

Blue Nights
Joan Didion

A wonderful expression of the closing days of a very full life

Blue Nights are those gorgeous long evenings of summer when, long after the sky and sun has gone down, the sky retains a transcendent purple hue, something that Vincent van Gogh might have painted. Joan Didion expresses it better on the opening page; I use my own words only to be unique.

Didion has had a charmed life. She asks herself in the book whether to call it privileged. In terms of absolute wealth, a plethora of servants, and mansions scattered throughout the world she concludes that she has not. Nevertheless, in the wealth of names she can drop, acquaintances she has made in the Hollywood scene, the literary scene, and the intellectual scene, she has been privileged to be among the best, or perhaps one might say, the most celebrated personalities of her era.

Her description of a childhood resonated with me. She was independent; we California children of the era were independent. We were allowed to do almost anything we wanted, both out of our parents' sense that taking risks was an essential part of accruing the life's experience that you needed to be an adult, and the fact that they were too busy with important things such as winning the war to spend every moment engaged as "helicopter parents."

Didion describes the transformation from a free, unfettered, experiential childhood to the cloistered, protective childhoods of today. A telling event was the kidnap murder molestation of Stephanie Bryan in the 1950s. The Hearst newspapers exploited it to sell millions of copies. Every mother's heart was gripped with fear, and they thenceforth held tighter on to their offspring. The tragic loss to the Bryan family was magnified by the publicity. I was a schoolmate of Bryan's sister, who struggled mightily to live a normal life. At any rate, Didion survived in adventuresome childhood that would have created 1000 panics in the life of any modern mother, and no doubt grew up the better and the stronger for it. Her parents had faith that she had the wits to survive, and she did.

Didion has suffered the loss of her child, Quintana Roo, her husband John Gregory Dunne, her good friend Natasha Richardson, and many other people close to her. Of course, having a wide circle of friends and growing older – she will celebrate her 77th birthday in December – exposes a person to the risk of loss. Nevertheless, Didion's losses seem to be out of proportion, unjust. They are the flip side to the charmed life that she led.

Didion has written quite a bit about her life and other essays. This book provides only vignettes, but they are delicious. Summers in St. Tropez,, room service in the best hotels throughout the world, Malibu, Topanga Canyon, and luxury apartments in New York. She recites the names of the subtropical flowers that adorned her Southern California homes, names that certainly few of the citizens who admire them on the streets could identify if called upon. She talks about her daughter's upbringing. Whether or not one would call it privileged, Quintana attended the best schools and palled around with the best of

friends. She was exposed at an early age not only to life's luxuries, but to a broad palette of intellectual and artistic tastes. At an elementary school age she was not a mere movie fan, but a movie critic.

Didion describes at some length the adoption process and the identity questions which never resolved themselves. Is this really my child? Is this really my mother? Would this mother abandon me as that my other mother did? Didion poses these questions well, laying out all of the issues but never even attempting to resolve them. They cannot be resolved.

Although Quintana died at a young age, and was afflicted by some sort of a psychological or neurological disorder which could never be properly identified, she has to have been satisfying to her mother. She succeeded in, if not a literary career, at least a career in letters as a magazine editor. Adoptive children are a mixed bag, and she must count herself lucky that she got one with the intellectual ability to achieve some success in her mother and father's arenas.

The tragedies of Didion's life brought her in contact with more doctors, physical and psychological, than any person would wish to encounter in a lifetime. The tragedy of life is that these doctors can seldom even agree on a diagnosis, much less a course of action, for any but the most self-evident maladies. Didion indicates that she did what we all do. Recognize that they are only guessing, that they are probably wrong, and follow their advice willy-nilly. As she comes to grips with her own frailties, her own mortality, she has no better prescription than to follow the doctor's advice, but she is too worldly wise to invest a lot of faith in their proclamations. She is advancing to her own meeting with her maker, to her own inscription on the wall of the Cathedral in New York City, with an unclouded understanding of the uncertainty of her own path and that of all mankind, but with no doubt as to where it all ends.

This is a beautifully written, touching biography or autobiography, wonderfully excerpting the most delicate and touching points to tell a beautiful story.