

doll hospital

ISSUE 5



DEAD LIKE KURT: SURVIVING THE CELEBRITY SUICIDE

**“AT 27, KURT COBAIN WANTED TO DISAPPEAR, TO ERASE
HIMSELF, TO BECOME NOTHING.
THAT HIS SUICIDE SO UTTERLY LACKED AMBIVALENCE IS ITS
MOST TERRIFYING ASPECT.
IT ALL COMES DOWN TO A STILLNESS AT THE END OF A LONG
CHAOS:
A YOUNG MAN SITTING ALONE IN A ROOM, GETTING HIGH,
WRITING HIS GOODBYES,
PULLING A TRIGGER, YOU CAN IMAGINE THE SILENCE
SHATTERING AND THEN COLLECTING ITSELF,
IN THE WAY WATER BREAKS FOR AND THEN ENVELOPS A DIVER,
ABSORBING FOREVER THE LIFE OF KURT COBAIN.”**

- ANTHONY DECURTIS, ROLLING STONE

I'd like to be an enfant terrible, but I have no friends, and I do drugs in my room, and not at parties, like the normal people do. I do not want to be a female reader of male greats, a female writer of male greats, and even though all I do is just get raped, I don't want to smack down a c bomb in a sentence like a dog stretching out for approval. I'm a dumb bitch, getting chased out of art house cinemas and feminist photography talks. I say I'm a genius because I'm deluded, but the places that like smart people don't like me, and a lady said she'd scalp me if I fiddled on my phone during her short film screening, the bright light rectangle eclipsing the velvet curtains and Guardian readers. I cried and left. Thin skinned and unwanted I was asked to leave. I made a scene while the silent films sang.

Every time I leave the house it always goes so badly.

I go see a Nirvana tribute band with my best friend. We wear plaid shirts with an irritating irony, playing at an edgelord act neither of us can pull off too well, joke about acting like it's the real Nirvana and actually Kurt never died and is performing in Bristol pubs and we're going to freak out and be like 'holy shit Kurt's alive!!' like he's Jesus and its nearly Easter anyway so that works, kinda, and how we should a make a movie about an aging Nirvana tribute, following the Kurt tribute and how his kids hate him and he's clinging on to the nineties, like how Mickey Rourke in 'The Wrestler' is clinging on to the eighties. We get ID-ed even though we're 25, a sign of our immaturity, perhaps. I'm still using my provisional license with its mad-eyed Manson stare as I never learnt to drive. We ignore the dads and daughters on wholesome days out who are trying to achieve something different to whatever the hell we're trying to do. Fake Dave Grohl leaves half way through to pee and we're pretty sure Fake Krist Novoselic wants to leave too. "How many songs did Nirvana have?," he pleads to Fake Kurt, who looks nothing like Actual Kurt, like we at least wanted him to try, then fail. Maybe have a blonde wig that would fall off half way through, a hokey American accent that breaks and burns, but his hair is short and his accent is Northern English not North American and where's the fun in that? "We're under no illusion that we're the real Nirvana", Fake Kurt sighs. Possibly in response to an increasingly violent crowd. Maybe they really did think they were seeing the real Nirvana. People get thrown out, get rowdy, get mad. Fake Dave is gone by now and some kid is playing the drums instead, Fake Krist must have left too, some punk guy from the audience takes his place,

crowd surfing over the barrier and picking up his bass. Fake Kurt is the only one left. His mic has been turned off but he's saying something about rock n roll like it's Reading 1992. We're obviously loving it and ask a bouncer if all tribute acts turn out this lively and he looks at us like we're crazy and we are.

They didn't even play 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' but we leave happy that we witnessed something disintegrate so spectacularly.

It is uncomfortable to romanticise a terrible thing, an obligatory small print to state the inappropriate impact of creating myths and magic out of the devastation of others, but it is also important to admit that alongside shot gun suicides and knife blunts to the heart that being alive can also be the terrible thing. That trying hard can be the awful thing, that washing daily can be dirty, that sobriety is a sort of purgatory and that some people just aren't going to be very happy however hard they try.

I'm so happy cause today

I found my friends

They're in my head.

There is a lie, a kind lie, a lie told in a gentle voice on bent knees to the ugly, unpopular ones that if they consume enough culture they will eventually be loveable, likeable. That you can enter the cinema through the side door if you can't get in at the front without a member card. That if you do your cultural homework during your teen years you will emerge out the other side as an engaging adult. But adolescence never meant very much to me, I'd already lost my innocence on a number you count on one hand. I was an aged child with a ten-thousand-yard stare, before becoming a childish adult, stunted by a trauma I was too messy to manage.

It's amazing how a single song can contain these impulses, how the rhythm of suicide matches the receptive riffs of pop punk, nu metal, grunge, all those maligned genres, making 'Adam's Song' a perfectly shaped bowl to pour your suicidal ideation into. Its high-pitched impotence, domestic banality and Nevermind references trace a map of masculinity to attach myself onto. In movies, they always show a person's suicide against a repeated record, like when Brittany Murphy in 'Girl Interrupted' is found dead, 'End of the World' by Skeeter Davis plays on loop. In real life, this happens too. I wanted to die with Tom Hopper in my ear, and was so knocked back to realise that in 2000, another young man had died with Blink 182 on repeat, using the same method I had planned.

It would be nice to shut up about suicide, to outgrow Nirvana, not to wallow, to create wholesome work, to have optimism to give. To be the kind of personfucking dense enough to refer to the body of work Chester Bennington so carefully created as ‘teen angst’, like he wasn’t a CSA survivor too, like Elliot Smith wasn’t too, like that doesn’t leave you, like Chester didn’t die by suicide at the age of 41 and not 14. Like we just write about killing ourselves because we think it’s fun and not because we’re hurting.

The first thing you learn when you start reading about Sylvia
Plath is that she killed herself when she was 30 years old.
If she had lived longer, would she have written something
completely different from *The Bell Jar*—something
more optimistic?

Stephanie Kuehnert, *27 Club*, *Rookie Magazine*, August 2013

Some people want to die, and need to talk about it. Some people need to find others who feel that way too, imperfectly engaging with an iconography of mental illness that, though poisoned by capitalist profit and a whitewashed landscape of rugged masculinity, does at least offer a sign that their internal suffering — so exhausting and isolating — exists beyond them. Am I even allowed to say such things? Can we find a space between not idealising, enabling and encouraging self-destruction and openly admitting that some of us really want to die the majority of the time? And not because we’ve been duped by movie montages but because mental illness is real, the world is cruel and interpersonal violence is killing us.

Meet Lil Peep, The Kurt Cobain of modern rap
/ Farewell to rapper Lil Peep, Kurt Cobain of
generation Z.

Though I do circle around suicide in both my life and writing, I do not feel that the act of representing one’s (difficult) life is glorifying any kind of certain death. If anything, it’s keeping me here.

I didn’t necessarily care about the dying young part,
but I naïvely believed that living fast was a necessity for making art.
People like Courtney, Kurt, the Beats, Hunter S. Thompson,
and everyone else I was reading and listening to at the time
seemed to bear this out. I needed experiences to write about,

and they had to be outrageous to be interesting.

Being healthy meant being 'normal,'

and I'd bought into the myth that 'normal' people couldn't be creative.

Stephanie Kuehnert, 27 Club, Rookie Magazine, August 2013

But I am bedridden and batshit crazy and healthy is not an option, even though I'm being a good girl and taking my pills and going to appointments and saying earnest things to doctors that smack of desperation like, "hey at one point does it get better? What do I need to do? I'm doing mental illness right now? Right?" But this is returned as a wrong-addressed parcel and I am informed that some folks cycle into suicide like the seasons. That I just need to accept that I want to kill myself sometimes, that death will visit me every few months, a smiling Groke, till she slides off with a few dead plants but no mortal damage.

Kurt and Elliot and David and Ernest. Good working-class names, for good working-class deaths, the kind you need to use your hands for. Practical, like making a chair, taking a carpentry course, chopping wood, shooting game. An object fetish for the options of one's execution, handed over to the consumer repackaged and replicated like an Ikea flatpack.

But suicides have a special language.

Like carpenters they want to know which tools.

They never ask why build.

Anne Sexton, *Wanting to Die*

A fetish for the impact of that object in crime scene photos of corners of the body that touched the object that would leave you feeling grubby. White socks and blue jeans and arm hair and trainers and a medical tag and a K records tattoo. Do we consume images of death to feel a closer proximity to our own? Perhaps this is how we can understand the (unquestionably grotesque) impulse to buy, wear and Instagram a t-shirt with Kurt Cobain's suicide note printed on its chest. (Yes, this did actually happen, I know, I know.)

Lil Peep's Online Store Sells Out Hours After
Death. Lil Peep Posthumous Merchandise
Line Announced Less Than 2 Weeks After
Rapper's Death.

Of course, this monetization of personal tragedy is fucked up, of course, of course, of course. But talks of ‘glamorization’ and ‘romanticization’ do not answer the question of why the commodification and consumption of such suicide objects and events are happening. Who is wearing such items? And why?

Okay, so I turned twelve in September 1994.

Being a teenybopper tween during that era was pret-ty dark. The cutest rock star, Kurt Cobain, shot himself in the head, and my friends and I were wildly interested in this. How could we not be? Murdering your life had officially gone pop! Courtney Love was reading Kurt’s suicide note on loud speaker on MTV. “I HATE MYSELF AND WANT TO DIE” posters were stocked at the mall.

I bought one! Kurt was wearing green Converse One Star sneakers in the suicide photos, so I bought green Converse One Star sneakers-and so did my friend Lauren. And

then so did my friend Samara!

Cat Marnell, *How to Murder Your Life*

We love to shame these people, especially young women, the girls who wish they were ‘Dead like Kurt’, who line up their Amys and Janises and Jimis like American Girl dolls, to coax them to say these unspoken things, to wear these subjects on their chest, only so we can scold them for it. As if they are the ones who have produced this peculiar cultural sign making of suffering, this hostile world that is nudging young people ever closer to their own demise. I may not want green sneakers or a suicide shirt, but I do want to be dead like Kurt. I am obsessed with guns. Shotguns that sleep in sock like coverings like sleeping bags, handguns in tin coffins in attic openings, YouTube cowboys killing tin cans in their backyard. I am an angry young man at the end of my days, every day. And the hypermasculine rock star death contains my worst impulses, my worst selves, makes me realize that if I was the man I would like to be, with the money and freedom, I would be living in isolation in some filthy place, because if those genie wishes came true I would be able to go back to the substance abuse and the capped life expectancy unchallenged.

Like Ernest Hemingway was manly.

The beard and the guns

and the wives
and the little short sentences
He shot himself.
A short sentence.
Anything rather than a long sentence,
a life sentence.
Death sentences are short and very, very manly.
Life sentences aren't.
Ursula K Le Guin, 'Introducing Myself'

I probably shouldn't talk about suicide. After all, I am not a responsible parent, a wellmeaning teacher or a struggling teenager. (Or a writer, or a rock star, or a novelist, or a poet). To claim such a position would be dishonest. I am an irresponsible and isolated trash panda in their mid-twenties wearing an oversized white t-shirt that reads 'cat food' accompanied with an image of a cat made of noodles sitting in a bowl. Not an educator or an artist. This is the question of mournable bodies, a definition tied to the white supremacist fantasy of the productive body, a subject distanced from the social and political realities of the suffering in this world that would cause a person to exit from it. After all, whose absence is worth noting? And why?

I have been actively suicidal since childhood, life has not been good to me, my brain hates me, my body hates me, I keep trying to leave but somehow I am still here, in this terrible place. But why? It is so clearly counterintuitive to live with its stomach ache and sexual violence. My only explanation is that life is poison and I'm an addict. Only a crazy person would want to stay alive and, oh boy, am I crazy!

I'm so crazy I'm in the mental hospital, the embarrassingly in-depth medical report that follows being the closest I'm getting to a New Yorker profile piece. I mumble something about my paranoia and psychosis, experiences that have been identified previously as paranoid schizophrenia. But they ask me more questions, or I answer them differently, I don't know, but I am given a tin foil balloon of pink and silver that reads "Congratulations, it's a cluster B personality disorder!"

This is not to equate my craziness as currency, my suffering as authenticity, my misery for depth, a stance so boldly called out by Aldous Huxley in 'Brave New World':

"But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin."

"In fact," said Mustapha Mond, "you're claiming the right to be unhappy."

"All right then," said the Savage defiantly,

“I’m claiming the right

to be unhappy.”

“Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen to-morrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.” There was a long silence.

“I claim them all,” said the Savage at last.

Mustapha Mond shrugged his shoulders.

“ You’re welcome,” he said.

Aldous Huxley, ‘Brave New World’

Because this is no call to arms, no road map for freedom, ‘John the Savage’, in his self flagellating light house of isolation dies by suicide in the following, and final, chapter. No solution to the capitalist indulgence of positive consumption is offered, no resolution is given. To identify and acknowledge the reality of one’s suffering through an individual martyrdom is no solution. Violent, judgemental and cruel, John is just another Shakespearean tragedy fanboy and Huxley has no time for pretentious, performative nihilism. (We could even read the pairing of the white bread name of ‘John’, with the questionable, colonizing slur of ‘savage’ as a criticism of rugged white masculine individualism, with its colonial fetish for ‘primitivism’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘returning to nature’.) Huxley reminds us it is one thing to recognise that such slings and arrows exist, another to elevate them to the divine. That corny Fight Club nihilism is just as dodgy as aggressive, anti-septic optimism.

Because despite all the Instagram reminders that it’s ‘okay to be sad’ I’m increasingly realising the thing I need to learn is that it’s okay to be happy. And despite my depressive illness I really am an optimistic person, the kind that talks to dogs and points at the moon. And though I slip into suicide episodes every few months despite being on the ‘right’ medication, and receiving the ‘right’ kind of therapy, my greater struggle was the bursts of joy that popped out in the in-betweens. It’s okay to not be okay but it’s also okay to be okay...even for a little bit. And it’s okay to enjoy that okay. Okay?

The first ever Valentine’s day I spent in a relationship and my biggest crisis was whether to share the roses I was given on Instagram! Though I justified this as a sensitivity to others, I realise that this is part of the very same toxic trauma that made me sick in the first place. That I wasn’t ‘allowed’ to be happy, to be loved. To experience such affection was wicked enough but to be publicly admit it was

an abomination. Public self-flagellation is one thing, but public celebration? No way! And I'm sensing that these suspicions sprout from the popular model of social justice that so loves to martyr the already-troubled, and particularly the multiply-marginalised, woman.

I have often felt the call of self-destruction: the temptation to reach into your gut, pull a kidney out, let a thousand strangers touch it with their grubby fingers, then put it back in, knowing that none of those strangers will be around to help you through the subsequent infection. This is the real danger: I'm just another girl, unless I can offer myself as a human sacrifice, or (as is often the case) let myself be offered.

Jude Ellison Sady Doyle, 'Our Fascination with Female Train Wrecks'

Die young stay pretty. Or whatever the quote is. But I'm not pretty to begin with, will be never be pretty, could never be pretty. To reclaim prettiness for the racialised has its virtues, but I am not virtuous and I'm as ugly as they come and not only am I staying ugly, with my hooked nose and wonky spine and scarred skin, I'm staying alive. Stay alive get uglier. Get so ugly! Grow horns and fur and cloven hooves. Grow third eyes and extra limbs and a pointed tail! Grow it all because ugliness has a lust for life that the inherently morbid nature of the beautiful does not. Cat Marnell has lived long enough to publish an autobiography, and even Lana the dead girl, singing to us through a Ouija board of a back catalogue, has a lust for life.

And in this yellow school bus of a life you're stuck next to me! And I'm terrible company. And I'm the girl who tweets about killing herself every seven seconds only to live to be 10 thousand! And we're staying on this bus, and no one's getting famous, and no one's opening a window, let alone getting out, and it's magical and miserable at the same time, to quote Taylor Swift, as hey she's here too! But you're not going to meet her and neither am I! And the wheels on the bus go round and round!

When Fiona Apple sang "I just want to feeeeeelllll evverythinggggg" she didn't just mean the suicidal sucker punches but the good times too, cool bands when you can feel the guitar in the square space between your left nipple and your right, watching a really rad movie for the first time, Autumn, when it's really bright but also really cold...there are so many things... so yes I want to feel everything and I want to stay alive, both during the times it feels like the world is an axe murderer knocking at my door, and when the light is so hazy, and the air is so soft that expressions like 'it felt like a movie' and 'perfect moment' do not go unwarranted.

Like Cassie from Skins so sharply said 'I had to stop before I died, because... otherwise it wasn't fun.' and I need to remember this when both drugs and disordered eating are more appealing. And though I

already held the Neutral Milk Hotel line of ‘always sober/always aching’ as proof of how fucking miserable getting clean is (God I hate that expression! I was never dirty!). Or the fact that I genuinely ranked toxic masculinity masterpiece ‘The Wolf of Wall Street’ as a relatable resource for overcoming addiction:

How’s being sober?

Fucking sucks.

Boring, right?

So boring, I wanna kill myself.

Thanks Leo! And I do wanna kill myself, or get high to forget that I wanna kill myself. And much like Leo’s Jordan I do not want to die sober! But I need to feel this ache, have always needed to, even when it hurts so badly. I’m going to make it through this year if it kills me, and the next and the next, until there are no more years, and no more days, and no more world, and we are just bits of stars, and dinosaur bones, or whatever humans are made of, and I will love you forever. The end.