

Grief... Grief

By Michael Howard . . . Michael Howard

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Michael Howard's, "Grief," is an exercise in subtext.*

Crafted entirely of dialogue, the plot is simple but the context is more complicated. The piece breaks down how two characters/friends handle the death of a classmate, yet, as readers, we only will learn more of these two speakers' relationship to the dead girl through their jealousies, sexual encounters, inability to process empathies and sympathies, and the shortcomings of youth.

The strength of "Grief" is how Howard represents the process of expression through conversation and creates theater. Neil LaBute often uses the same diagonals as a break in his plays, and, here too, the pacing, back and forth, and structure of the dialogue is rich with performance.

That these two speakers are unable to process one of life's great unknowns yet isn't new in fiction. Naïve inconsequentiality aside, what works within the dialogue here is that you see how grief stays with us, even though the connection is weak, blackout, and a part of some heartbreaking jealousy.

One of our greatest illusions, by speaking over a tough topic with another we're able to excise ourselves of responsibility, or lack thereof, through the presumption of grief.

If you feel nothing about a tragic situation, can you still grieve?

Even though you hear the words, does the person across from you still not imply, question, plead, more?

If she's dead, and you don't "remember," was she still raped?

I want to see the piece done in a small, blackbox theater, as a part of a collection of theatrical shorts. Two people, students I'm probably not paying because I can't, sitting down on whatever represents campuses now, sparse and simple. Speaking slowly and deliberately, these lines of dialogue.

Take a breath, read it well, and it won't be how these characters are speaking about grief not necessarily how you would like but the way in which you have read this work helps you comprehend your own (perhaps futile) process of grief.

Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language...)*

And you're saying I knew Kelsey? / You knew her. In a manner of speaking. / What? / You knew her. / I knew her and now she's dead. That's what you're saying? / That's what I'm saying. How do you feel about it? / I dunno.

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Let's sit down a minute. / There's a picnic table. / Take it. / There's no shade. / That's alright. I just want to sit for a minute. My head hurts. / Do you have practice later? / Yeah. / That was a nice goal you scored last game. / Thanks. This heat is tough. / It's not so bad. It's good beach weather. / The sun's right in my face. / Why don't you wear sunglasses? / I need new ones. / I might have an extra pair lying around. / That's alright. I'll buy a new pair this week. I need swim trunks too. / Did you think of that because I mentioned the beach? / Could be. One of those things. / I don't have extra swim trunks. / I didn't think you would. Christ, that sun. / Want to swap seats? / Do you care? / No. I'm wearing shades. / Alright then. That's a lot better. What a relief. / Heard about Kelsey? / Who? / Kelsey. / Kelsey who? / I dunno her last name. / I dunno any Kelsey. / Yeah you do. / I do? / Yeah. Or rather you did. / Which one? / The one you did last Friday. / I don't remember. Where did we go last Friday? / To the rugby house. That's where you did her. / Oh yeah. That one? / Yeah. / What about her? / She died. / Her name was Kelsey? / Yeah. / How do you know that? / I had a class with her in the spring. / Really. And you say she died? / Yeah. / How'd that happen? / In the car accident. / Which one? / The one from the other night. The one on the expressway. / Oh right. So Kelsey died in the car accident huh. The wreck from

the other night. / She did. / And you're saying I knew Kelsey? / You knew her. In a manner of speaking. / What? / You knew her. / I knew her and now she's dead. That's what you're saying? / That's what I'm saying. How do you feel about it? / I dunno. Should I feel something? / It's up to you. / Would you? / Would I what? / Feel something. / You mean if I were you? / Yeah. / I might. / I don't think I feel anything. / Try. / I'm trying. / How come you keep looking over there? / I dunno. I can't help it. My eyes keep pulling that way. / There's nothing over there. / I can see that. / A couple trees, but that's all. / And a building in back of them. / It's the registrar's office. / Have you been in there? / Sure. A couple times. / I don't think I've been in there. / I'll bet you have. / What about Kelsey? / What about her? / Think she went in there? / She might have. There's a pretty good chance she did. / Wonder if she's still on the roll. / What roll? / The registrar's. / They probably took her off. / So soon? / They work pretty fast. They don't waste any time. / That doesn't seem right. / I dunno what to tell you. / That girl looks like Kelsey. / Which girl? / That one over there. With the book. / No she doesn't. / A little bit. / Not at all. / I can't picture her face. I'm trying but I can't do it. / I can. / Was it pretty? / So-so. / What color eyes? / I dunno. Green. / I can't remember anything about her. / You had a lot to drink. / Wonder if she liked me. / Maybe she didn't remember you either. / Maybe. But I like to think she did. It's better that way. Anyways, maybe a numbness. / What? / That's what I feel. / Oh. I don't think numbness counts. / Why not? / It's not a real feeling. / It could be. / It's the absence of feeling. / I guess so. / Why don't you sit here and try some more. / What are you gonna do? / I'm gonna grab some lunch. / I'll come with. / You're done trying? / It's hot out here. And my head hurts. I should get something solid in me. / Maybe that's the trouble. / That's what I was thinking. It's hard to feel on an empty stomach. As soon as I get something solid in me I'll let you know what I feel. / How

about the deli on the corner? / Let's do it. / I like their potato salad. / I haven't had it. /
Give it a try. / Maybe. We'll see. / You don't have to feel anything, you know. I was
just asking. / I know. But I still feel like I should. I mean, I want to try. / You should
at least try. / It's the least I can do. / And the most. / And the most.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story was inspired by ... I'm not sure. I sat down and began writing a dialogue between two university students, a humdrum dialogue, which quickly became a story about a peculiar sort of loss and one character's blundering (but nevertheless sincere) effort to confront it. As with much of my fiction, the characters are unable, or perhaps subconsciously unwilling, to apprehend the meaning of their own experiences. Of course, the story is also "about" the unusual formatting. Form as content and so on.*

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