, and then for almost seven years after that. I would also have recurring dreams about that house. In those dreams, the room that figured most vividly and persistently was Zack's bedroom. This room had the feeling, both in my writing and my dreams, of being the focus, the center, of something urgent and intangible that I was missing. I gradually came to understand, during the time I was living alone - I never had these feelings when Zack was staying in the house -

that it was Zack's childhood I was yearning for. It was Zack's time as a child that I was missing, and feeling nostalgic for. That dream-bedroom, which was more or less the same one I wrote about in the manuscript (an example of how, for me at least, writing is sometimes not all that different from dreaming), where he'd spent the first seven years of his life, was something like what the ancient Greeks called an "omphalos" - literally, a navel; or more figuratively, a center - the center, in this case, of Zack's childhood. It was very important to me, for some reason, to hold onto that center. Perhaps it was a way for me also, in my solitary life, to hold onto those memories of us as a young family -- memories of a young and healthy Diane, of Zack, of our life together. A life that had now vanished. Diane was ashes, cast into the surf at Montauk, a couple of days after I'd heard her, or believed I'd heard her, call out to me from the housekeeper's walkie-talkie. And that moment of uncanny weirdness had vanished, too - together with all it had meant to me at the time. Had it ever even happened? (Zack himself has never believed in it, and thinks it was just another bizarre coincidence - that there was obviously just somebody on the housekeeping staff named "Jojay". Though I'd never come across that name before, and never have since - except for a photo a

friend once showed me of a bookstore she'd been to in the Cotswolds called "Jojay's". As far as I know, it's a name that hasn't yet crossed the Atlantic.)

But even leaving aside Diane's uncanny appearances in my waking life, her presence in my dreams often seemed to possess, to my dreaming mind, elements of the supernatural, to which she alone had a mysterious access. In the dreams, I came to discover - over and over again, as if I hadn't yet known this, though the dreams were recurring -- that for all the time since her death, she hadn't really been dead at all, but only in a state of suspended animation that had us all fooled - including the doctors. In this liminal state, she had secretly left Long Island, where we'd been living when she "died", and returned to Los Angeles, where she was now living an alternative life without us. Another recurring element in the dreams was that I had explicitly been given her cell phone number, but had lost it - or had it only intermittently. It had been months, maybe years, since I'd spoken to her. It had been up to me to phone her - and I hadn't.

The dreams in which Diane appeared were almost always troubling and guilt-laden -- the guilt a holdover from an all-too-real act of betrayal I'd committed against her, in her final years, with an old girlfriend, with whom I'd had

a prolonged internet flirtation that I was unable to end until Diane became terminal, in the last year of her life - and not even then, completely. Diane had soon found out about the affair - whereupon I promised to end it. And I did, for a year - but then resumed it, intermittently, even after she became terminal in the summer of 2003. The flirtation didn't fully end until the fall after Diane died, when the old girlfriend and I had dinner together a couple of times, and I found that whatever destructive perversity had been driving my adulterous attraction had now lost its power. Diane was dead, and the transgressive thrill was gone. It was sometime after that sad reckoning that the "Diane dreams" began.

But those dreams were not, in any case, the same dreams in which Zack's childhood bedroom appeared. (As if some censor in my unconscious were scrupulous about separating the "guilty" from the "innocent" material.) Zack's room held a very different constellation of feelings in my dreams: not guilt, or delinquency, or remorse, but rather -- as I've mentioned -- longing, yearning, loss, and an utterly vain hope of recovery - recovery of his childhood. In those "bedroom dreams", I seemed to be back once again at the center of things: the center of our life as a family, before my betrayal of Diane, before her

illness and death. Back in a time when we were young, and whole, and healthy, and just starting out, all three of us, on our life-journey together -- a journey that was to be so cruelly cut short for Diane, and radically re-routed for Zack and me. And did I have a background sense of this too in my dreams? A sense that the childhood bedroom, as a place of refuge and protection and security, was all the more precious because of the firestorm (illness, betrayal, death) that lay ahead? That sense was perhaps like a leak in the unconscious censor, which allowed the sadder consciousness of my waking mind to drip through, as it were, into my dreams. The comfort of Zack's childhood bedroom was felt, in these dreams (and again, this was part of that "background sense"), to be only provisional, and therefore to be held onto all the more tightly. I had a double awareness of simultaneous possession and loss, like the sense, in the other "Diane dreams", that Diane was both present and gone, both loved and betrayed - that this person, whom I'd thought I knew so well, had an alternative life that I'd never even suspected - perhaps not unlike the alternative life I'd been pursuing in my internet affair.

But whatever happened, I wondered, to that little boy who'd slept in Zack's childhood bedroom? I missed him so much. I wanted him back. Where had he gone? The man that

he'd turned into was now a lawyer, working for a firm in LA specializing in title insurance, on the other side of the country from the solitary bedroom on Long Island where I was dreaming the dreams of his child-self. At the end of "My Dinner with André" - my favorite movie - André asks, about the little boy he remembers holding in his arms, "Where is that son?" Vanished, for me, from all but memory and dream; but there, still present, and persistent. And, in the manner of dreams, both here and not; the paradox of simultaneous awareness - of having lost him, but also of still being able to feel what it was like to have him when I did.

I say "having lost him" -- lost the little boy that he was. But I know - also simultaneously - that I still have my son, while Julie has lost her daughter, forever and irrecoverably. She has lost not only the little girl that Ruthie was, but the woman that little girl grew into.

Where is that daughter?

The kinds of irrecoverability are different, too. Zack's childhood has vanished into the man he became - it has been absorbed into that man. It is, in that sense, still a part of him. But Ruthie, like Diane, is now ashes. Part of those ashes are in a mausoleum in the basement of a church in Guanajuato; part are at our house in Seattle; and

part are with her sister Zoe. Julie cannot talk to Ruthie and say, "Remember when you...?" or "Remember when we...?" Those memories are all the more precious, I'm sure, for having no "shrine", as it were, in the living body of their subject. More precious, and more painful. For they are not only memories of a vanished childhood, but of a vanished life. A double-heartbreak. No flesh to hold onto. Not that I make much of an effort to hold onto Zack's flesh these days (and I can hear his sternly mortified and admonishing reaction to that notion: "Daddo..."); but it's still nice to sense it beneath his clothes, or to feel his beard against my mouth, when we hug hello and goodbye. Julie will not be able to do those things with Ruthie anymore. Her flesh is smoke, vapor and ash. Like Diane's. And not even that anymore. It is true that molecular traces of their bodies still persist somewhere in the world (I call those molecular traces of a person their "juice"), but they are not recoverable, and the knowledge that their "juice" still technically, physically exists holds not much consolation or solace for the survivors.

And yet they are not nothing, those traces, that "juice". We know that matter cannot be created or destroyed (at least not at the larger-than-quantum levels

we are talking about here - the level of human flesh). But it is being continually transformed.

Full fathom five thy father lies;
 Of his bones are coral made;
 Those are pearls that were his eyes;
 Nothing of him that doth fade
 But doth suffer a sea-change
 Into something rich and strange.

And nothing richer, or stranger, than all the varied materials of memory: always shifting, always changing. The tidal flux of recollection, watering the mind, oxygenating it, making it grow. Bringing it new life - even in death. Especially, perhaps, in death.

On the dining-room table - the same table where she sat, crumpled and weeping, on the morning of March 10th - Julie has set up a little shrine to Ruthie: a triptych of photos. On the right, Ruthie at seven or so, burying her sister Erica in sand at the beach. On the left, the adult Ruthie, caught by Erica at the beginning of a laugh, and looking a little incredulous, gazing out over the river in Prague. And in the center, Ruthie at around 12, tall and gangly, a female hobbledehoy, emerging from the surf. All three photos taken by the water. Nothing of her that doth fade, but doth suffer a sea-change... In front of the triptych, Julie has placed two small memorial candles, refreshed every evening when she recites the Kaddish, and

plays a song by a singer that Ruthie loved and played for her on her trip to Guanajuato in January - the last time they saw each other. Julie is not Jewish, though she speaks and reads Hebrew, which she learned when she was an Evangelical Christian, some years ago now. But she is deeply drawn to things Jewish, and so her recitation of the Kaddish every night feels right:

Oseh shalom bi-m'romav, hu ya'aseh shalom
aleinu v'al kol Yisra-el, v'imru amen.

Is it better, as the Bible tells us, to go to the house of mourning than to the house of mirth? With my inclination towards depression, I have always thought so. Even as I child, I think I treasured my pensive and melancholy moments - though of course I did not perceive them that way at the time. But Julie does not share my inclination; by nature, she is "always merry and bright" (the title, for what it's worth, of a biography of Henry Miller - a writer important to me). Well, maybe not "always", these days. These days, our house is a house of mourning; and the recitation of the Kaddish seems to authenticate that status in a way that is not sanctimonious, but straightforward and natural. Hebrew as the language of mourning. Or say rather, the language of comfort, of fellow-feeling. Of communion. But what do I

know of Hebrew, really? Next to nothing - only the few words that Julie has taught me. Some Jew I am. Though what there is of Jew in me responds when she says the prayer for the dead. But that response may be more to Julie than to the prayer - and especially to the combination of the two: Julie saying the prayer.

My father, a Jewish atheist, asked that the Kaddish be said at his memorial service, held in the backyard of the house in Pacific Palisades; and so it was. I think that when my time comes, I will ask for the same. Though I am not quite an atheist - I am too superstitious for that - it is not because of any vestige of belief that I would want the Kaddish. It is simply for the solemnity and dignity of the ancient words I do not understand. At least not on a literal level - not a word do I understand, except for the final "amen". But on a figurative level, perhaps, I have an inkling of what the words are saying: that it is indeed better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of mirth.

But why? Julie and I were talking about this the other day, and she said she thought it was maybe because of comfort - the ability to give comfort to those in the house of mourning. The comfort of remembrance. In the face of loss, remembrance. Remembrance is the redeemer. It giveth

us back, after a fashion rich and strange, what we have lost. A person, a childhood, or even just a moment. The remembrance of things and people past is all that is left of them after they are gone. It is the ultimate form of "juice".

Proust also said, "The true paradises are the paradises we have lost." But the paradise inhabited by Ruthie and Diane and the child that was Zack is nothing divine. It is the paradise of the irrecoverable. I am reminded of something Diane's father Bud - a diabetic who died at 66, immediately after heart-valve surgery - used to say: "Nothing is irrevocable." To which Hemingway, speaking from the school of hard realism, would have replied, "Isn't it pretty to think so?" But I want to believe with Bud here. His optimistic affirmation speaks to a faith in what we would call, these days, "agency": the belief that we have the power to reverse, or at least redeem, in part, the damage we have done, the trouble we have caused. I don't think Bud was speaking of death, or of the laws of physics or biology, when he made his statement. I think he was speaking of what Emerson called "compensation": the idea that nothing is entirely lost without something else being gained. A kind of spiritual First Law of Thermodynamics. (Though recently, as I

understand it, that law is being challenged on the quantum and cosmic levels.) Nothing that we do, none of our actions, is irrevocable, though so many things - people, places, moments - are irrecoverable. Proust's paradise was memory - a grand, expansive domain. I would settle for a much smaller plot, the size of a child's bedroom in East Hollywood. Julie's place is smaller still: a triptych of snapshots on the dining-room table, lit by the candles of remembrance.