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**“We must be ready every day, all the time”:**

**mid-20<sup>th</sup> century nuclear anxiety and fear of death in American life**

“I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand,” prayed Saint Augustine. “The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts” (*The Confessions* 244). Not unlike the French street photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, who observed in an interview twenty centuries later, “It develops a great anxiety... Cause you are always waiting, what’s going to happen, what, what, what, what! It’s what? ... It’s all the time” (“The Decisive Moment”). What they describe is the jumble of confusions—often exciting but equally often unnerving—that characterize the experience of being alive.

Precisely what it means to “be alive” is a question that has sparked centuries of philosophical debate. A deliberately vague phrase, it is intended here to encompass a range of human experience, but most particularly the life of the mind. As Cartier-Bresson continues, “Life changes every minute. The world is being created every minute and the world is falling to pieces every minute. Death is present every where, as soon as we are born.” It’s a dynamic characterized by uncertainty about the future, a dynamic that influences and shapes the stories we tell, the culture we produce, and the ways in which we respond to events within our lives and within our world. It’s problematic then that

uncertainty is so often drained out of historical accounts of lives, which are written with what the novelist and critic William H. Gass labeled a “stubborn externality” (*Fiction & The Figures of Life* 263).

In his work, *American Fear: The Causes and Consequences of High Anxiety*, Peter N. Stearns offers a compelling historiography of the place of fear in twentieth century American life. As Stearns acknowledges, the connections he illuminates are “possible, but they cannot be proved;” (89) however, his work is provocative, particularly in regards to what Stearns identifies as the role “history has to play... in explaining ourselves to ourselves” (8-9). In *American Fear*, Stearns argues that fear is an “urgent American policy and personal issue” (9), and he advocates the important role that behavioral history and emotional history play in our understanding of “significant (and probably distinctive) national reactions” (8). Through the book as a whole, he explores how “national reactions to the dread emotion [of fear], both in personal and in public life, have exhibited crucial distinctive features” (3), which have made Americans more anxious and fearful than they were in the past. Within this broader argument, Stearns hypothesizes that Cold War fears and changes in responses to death heightened anxieties around mortality and grief, thus contributing to a national climate wherein fear emerged as the dominant emotion (75). The nuances of the cultural changes Stearns identifies are further illuminated when considered through a life-writing lens and they grow particularly evident when viewed across the narrative of a celebrity life.

As the most visible American life narrative of the mid-twentieth century Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's life is an excellent source from which to draw out support for Stearns' claims. Examining how her image was connected to nuclear fears in the early 1960s and exploring the ways in which her life narrative intersected with contemporary American attitudes towards death demonstrates how celebrity life narratives act as repositories of cultural anxiety, wherein emotional phenomena such as fear play out. As such, they offer compelling evidence of those phenomena and a rich means of contextualizing them within American life.

### **Life-Writing and American Celebrity**

Stearns attributes the rise in publicly expressed fear to changes in cultural attitudes towards the specialness of children, as well as attitudes towards grief and death, all of which had an impact at the level of everyday American life (82-87). He also cites the unprecedentedly long period of U.S. military engagement from World War I onwards as a factor at the national level, particularly the U.S. government's repeated suggestions from 1945 on that Communists and Communism were foes to be feared (181). Collectively, Stearns argues that, over the course of the mid-twentieth century, these cultural trends led to "historical shifts in emotional signals" (8), contributing to an increase in American "emotional vulnerability" (xi) and an avoidance of fear through which "we may have become more fearful than necessary" (8).

Over the same period, celebrity assumed an increasingly significant place in American life. The proliferation of American celebrity life narratives from the mid-

century onwards suggests there is more to celebrity than meets the eye and that, as readers and consumers, we use celebrity narratives to do important internal work. If, as Paul Ricœur argues, “we understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works” (87), then the lives of celebrities have, for the last half century, been one of the dominant cultural forms through which we have sought understanding. The psychoanalyst Josh Cohen hypothesizes that our interest in the lives of other people may be “an unconscious protest against our ignorance of ourselves” (xii). For, just as John Ellis has argued with television, so too do celebrity stories provide “multiple stories and frameworks of explanation which enable understanding and, in the very multiplicity of those frameworks, it enables its viewers to work through the major public and private concerns of their society” (74).

This chimes with what historians have argued about Americans’ relationship to their national past. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen have contended that Americans make “the past part of their everyday routines and turn to it as a way of grappling with profound questions about how to live” (18). Rosenzweig and Thelen noted that, through the past, Americans “addressed questions about relationships, identity, immortality, and agency” (18). However, contemporaneity is a key factor in celebrity stories, which lends them their urgency and contributes to their appeal. It is also an element missing from accounts of the past. Typically, we see the past as settled and done; open to revision, of course, but, the lives over, the narrative arc is clear in a way that it never was while the people involved were living. In contrast, a living celebrity’s life is an ongoing drama. Richard Dyer argues that famous people model “the way people live their relation to

production in capitalist society” (5), but the lives of living celebrities also furnish examples of how individuals live in relation to the uncertainties inherent in being alive in a given moment. In particular, they highlight ways of navigating fear and anxiety.

The simple binary is that anxiety is anticipatory while fear is stimulated. A more nuanced view is one where fear centers around “an obvious (albeit not necessarily clearly perceived) danger located in space and time that must be dealt with” while, with anxiety, “the nature and location of the threat remain more obscure and thus are difficult to cope with by active defensive maneuvers” (Öhman 710). The definition can be inflected philosophically, so that “Anxiety manifests itself within a person in the course of daily living as various threats to one’s being by non-being—ultimately death” (Ritter 52). In both cases, however, uncertainty and the unknown loom large. In fear, we have expectant worry—worry about what will come to be in the unknown future— while anxiety revolves around the ultimate unknown—one’s own nonexistence. Cohen suggests that celebrity culture itself might even be “a kind of drama around the scope and limits of what can be known” (xiv), a reasonable hypothesis given how tightly celebrities become knitted into our own emotional lives. Reading stories of celebrities, one can work through personal, legitimate fears such as divorce or estrangement, and frightening, incomprehensible world events may feel more manageable when connected to the story of an individual. Particularly when it is an individual one has been reading about for a long time.

Two anecdotes from the novelist Susie Boyt's memoir, *My Judy Garland Life* (2008), illustrate this connection. Boyt recalls a young girl who said that, if nuclear war occurred, her first thought would be: "I hope Boy George is OK" (127). This quotation reveals how celebrities are tied to the ways we confront threat occurring on an intolerable scale, while Boyt's own experience illuminates how we use celebrities to cope with personal experience. Boyt recounts how, after a friend's death, when she was "twenty, bereaved, grieving, living alone, an owner-operated pain factory" (83), she watched a Judy Garland PBS television special every day for a period of six months. These repeated daily encounters with Garland provided "something that just wasn't available to me elsewhere," and the 85 minutes of the program offered, she writes, "an arena in which it was possible for me to stay a person" (83).

In these anecdotes, the links between fear and anxiety, the national and the personal, and celebrity and life-writing emerge, along with significant overlap. Within these intersections, broader cultural trends come into view.

### **American Fear and "the Force of the False"**

The past was once the present. An obvious circumstance but one worth stating precisely because it is so often obscured by the way we write about the past—approaching it and everyone in it as though they had a certainty about their lives which we, the living, now lack. In reality, the experience of being alive, then as now, has always been characterized by uncertainty and improvisation, a circumstance that becomes

evident when we shift our thinking of the past into thinking of it as *that which was once present*.

The “avalanche” Gass describes—which seems to encompass the uncertainty of being alive, the sensation of not knowing what will happen next or the ultimate effects of one’s actions— is essential to any attempt at understanding why human beings within the past behaved as they did, as it establishes the haphazardness of life: the reality that, per Carr, “human beings do not always, or perhaps even habitually, act from motives of which they are fully conscious or which they are willing to avow” (48). The “avalanche” plays a crucial role in the life of any individual and its effects are particularly evident when we consider events of the past driven by what Umberto Eco calls the “force of the false” (2). “[T]hat our history was inspired by many tales we now regard as false should make us alert,” Eco writes, “ready to call constantly into question the very tales we believe true” (26, 22). And yet, because of how such stories are told, particularly if they are being espoused by trusted people in power, they are accepted as truth. Such was the case with the Cold War.

In hindsight, the threats from abroad during the period of the Cold War were never so certain as they were portrayed, and several generations of Americans spent decades being unnecessarily afraid. This is a circumstance in which John F. Kennedy was complicit, as his campaign for the presidency emphasized the threat of diminished American prestige and promised an intensification of the Cold War. As Garry Wills notes, “Kennedy, with his call for escape from the Eisenhower narcolepsy, had to reduce

everything to a contest with Khrushchev” (427), who was portrayed as a madman in control of enormous military power—an image that would have held horrifying echoes of Hitler for many Americans (Stearns 175). Thus, as John Mueller summarizes, “Massively extrapolating from limited evidence, determining to err decidedly on the safe side, dismissing contrary interpretations, and striking a responsible chord with the public, decision makers became mesmerized by perceived threats that scarcely warranted the preoccupation and effort” (117), and “militarily pathetic countries” were seen to pose major risks (127).

“Here’s Tony going to his Cub Scouts meeting,” intones the narrator of the 1951 civil defense propaganda film, *Duck and Cover*. “Tony knows the bomb can explode any time of the year. Day or night, he is ready for it... Sundays, holidays, vacation time, we must be ready every day, all the time, to do the right thing if the atomic bomb explodes.” The darkly comic documentary *The Atomic Café* (1982) poked ironic fun at such films, but they appear less ridiculous when we remember that the threat was felt to be real and that this particular film was directed at children. “Older people will help us, as they always do,” the narrator of *Duck and Cover* reminded young viewers, “but there might not be any grown-ups around when the bomb explodes. Then, you’re on your own.”

Civil defense films encouraged a state of perpetual preparedness, a constant awareness of nuclear threat bound to result in an elevated state of fear and anxiety. The effects of such a state are visible in the literature subsequently produced by authors who experienced this emotional climate first-hand. As a result of the atomic bomb drills she

participated in at school, Joan Didion later remembered, “it never occurred to me that I would not sooner or later—most probably certainly before I ever grew up or got married or went to college—endure the moment of its happening” (598): the dropping of the bomb and her own death. “The American people were now being systematically terrified by the country’s ownership,” Gore Vidal wrote 40 years after. “Did I see through all of this at the time? [...] No. I believed the whole nonsense” (235, 237). Many people did. Opening his sixth Cambridge lecture in 1961, E.H. Carr observed, “We live in an epoch when—not for the first time in history—predictions of world catastrophe are in the air, and weigh heavily on all” (133).

With the creation of the atomic bomb and its unprecedentedly destructive power, the nature and potential scope of the world’s catastrophes had dramatically altered. Accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950, William Faulkner declared, “Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?” Fifteen years later, Susan Sontag observed that “from now on to the end of human history, every person would spend his individual life under the threat ... of something almost insupportable psychologically—collective incineration and extinction which could come at any time, virtually without warning” (224).

The emotional scars are impossible to prove but general deductions can be made. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 is popularly considered the peak of nuclear anxiety. According to a 1966 report on American fear of nuclear war, the crisis was

“characterized by what were probably the most threatening signs of nuclear war which had occurred to that time” (102), and it was a moment of “high international tension” (101). However, this same report found that, even in moments of low international tension, Americans still reported experiencing fear—a situation, the report surmised, that had much to do with the threat of surprise attack, which was heavily emphasized in civil defense propaganda. (“Sometimes,” the narrator of *Duck and Cover* advises, “the bomb may explode without any warning.”) Among the study’s Baton Rouge, Louisiana cohort, 96% of respondents believed their city was in danger, 91% believed they were personally in danger, and 95% felt unprepared for nuclear attack (140). The twin fears of communism and nuclear annihilation were pervasive and frequently reiterated to the American public.

These fears surface, both intentionally and coincidentally, in Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis’s story, suggesting her narrative’s ongoing connection to the anxiety of nuclear annihilation. While her husband met with Nikita Khrushchev to discuss nuclear disarmament, Jackie toured Vienna, where, the AP noted, she was considered “a link between the New Frontier and the Old World... in a frightening nuclear age” (Lewine). “She stands for a sensitivity to art and beauty despite pragmatic politics, nuclear tests and the Cold War,” concluded a 1962 biography (Curtis 159).

Carole B. Schwalb has documented how Jackie’s image, as First Lady, was used internationally as Cold War propaganda—particularly the White House tour documentary and documentaries of her 1962 trip to India and Pakistan— but her story acted in a

similar capacity domestically (“Jacqueline Kennedy and Cold War Propaganda” 111-127). The connection was often one of adjacency in the newspapers, with charming images of Jackie bordering stories on nuclear annihilation. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, through the happenstance of editorial layout and, particularly in the newspapers in smaller markets, photographs of her and her young son at a White House reception repeatedly neighbored stories on the unfolding emergency.<sup>1</sup> This connection recurs, through a historical fluke, when her appearance at a memorial dedication in 1965 coincided with nuclear testing in China, so that photographs of her and her son are, once again, flanked by headlines like “Red China Explodes Second Atomic Bomb.”<sup>2</sup>

Historical coincidence, perhaps, but the connection lingers. In 1969, the writer Anita Loos gushed to the fashion magazine *Women's Wear Daily*, “God bless Jackie—the only thing that can make us forget the bomb” (5). Loos was being facetious, but the comment hints at how Jackie’s story provided entertainment, but veiled harsher concerns. That Loos said this in 1969 suggests people were still thinking about the bomb, that they wanted to forget, and that, on some level, Jackie helped. Sontag’s arguments regarding the imagination of disaster are useful in thinking about Jackie’s story in this regard. Sontag writes that disaster films and stories can “lift us out of the unbearably humdrum and to distract us from terrors—real or anticipated—by an escape into exotic, dangerous situations which have last-minute happy endings,” while it also “normalize[s] what is psychologically unbearable, thereby inuring us to it” (“The Imagination of Disaster” 225). Two decades later, the pop culture critic Wayne Koestenbaum drew the same connection as Loos, taking it far more seriously. He also illuminated the dualistic

function Sontag identified when he suggested, “the explosions we’ve lived fifty years in mortal fear of (a fear we’ve repressed) find expression in a quiet icon like Jackie... [who] mimics our own denial” (231). She embodies, enacts, and softens. This dynamic emerges again, more explicitly, when we consider the theme of death in Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis’s life narrative.

### **Jackie and American Death**

“[W]e certainly fear because, ironically, we do not discuss fear enough,” Stearns argues, pointing to American “well-intentioned but misguided attempts to sanitize an unavoidable emotion” (19). As Stearns notes, by the mid-twentieth century, premature death had become a greater source of anxiety, as certain kinds of death (military death, for example) became less acceptable and most American adults encountered death less casually and less frequently (82). During this same period, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was the most visible woman in America, and hers was a story characterized by an alarmingly high premature mortality rate. It is also, to this day, one of the country’s most visible widowhood narratives. It’s significant that its contemporary cultural context was one wherein death and grief were increasingly unacceptable.

The most explicit, and also bizarre, example of this arises in May 1994, when Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis’s death, in combination with that of former President Richard M. Nixon a few weeks earlier, played a major role in the contemporary conversation around the issue of advanced directives (*a living will*), which was, at the time, part of a broader discussion of euthanasia and a patient’s right to die. The morning

after her death, the *New York Times* reported, “Mrs. Onassis signed a living will in February that had clearly expressed her wish not to receive aggressive medical treatment” (Altman). The *Philadelphia Inquirer*’s report included the detail that “aggressive treatment of her disease was suspended and she went home to die” (Enda), a transparent admission of what experts were then calling *passive euthanasia*—terminology that directly linked it to *euthanasia* and, more specifically, *doctor assisted suicide*, which was much in the news at the time due to Dr. Jack Kevorkian’s recent acquittal in a doctor assisted suicide case. The former First Lady and the former President’s exercise of choice in the manner of their own deaths modeled the choices available to the patient and illustrated how the issues of patient rights might play out in one’s own life. By early June, the *New York Times* recorded that these two deaths “appear to be accelerating the sea change in Americans’ approach to death” (Scott). Significantly, it is a choice with which both are associated to this day. In texts on hospice care, advanced directives and estate administration, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Richard M. Nixon are the only famous people mentioned.<sup>3</sup>

Taken in isolation, this is an odd episode. But it becomes more legible in light of the changing attitudes towards death in mid-twentieth century America. Due to the biographical details of her life, death recurred in Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis’s story in the newspapers throughout the 1960s and 1970s, but it was especially prominent in the contemporary movie magazines— mid-market celebrity magazines which targeted middle-class women and often featured Jackie on their covers. In these publications, readers were given access to Jackie’s imagined thoughts after the death of John F.

Kennedy and presented with stories specifically about the struggles of widowhood—questions about remarriage, the problems of moving on, the difficulties of single-motherhood, and the challenges of grief. These were struggles which, because of the marginalized societal position of widows and contemporary American attitudes towards death, were publicly discussed less and less. As the historian Philippe Ariès and the philosopher Bernard Murchland observed in 1974: “To talk about death, and thus admit it as a normal dimension of social discourse, is no longer acceptable; it is now something exceptional, excessive, and always dramatic” (“Death Inside Out” 7). Just to say the word *death*, they noted, “provoked an emotional tension that jars the routine of daily life” (7).

Ariès and Murchland cited this contemporary attitude as the “New Model of Death” (6), and what they identify here, in 1974, aligns with Stearns’ analysis. The American Civil War, as Drew Gilpin Faust has written, forced nineteenth-century Americans to “identify— find, invent, create— the means and mechanisms to manage more than half a million dead: their deaths, their bodies, their loss” (2). It was a process that, Faust argues, had transformative effects in the political and cultural spheres. Stearns makes a compelling case that these means and mechanisms underwent another profound albeit more gradual revision in the twentieth century, due to a decrease in child mortality, the migration of death from the home to the hospital, the promotion of “open but time-limited grief,” the resulting social unacceptability of prolonged grief and the abolition of grief support services (82, 83). Thus, the average American encountered death less frequently, in less intimate terms, and with less community and governmental support.

In August 1963, Jessica Mitford's exposé on the American funeral industry, *The American Way of Death*, revealed the extent to which Americans would go to euphemize death. The book was wildly popular and, according to one contemporary review, it shocked Americans "into contemplating a subject most prefer to avoid" (Krebs). *The American Way of Death* discussed an uncomfortable subject in detail and it did so in an engaging way. But it also, coincidentally, arrived just in advance of John F. Kennedy's death, an event that dramatically brought the subject of sudden, violent, premature death into American living rooms for a long weekend. Significantly, Mitford's narrative tone was one of emotional detachment and she considered death almost exclusively in terms of affordability—a comfortable approach for American consumers. Emotions, however, were neglected, as they were at the time of John F. Kennedy's death, when Jackie was praised for her stoicism.

Jackie's story already had an unusually high neonatal mortality rate. At a time when the national rate was at a historic low and, due to lower birthrates, children were increasingly regarded as precious (*Infant Fetal and Maternal Mortality* 12, 16), she had lost two children. The press treated the August 1963 death of her infant son, Patrick, primarily as a family matter and there was limited discussion in the newspapers. The UPI's account mentions her "deep sorrow" but notes that "she managed to walk out of the hospital smiling." This media emphasis on etiquette reinforces the contemporary attitude Ariès and Murchland characterize as one where "discretion is the modern form of dignity": an ethos in which displays of emotion were verboten and mourners "are permitted neither to weep for the departed nor to appear to mourn their passing" (8).

Ariès and Murchland, like Stearns, argue that this restriction of mourning is a distinctly twentieth century phenomenon, and it is one with which Jackie's mainstream narrative aligns but with which her movie magazine narrative is often at odds.

After John F. Kennedy's murder in November 1963, *Life* magazine reported how Jackie "drew strength from the events that had engulfed her" and "imparted strength to others," losing "her steel nerve... just for a moment" (48, 49). The TV cameras caught her weeping during the playing of "Hail to the Chief" outside of the Capitol on Sunday and, on Monday, during the funeral service, though the cameras were kept off her, the papers reported she "went bravely through her... hours of public grief," and "Only twice during the day did her tears appear" (Lewis). A few days later, the AP reported, it was "The stoic courage of Mrs. John F. Kennedy during the tragic ordeal" that "won the nation's heart" (Miller).

The contrast between these news reports and the movie magazine coverage is striking. The mainstream accounts emphasize stoicism, bravery and emotional restraint. The movie magazines promote these traits as well, but they also feature extended, dramatic narratives portraying Jackie's imagined grief in intimate terms. In these narratives, feeling takes priority and the private emotions overcome to arrive at the publicly enacted stoicism move to the fore. In *TV Radio Mirror's* March 1964 report, for example, the family adage "Kennedys Don't Cry" is cited and then revised, so that it isn't that Kennedys do not cry but that, "if they do, they hide their tears" (46). Superficially, this aligns with social norms, but the extent of Jackie's emotions as portrayed here comes

in stark contrast: “she broke down and sobbed openly;” “she herself was on the verge of tears;” “the future seemed so hopeless” (95, 96). Publicly courageous, in private, she is, as depicted, openly tearful and struggling: “helplessly, hopelessly, on the verge of tears” (96). For the contemporary reader, this article offered a sustained examination of grief, a taboo emotional experience, as well as a portrayal of the immediate aftermath of a spousal death.

The contemporary anthropologist Barbara Gallatin Anderson noted gender differences towards death that suggest such stories would appeal to female readers. While men perceived *dying* as the ordeal, Anderson observed that the female subjects in her research cohort focused upon the aftermath:

the women labor the consequences for them of the loss—the personal disadvantage, the physical toll, the social implications of a change in the esteemed roles of wife and homemaker... For the men, personal loss and emotional trauma were seldom compounded by the threat of economic privation (187).

In contrast, for the women, “There was more immediately at stake for them and few cultural supports” (188). These themes are all prominent in the story of Jacqueline Kennedy after John F. Kennedy’s death as the writers of the magazines imagined how John F. Kennedy’s death affected her.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, for months, the movie magazines ran stories about her situation that focused on her grief.<sup>5</sup> This continued over a period beyond which it would have been socially acceptable to still be grieving the President’s

death in everyday life and long after the story had ceased to appear regularly in newspapers.

On the surface, the contemporary accounts of Jacqueline Kennedy's widowhood conformed to tradition— particularly through their emphasis on remarriage, which is one of the easiest means of neutralizing a widow's social ambiguity (Buitelaar 12). But, even after John F. Kennedy's death and her remarriage, in the press and to many Americans, they remained connected. It was a connection reinforced not through mention of their marriage but, rather, through emphasis of her widowhood. Despite her remarriage, she was still identified as John F. Kennedy's widow, often referred to as "Mrs. Kennedy" and, though her second husband, Aristotle Onassis, was frequently photographed with her children, their upbringing was depicted as her responsibility alone. Hers was a story distinguished by its staggering visibility, which meant that, from 22 November 1963 until the late 1970s, the most visible life narrative in America was that of a woman who was portrayed primarily as a widow and single mother.

In his eulogy, Senator John Kerry observed, "Jackie Onassis lived almost every role among which women choose." But it isn't always a matter of choice and, ultimately, things *do* happen over which we have no control. In the 1950s, the United States government told Americans to be prepared for nuclear annihilation at all times. The transmission of this message occurred in a historical moment wherein Americans were socially conditioned to fear grief and death as extraordinary and unfortunate circumstances rather than a natural part of life. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's story

coincides with these historical circumstances and contains echoes, which seem likely factors in its contemporary power and also its posthumous endurance. She lived every role from which a woman could choose but she did not choose to be a widow or a single mother, which is how her story, in America, was most often framed.

## **Conclusion**

“It’s so calming to be able to form a clear picture of things in one’s mind,” Charles Swann tells his lover towards the end of *Swann’s Way*. “What is really terrible is what one can’t imagine” (439). Unfortunately, clarity is something life seldom allows. Celebrities matter because they are alive and, in their aliveness, they embody the uncertainties of being alive, which helps us cope with our own mortality. All of which also makes celebrity life narratives a valuable resource for analyzing American emotional phenomena and behavioral history, providing a ghost map of the contemporary culture’s anxieties.

A popular gossip analysis blog recently hailed celebrities as a sign that “we’ve almost reached peak civilization” in America, where life “is ridiculously easy, we have no real problems, and a lot of free time”; and so celebrity gossip is a national pastime that fills “the void once occupied by ‘dying of dysentery on [the] way to [a] new home across [the] continent’ and ‘planting food to eat during winter’” (LaineyGossip.com). This pronouncement is useful in that the anxiety is evident just beneath the surface: we have “no real problems” and too much free time, life is “ridiculously easy” and yet very little is in our control. Stearns suggests that the rise in American fear may be connected to

anxieties about America's place in the world (81), a hypothesis made manifest here, albeit in miniature and in personal terms rather than national. A celebrity may do something, and we may not agree with it; though she may pursue a given course of action, it may have unintended consequences in her life; though we can read everything there is to read about her, still we do not *know* her; though we are no longer dying of dysentery, still we are not content.

Celebrities are a way of organizing personal experience at the level of daily life and of coping with its hazards. In the present, we endure uncertainty and, in their aliveness, celebrities reduce the sensation that we are alone in this. As Josh Cohen writes of watching the television show *Big Brother*, "what magnetized me... wasn't what might happen but the simple fact of its happening" (61), an observation that suggests celebrities offer a respite— an opportunity to stand still, to be present, and to, however briefly, forget the future and temporarily vacate our fear. Like us, in flux, the celebrity moves ever forward, clear-eyed about nothing, into whatever tomorrow might bring. But there is, in this, a valor; in the doggedness with which we, together, not content, not knowing, navigate the tumult of the times in which we find ourselves scattered, alive. "It's a way of saying, 'Yes! Yes! Yes!,'" exclaimed Cartier-Bresson of being present. "It's yes, yes, yes. And there's no maybe" ("The Decisive Moment").

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