

Hounds of Grief

By Allan Gardner

Written to accompany Jack Kennedy's solo exhibition *Social Agony Conscious Healing* at Forth.

Someone once gave me the advice to ask people whether they like the Psychedelic Furs because at some point in the not-so-distant future, one of them will die and when they do die, everyone will pretend to have loved the Psychedelic Furs. They recommended I keep a note of who likes the band and who doesn't as a means of outing the fake mourners, the hounds of grief. It's a strange thing, Celebrity Death, because it's one of the only types of mortality over which we are comfortable taking ownership. When Robin Williams died, everyone became a psychologist for the day, discussing the tragedy behind his eyes even in comedic roles, how One Hour Photo proved that he had a dark side or the poignant suggestion that comedians are in fact not always necessarily the happiest people (gasps). Can you imagine a childhood friend calling to tell you that their Mother committed suicide for you to respond with: "*Yeah mate, makes sense, I could always see a deep sadness in her when she made us fish fingers after school*"? Probably not, no.

In your late twenties, a lot of couples seem to break up. Relationships once thought to be eternal splinter and crack and they all get drunk in the same bars at the weekend and fuck each other's friends in some sort of bizarre social hamster pile, decimating social groups and creating a slew of awkward experiences centred around who can and cannot attend a given event. Born-again teenagers pop on the stabilisers and make their way out into the world, forcing their friends and families to play along with the notion that they truly are the star of their own movie (pukes).

Your recently single friends are sort of like Dead Celebrities. By becoming celebrities, they are no longer human, stripped of their right to a complexity of being, unburdened of nuance by virtue of their ability to live the dream of the common person. To seemingly exist beyond the ever-widening jaws of office based underemployment is to exist outside of reality and with that comes an altered perception by members of the public.

Similarly, by maintaining relationships long enough to accrue things like sofas, garden furniture and shared debt, they (we?) kind of become like your (our?) parents. Stories of nightmare housemates stealing your office chair, setting it on fire and pissing it out tend to occur less frequently when one moves in with their partner and because of that (minor) uptick in living standards, our friends in relationships begin to somewhat resemble our parents. They have foregone the hedonistic wonderland of dating apps and dodgy pills in favour of Sundays at Ikea and very serious discussions about towels and in doing so have ceased to exist within the fabric of reality, instead inhabiting a soft play area where brunch is real and dogs wear coats at all times - until it all falls apart.

We treat Celebrity Death and the breakups of friends in the same way, an initial veneer of sadness followed by a salivating hunger for the gorey details. We want to see exactly what went

wrong, to get under the bonnet, poke around in the debris of someone else's life and gawp at it all under reality's harsh, unforgiving light.

I remember I was driving to school, with my mum and it came across the radio. I was too young to understand the gravity of it all, but I knew who it was straight away, Uncle Buck.

Man I loved that guy and I never met him, that's when you know he was larger than life and still in my thoughts today.

RIP John Candy.

Mark

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This comment was left on *Findadeath*, a website cataloguing Celebrity Deaths alphabetically and by year, as well as producing a podcast discussing specific deaths and circumstances. In their summary of John Candy's death, they talk about his obesity, use of cocaine and alcoholic tendencies as well as stating that his wife "begged" that an autopsy not be conducted. The implication left hanging, even decades later, being that Candy's demise came as a result of his inability to moderate, his lack of willpower when faced with the opportunities to indulge brought on by celebrity status. Even under the guise of mourning, the viewer is vindicated, their lack of access to the lifestyle justified by the fact that they are alive and Candy is not. We allow him to become a metaphor, an *Icarus* story, a deviant of the commandments and a struck down sinner - even one we admire - and this circumstance is far from unique.

TMZ immediately leaked photographs of Whitney Houston's hotel room following her death in 2012, accompanied by speculation and subsequent confirmation of the role that drugs played. These images weren't shocking, without their connection to Houston, they would have been entirely banal - in fact, the most significant alteration to public perception around the actress and singer wouldn't come until 2018, when Kanye West paid \$85,000 to use an image of her bathroom for Pusha T's *Daytona*. The photo comes from a set purportedly taken in 2006 following a heavy session at the Atlanta home she shared with Bobby Brown but has become entwined with the story of her death, coming up more frequently than photos of the hotel room in which she actually spent her last night.

The reality of this situation is that by her death, it's likely that Houston was using drugs nowhere near as heavily as when the 2006 photographs were taken, although she may not have been of sound mind. However the impact of those bathroom pictures is so significant, it moves the dial on reality and places Houston's tragic death within the visual context of those infamous pictures. In essence, we want her to have died there because that is the most beautiful tragedy. To go from the height of celebrity and then die in a crack den satiates our lust, we'd have seen the people who achieve our dreams punished for it.

If someone accused you of enjoying your friends' pain following a breakup, you'd surely be offended - yet you (we) still sit in the pub and talk about it, just as sure as everyone wanted to see the photos of Whitney Houston's bathroom. It paints a small picture of human beings living in reality, weak and crooked, seeking fulfilment through the failure of others. The distance we

put between ourselves and media figures is what allows us to treat their deaths as entertainment, to drop them into the stream of content alongside reality TV and football and graphic depictions of war in countries we consider distant from our own - another plane of reality. Our resentment leaks out, staining the sofas and barstools we observe from, coating the world in a film of miserable secretion. Our joy sits hand in hand with the pain of others, our currency for which remains ignorance.