

A GRIEF OBSERVED

Michelle Witton

Sunday mornings in Willesden Green were usually quiet. Sunday mornings were a good time to call home. 9 am, Sunday 31st August, with early autumn sun streaming in through my bedroom window, I called Mary, a friend from University.

It was a warm, but subdued, call. After we'd exchanged recent news, Mary paused.

'I already know' she said, 'it's been all over the news.'

'Know what?' I replied.

'About Diana being killed...I thought that was why you called, to tell me?'

'No. What... who's died?'

'The Princess of Wales – there was a car crash last night your time in Paris – she was killed. Dodi Al Fayed too.'

'Hell...I had no idea. It's still early morning here. I've just got up. I haven't listened to the news yet.'

'Yes – it doesn't seem real. They say her car was speeding to get away from reporters and crashed.'

We talked a little more, both of us too stunned to say anything of consequence, and hung up. I ran through to the lounge and turned on the television. There was no need to flick through the channels because the news was the same on each one. Blurry, hand-held footage shot the previous night, red and yellow lights of emergency vehicles surrounding what could barely be made out to be the remains of a car wreck. The blinding flashes of a myriad of paparazzi cameras, speeding police motorcycles, the cavernous mouth of an underground tunnel.

What I remember most about that day is its stillness. There was no sound of passing cars, no one walked along our road. It was as if the normal rites of a London Sunday had been immediately suspended.

As the grainy footage of the ambulances, police cars and car wreck were replayed and replayed, in my mind I was watching another broadcast – though this time it was one that I'd seen years ago in Australia, when I was at high school. July 28th 1981, the day before Lady Diana's wedding, everyone at school was excited – we were all going to stay up late to watch the royal wedding broadcast from England. All the Sydney papers were full of pictures of Charles and Diana's courtship – Diana as a kindergarten teacher, a child on one hip and sun streaming through her thin, diaphanous skirt, in a picture for which she'd posed when far less wary of paparazzi ruses, Charles and Diana strolling arm in arm at Highgrove when they announced

their engagement, Diana's bright blue eyes shyly peeking up from under her blonde fringe as she presenting her brilliant engagement ring to the world. 'Charlie's getting married at last, to a pretty girl without a past. 'Er Majesty's so happy, the Duke's a happy chappy – cause Charlie's getting married at last' played on all the radio stations. People in England were having street parties. On the train home from school there was excitement in the air as office workers and students headed home to watch the royal wedding.

My whole family sat up to watch the wedding. My brother and I watched it in our pyjamas, curled up on the carpet in front of the television. My mother and I gasped in delight as Diana stepped from the golden wedding coach at St Paul's Cathedral in her gorgeous Emanuel wedding dress, its 25-foot train billowing behind. It was the most beautiful dress I'd ever seen. I remember watching the shots from overhead as Diana walked, for what seemed like ages, up the Cathedral's aisle. Though we could see little of Diana's face beneath her white veil during the service, but she seemed very nervous. My family and I laughed – much more in sympathy than in jest – when she stumbled over Charles's name during her vows. I thought how nervous I would be too, if all the world were watching. The wedding coverage went on into the early hours of the Sydney morning. New Idea, Woman's Day and Woman's Weekly were relieved of writing about anything but royal wedding for months to follow.

'In the early hours of the morning' intoned BBC news presenter, Sir Trevor McDonald, 'Diana, Princess of Wales and Dodi Al Fayed were killed when the car in which they were travelled collided at high speed into the wall of a tunnel in Paris. Condolences to Prince Charles and the royal family have been received by the Palace from world leaders. England awoke today to the news of the death of its fairytale princess.'

I stayed inside watching the news as updated reports gradually pieced together the events of the previous night. On hearing that Diana had not been wearing her seatbelt at the time of the crash I felt a violent rush of anger. How often had I, as a child, been told to wear my seatbelt! If she'd *only* worn her seatbelt! The futility of it all was overwhelming. In the mid afternoon a radio bulletin reported that people were laying flowers in front of Buckingham Palace. I grabbed my purse, locked the door and walked to the tube station. I was only thing moving in the surrounding streets. Even the birds were silent.

The flower shop at the tube station was still open. I bought what I thought was nicest of the flowers they had left, a bouquet of pink and white carnations and baby's breath. There were only two other people in my carriage on the tube, one of whom also carried flowers. There was an unspoken understanding where we were going, though

even with a common purpose, neither of us was willing, or able, to speak of it. The flowers in my lap, I caught the Jubilee Line to Green Park.

I didn't think much about going to the Palace. I was numb and disbelieving. Green Park is an expanse of parkland, sloping gently downhill from Piccadilly and Mayfair to Buckingham Palace. It was dusk and I took one of the asphalt paths through the green. A roundabout marks the junction of the Mall, St James's Park and Green Park. The roadway in front of the Palace was gradually filling with others drawn towards its gates. People moved slowly. Many sat on steps of the Queen Victoria Memorial in the middle of the roundabout silently looking towards the Palace. The long white curtains of the Palace windows were drawn closed. It was a house drawn in to silence. I looked at its vacant wide front balcony and, in my mind's eye, saw the newly married Charles and Diana waving from the same balcony on their wedding day, the deafening cheer of the crowd as they kissed. What I remember most vividly though about that later evening is the sky. It was an early evening sky of light blue and of high pink clouds, fringed with gold. I stood, looking up through the tall wrought-iron Palace gates, watching the pink clouds race across the sky, disappearing behind the Palace.

Before the Palace gates, stood waist high barricades. A few people sidled through them to the closed gates to read the small, simple black-framed sign announcing Diana's death. Beyond the gates, in the wide white gravel and sand forecourt, the Palace guards stood to attention at their sentry positions. People had begun to lay bouquets of flowers, cards and soft toys in a line in front of the barricades, though in coming days these simple offerings were to multiply to literal mountains of tributes piled at the gates. I laid my bouquet on the asphalt next to a guttering candle and walked to the left of the Palace gates, pausing to read others' cards and messages. 'You are the Queen of our Hearts' on a heart-shaped card, left over from the previous Valentine's card, 'Thank you for the goodness you brought to the world. You are with the angels', 'In your passing, may you now find peace and true love'. A middle-aged lady to my right was crying softly, comforted by her daughter.

Though the response to Diana's death on that first day was expressed by the silence, the following day and succeeding months saw the expression of Britain's overwhelming national grief. Though the media coverage was unrelenting, more telling however were individual expressions of loss, as people of all ages, classes and race queued for hours, sometimes overnight, to write their own personal tributes in the books of condolence opened at St, James's Palace. Over 175,000 letters and 150,000 cards were received by Kensington Palace and 200,000 letters at St. James's Palace.

The death of Diana at 36, so young and full of promise cut through the waking dream of our own immortality. In her death we confronted the fragility of our own existence. The shock of her death affected my friends and relatives in Australia no less keenly than those in England. However, the grief expressed in Britain might be likened to the impact felt at being at centre of a bomb blast. In 1996, when the Princess decided to scale down her charity work, more than 100 organisations were named as recipients of her attention and backing. Through her work for children's hospitals, cancer causes, arts foundations and homeless shelters Diana had affected the lives of many. In the months following her death, a frequent topic of conversation were people's experiences of having met Diana through her work. For the two months that followed London was a quiet city – numb, subdued and withdrawn.

That Britain's grief at Diana's passing was so overwhelming reflects that Diana and the influence of her work had reached different sections of Britain's diverse population. To the young Diana was the kindly princess who loved children and had visited many playgroups, schools and hospitals. To young women she was a contemporary with groundbreaking fashion sense and an inspiring love of life.

Diana's personal life reflected the struggle of balancing work and family life, of battling with depression, the pain of divorce - experiences with which many women of her generation could identify. To older women Diana was a sister or daughter-figure. To men, she was a rare and natural beauty. And despite whatever the reality may've been of Diana's personal life, she was the freshest, most vibrant influence to impact upon the British monarchy for decades.

The young and old of all races and creeds had been drawn closer to the royal family by the broad reach of Diana's work and were united in mourning her passing. Diana's youthful sense of fun and courting of the media was initially an affront to a stayed and emotionally distant monarchy. Her death and the public's recriminations against the royal family for Diana's perceived mistreatment at their hands, brought the Palace to confront the extent to which the monarchy had distanced itself from its people.

My favourite memory of Diana is a clip from news footage. Having not seen William and Harry for weeks, Diana is reunited with the princes aboard the Britannia. On catching sight of William and Harry on deck, Diana gasps with joy, flings open her arms and rushes towards them, gathering her sons in her arms. Diana's passing was a loss for the world but, most significantly, it was a loss for two young boys.

Saturday 6th September 1997, I spent the day of Diana's funeral with friends, watching the funeral service together. It was a grey day of low cloud and drizzling rain. National grief perhaps reached its apogee as the funeral cortège approached Westminster Abbey, the Abbey's tenor bell tolling resoundingly to mark each minute of its passage. The young princes, William and Harry, led the procession. A plain

white card inscribed with the words. 'To Mummy' sat atop a coffin bedecked with flowers. The streets along which the cortège travelled – both to and from London – were banked deep with the mourning. Television cameras picked out faces all along the route of the motorcade – faces of the young and old – all lined with tears. After the funeral, the television cameras followed the hearse as it headed out of London towards Althorp, Diana's family home and final resting place. Despite the rain, the motorway was lined with people to bid Diana farewell. The broadcast ended with a final shot of the hearse disappearing from view down the roadway in the rain, the royal flag on its bonnet waving violently in the wind.

A few weekends after the funeral I visited Kensington Palace. Walking to the Palace from Kensington High Street, I passed countless bouquets of flowers, now wilted and dying, tied to the Palace's high fence. The colours had run from the bouquet ribbons. As I entered Kensington Gardens, the sight of the sea of flowers before the Palace gates was awing. Waist deep in height, the high mound of bouquets stretched wide to the left and right and at least 20 feet before the Palace gates. I stood on the fringe of the bank of bouquets and, somewhat pathetically, added my own to its number. On this bright afternoon people picnicked on the grass bank opposite the Palace, taking in the panoramic view of the flowers. Throughout gardens, individual trees had also been chosen as sites for personal tributes. At the foot of each tree had been laid flowers, candles, toys and cards. Tethered to their branches, heart-shaped silver and red balloons danced in the afternoon breeze. Visitors came bearing their own tributes and remained to stroll among the trees, admiring those of others.

Mine will not be the definitive nor the last of the commentaries on the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Writing in 2003, Britain has emerged from the aftermath of national shock and grief. Occasional magazine articles attempt to re-analyse Diana's somewhat confused emotional and psychological life but nowadays it is David and Victoria Beckham are the object of obsessive media attention. The romance and lifestyle of the Beckhams fulfils the public's need for escapism. At the time of writing, it has been announced that the glamorous couple are to be turned into a US\$1 billion global brand including product endorsements, television shows, film roles and fashion lines. Complicit with the cult of celebrity, the Beckhams are far more willing photo-shoot participants than would ever be the royal family.

At Harrods, the world-renowned store owned by Mohamed Al Fayed, father of Dodi Al Fayed, a memorial to Diana and Dodi has been erected. Opposite Starbucks, at the foot of the ground floor escalator sits a small artificial fountain festooned with white roses and lilies and surmounted by the fading photos of a smiling Diana and Dodi in garish gold painted frames. A stained wine glass and diamond engagement ring it is said Dodi had bought for Diana are encased in a glass pyramid on top of the fountain.

'Tastefulness' had evidently not been a key, or even marginal, consideration in the memorial's design. Jostling tourists and shoppers formed a bottleneck at the foot of the escalators, the crowd pressing forward to peer at the display. Pulling a camera out of his rucksack, a father motioned towards the memorial and asked his daughter, 'Do you want to stand next to it and pretend to cry?'



Michelle Witton studied Arts/Law at Sydney University and was awarded a Commonwealth Trust scholarship to Cambridge, where she was an actor / writer with the comedy revue 'Footlights'. Michelle trained as an actor at Guildford School of Acting and RADA. Her screen work includes 'The Bill' and 'Dr Willoughby' (ITV) with Joanna Lumley. Her work has previously been published in TNT Magazine and the Sydney Morning Herald.

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