

# The Mirror of Ourselves

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The subtitle on CNN was suddenly saying Princess Diana dead. And for just an hour or so, it felt like November 1963. "This will be a fixing moment in your lives," I intoned to my two sons (I was thinking, naturally, about her two sons). "You will always remember where you were and who you were with when you heard this news." Princess Diana dead: it seemed brutally inordinate. Because Diana had never been hard news, until then. Diana, in every sense, had always been soft. For once I found myself longing for a euphemism: passed away, perhaps, or succumbed.

A sense of proportion would soon return. Or at least it would in my house. The true comparison, of course, is not with Kennedy but with Kennedy's wife. (And consider the passive figure of Mr. Zapruder, his shutter innocently open on the grassy knoll, as opposed to the figure of Mr. Rat, the paparazzo.) But in the immediate aftermath, one experienced the pity and terror associated with a major loss. You felt stunned from nowhere, as if something had veered in out of your blind spot.

That fatal ride has the quality of nightmare. What was it like, being driven by a vainglorious drunk at an insane velocity in an urban tunnel? With rising claustrophobia, the passenger will sense that a driver's mind is disorganized--that "control" is in the process of being relinquished. And so it was. It makes your shins shudder to imagine the atrocious physics of the impact, as the Mercedes transformed itself into a weapon of blunt force. Next, the swat team of photographers and the final photo shoot. Whether or not the paparazzi helped cause Diana's death, they undoubtedly defiled its setting. They took pictures of the dying woman. How could they? But they did. And now the two sons, the princes, face not only the loss of a loving and lovable mother but also a bereavement uniquely contaminated by the market forces of fame.

Let us for a moment examine the nature of Diana's fame. One might call it a collateral celebrity, because it relied on no discernible contribution (except to the gaiety, and now the grief, of nations). Lady Diana Spencer attracted the love of the introverted heir to the English throne. And that was all. Brightness of eye, whiteness of tooth, a colluding smile, a certain transparency, a vividness, an exposed vulnerability: it was enough for him, and it was enough for us. Madonna sings. Grace Kelly acted. Diana simply breathed. She was a social-page figure who became a cover girl.

One can soberly assert that the Diana saga, in itself, was a nonstory, remorselessly and fanatically annotated by our own projections and desires. Rather, we are the story. Equipped with no talent, Diana evolved into the most celebrated woman on earth. What does that tell us about the third rock from the sun?

She certainly believed she had a talent: a talent for love. She felt she could inspire it, transmit it, increase its general sum. It has been said about her (what hasn't been said about her?) that she adopted various charities as "accessories." But the causes Diana was most strongly identified with--AIDS, hospices, land mines--demanded more than a reflexive commitment. There is no question that she made a difference to the homosexual community, in England and perhaps elsewhere; her support came at a crucial time, in defiance of tabloid opinion as well as royal prudence. Yet the fact remains that Diana was far less dedicated than, for instance, her onetime sister-in-law, Princess Anne, whose want of looks long ago consigned her to near total obscurity. Let's face it: we're a planet of looks snobs.

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On the larger scale, Diana's contribution to history is both paradoxical and inadvertent. She will go down as the chief saboteur of the monarchy. It wasn't just the divorce, the tell-all boyfriend, the married rugby star. She introduced an informality, a candid modernity, into a system that could offer no resistance to it; she had a beauty in her life that made them ugly.

Above all she will be remembered as a phenomenon of pure stardom. Her death was a terrible metaphor for that condition. She takes her place, among the broken glass and crushed metal, in the iconography of the crash, alongside James Dean, Jayne Mansfield and Princess Grace. These other victims, however, died unpursued. They weren't fleeing the pointed end of their own celebrity: men on motorcycles with computerized cameras and satellite-linked mobile phones. The paparazzi are the high-tech dogs of fame. But it must be admitted that we sent them into that tunnel, to nourish our own mysterious needs.