

The Festivities of Dying

Midnight on Sunset Boulevard, the smug eyes of Bel-Air on the luminous sky and Hollywood sign, its latent summer heat rolling downhill like shit. You are among the eyeless, watching elsewhere. The gilded ends of velvet stanchions, rope velour to match the red carpet laid on asphalt for miles, you'd think, and cop cars pivoting traffic since 5am, black and white limos doubling down the side streets now, flashing lights of silver and gold from spotlights of unknown heights, camera flashes sharper than classy perfume and hastily rolled joints, the jittery monologues of naïve postgrads: "Reporting live from LA, we're just minutes away from this special, tragic event." Celebrity interviews, tear-proof mascara for laughing too hard, and a line of bodies to a newly built ballroom ahead, the way for which was plowed by demolition crews sinking a century-old theatre. You're almost there.

The easel-poised posters on either side of the doors display a shot from the Socialite's most recent photoshoot with Vogue and watermarked below her sneer in Comic Sans: "Backstage Passes \$300" and in italics, "Have the Time of Your Life by Celebrating Hers." Warnings beneath, "No Weeping Allowed," and "Black Clothing Strictly Prohibited." Repeated on the borders in bold, "DEATH OF A SOCIALITE."

The bouncer filtering out non-designer outfits and unfortunate skincare routines, his beady eyes on the search for press passes or tips from Benjamin Franklin. There on the corner as you pass, B-class social media influencers partying in denial, e-boys on state-wide tours, YouTube vloggers, hit Tik Tok stars pressing Record, your hunched shoulder in their background now vanishing into the venue.

Inside, the red carpet continues past the dancefloor until it reaches centerstage, where they're displaying the casket. A cape of roses wraps around, and multicolored flares burn at each

edge. There's no body inside; the Family set her in the photobooth, and they congregate past the bar and lounge to your left, between the chocolate fountains, embracing the singers and actresses who ever paid The Socialite a good public feud. Martinis and beer ensnare the high-ceilinged atmosphere, and collected clouds of smoke surround you, laced with formaldehyde. The disco ball descends and "Celebrate Good Times" plays out in delirious trap distortion through the mammoth speakers, strippers climbing poles painted ivory.

The funeral's in full swing.

"Gastby, eat your heart out!" a daytime talk show host calls from behind, and you sidestep a wave of guests pouring passed. Most go first to the Family's cosmetics launch for the new fall collection, featuring the Limited Edition *Grief* Palette.

Gossip peppers the air. "I heard she OD'd on crack from the same dealer they booked for this party."

"She injected her breasts with concrete, and they tore down through her lungs during sex. The video's up everywhere."

"No, no, that's fake. She fell off the Golden Gate running from the paparazzi. Like Princess Diana but way more pathetic."

The voices follow you, even in the back corner where merchandise is sold on long tables. Chocolate bars with her face on the wrapper, shirts that promise "Deader Than Ever," and pop sockets flaunting glitter crossbones big enough for the iPhone XXX.

The saleswoman says, "It's just like her wedding last year, except you can't divorce the Grim Reaper after eight months."

Next to you, a runway model purrs, “She’s gone for good. Gonna rot down to rivers of Botox and radioactive fingernails. And eventually her family’s ghosts will spend eternity reciting lines from that goddamn reality tv show of theirs.” The women cackle.

An old man walking by says, “When you laugh at someone’s pain, you’re dying inside,” and the model calls back, “No one’s in pain here, grandpa,” but he has vanished into the mob, and you wonder if he was real or just a manifestation of yearning.

A white projector screen comes down the back wall. You shuffle toward the center of the ballroom. A handsome man sees you frowning. “It’s not as cruel as you think. It’s a wise thing, this party. Life’s too short to cry like a dummy. This is better, it’s deep. It’s fun! We’re alive, let’s eat cake and laugh. You know? Haven’t you ever celebrated the Day of the Dead? It’s not a cruel thing. It’s the only thing we *can* do. Don’t try to convince me you know what death is, what it’s made of, what it calls for. You may convince *yourself* you know, but not me. I know. I laugh at the festivities.”

Maybe you scream, or maybe you run, or maybe you rock along until the sun rises. Instead you smile, wait for him to stroll away confused, and then you’re alone amidst the chaos and you ask yourself, “Are we celebrating death or life?” You wish to leave, but there is no good reason to, and the eulogy is just beginning.

The Socialite’s mom stands tall in her white pantsuit behind a microphone beside the casket. She’s motioning, black bangs bouncing, to a teenage boy in the photobooth. “No need to bring it back, you keep it, really, yes, you pretty little thing. Hardly needed up here, really, what use would *that* be? Keep it, keep it!” The music stops, the strobe lights halt, and a rosy spotlight washes over her and the echoing, sobering giggles on her puffy lips. The masses halt as well, but

now their whispers sizzle as loud as daylight, hushing in a moment with mere pitchy embarrassment on the tail ends of their fading syllables. All eyes fall to her.

“We’re so glad everyone is here!” Cheers and cheers. “My beautiful, talented baby would be ecstatic knowing everything she’d built has accumulated to *this!*” She spreads her arms grandly, absorbing the expanses of the ballroom. “My daughter may have been young, but her life was truly a perfection, so why make the funeral any different?” A useless pause. “I can’t see any better way to bring this party to its peak than with a special surprise.” The projector screen lights up red. “Introducing the official trailer for *The Family*, Season 23. Tune in Sundays at 9.”

The video plays flashes of familiar faces and catfights, hints of selfie tutorials, proposals and breakups, Bahama vacations: gothic dramas morphed into roars of anguish, the modern American Dream. “Want to find out how she *really* died?” the narrator booms. “It’s all in *The Family*, premiering this fall.” The screen glows, *#howthesocialitereallydied*, and then goes dark.

The spotlights shut off when you realize the eulogist is already gone, and for a moment you wonder if the music will start back up, if the strobe lights will flicker to life, or if ghosts will well up and stalk the dancefloor to reclaim their fame for one final night.

The party does resume after all, louder and loftier, each guest wasted and candid, the Family on their way out for a flight to New York, where the satellite event is seething. Next to you, a man you’ve only possibly met before asks, “Had enough? Wanna ditch this place, get a drink someplace quieter?”

And you think, *The night’s forever young*, as a limp bodysurfer floats your way, raging high above the lowly sea salt waters of sweating bodies, and a foul odor assaults your nose, ripe with rot, though not far fouler than the rest of this decaying bunch, and you realize who it is

they're carrying above their heads as jesters would their queen atop her throne of lies, and now the world is screaming with its laughter.