

How 'The Leftovers' teaches us to mourn

1 message

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Warning: This newsletter contains spoilers up to the first four episodes of *The Leftovers*.
Wondering why you're getting this? Catch up here with ***Streaming TV Party***'s previous newsletters.

Introduction: [Streaming TV Party: We're watching *The Leftovers*](#)

Season 1: ["Pilot" and "Penguin One, Us Zero"](#)

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Mourning: The Sudden Departure's Cottage Industry

Part of what makes *The Leftovers* resonate for me right now, apart from [Kevin Garvey's bad policing](#), is how timeless some of its world-building and the people who embody it feel. Our obsession with celebrity culture amid the loss of 140 million people. The emergence of opportunists, such as Holy Wayne Gilchrist (Patterson Joseph), who claim they can ease the pain of losing your loved ones to the Sudden Departure; whether or not they actually do is up for debate. The sheer amount of bureaucratic hoops one has to jump through just to get a benefit payout from the government if the questions that Nora Durst (Carrie Coon) has to ask applicants is any indication.

But nothing quite captures the capitalistic reality of the Sudden Departure in a post-Oct. 14 world than the existence of [Loved Ones bereavement figures](#).

You first learn about them briefly in "Two Boats and a Helicopter" as a commercial for the product—a life-like recreation of your Departed family member that allows you to bury or cremate them—that starts to play as Matt Jamison (Christopher Eccleston) buys a container of bleach for his wife's caregiver; a clip of it plays on his TV when he returns home. There's even an [actual commercial](#) for Loves Ones bereavement figures.

"Loved Ones bereavement figures allow you to say that goodbye," the commercial's narrator states. "With as little as a single photograph, Loved Ones can create a tangible likeness of your Departed, a bereavement figure for burial or cremation, allowing you and your family to finally begin to feel whole again." It's cynically brilliant, and it's the sort of ad that would feel completely in-step with the types of commercials that play during, let's say, *The Price Is Right*.

At the end of “B.J. and the A.C.” (an episode full of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph allegories), Tom Garvey (Chris Zylka) and Christine (Annie Q.) encounter an overturned truck. Initially, it looks like a bunch of dead bodies fell out of the truck until you get closer and learn that all of those bodies are bereavement figures. Tom Henney, the soldier Tom and Christine meet on that bus, doesn’t really see the point from a financial perspective.

“Careful there, Tommy,” Tom Henney says. “Some sad idiot paid a fucking fortune just to bury that thing.”

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What Does a Lack of Closure Do to Us?

The cruelest part of the Sudden Departure, apart from not knowing what happened to the people who vanished, is the inability to truly say goodbye and mourn them. Are they dead? Is their disappearance only temporary? What happens if you move on and they return? Or if you refuse to move on and they never reappear?

We might not have a Sudden Departure in our midst, but we’re [seeing aspects of that play out right now](#). Because of how easily [COVID-19](#) can spread, we’re not allowed to be with loved ones when they die, and we can’t hold [proper funerals](#) to say goodbye; we gather on Zoom to [mourn](#), and funerals, if they’re held at all, are extremely limited in who can attend. We feel it even further because we’re [already grieving over most aspects of our lives](#) drastically changing for the foreseeable future. It’s isolating, even for those of us with similar experiences.

It doesn’t surprise me that those bereavement figures cost a lot of money. (You’ll find out just how expensive in a couple of episodes.) Funerals and cremations are already prohibitively expensive in our world—GoFundMe [literally has templates on how to create funeral campaigns](#)—and that’s before you add the additional cost of purchasing a bereavement figure to say goodbye to a Departed. *The Leftovers* sets up a massive class divide on who is given the opportunity to say goodbye, something that government benefits might not cover.

Does it help? It’s not clear because we’ve yet to see anyone among our cast of characters use the service. But even pre-pandemic, the most private of goodbyes pre-pandemic doesn’t come without its cost.

Recommended

Elisabeth Moss stars as horror novelist Shirley Jackson in [Shirley](#), a character study that escapes the boundaries of a traditional biopic and is now streaming on Hulu.

Michaela Coel's new HBO series [I May Destroy You](#) explores the aftermath of one writer's assault as she struggles to finish her second book.

Binge *Picard*, *Star Trek Discovery*, *The Good Fight*, *Why Women Kill*, and more with [CBS All Access](#).*

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What Is a Legacy?

I'm fascinated by Matt Jamison, the Episcopalian reverend who makes it his mission to make sure everyone is aware of the Departed's dirty laundry; he believes that they were taken because of their sins. He's a living contradiction, someone who's simultaneously despicable and sympathetic. While he might have good intentions, he goes about it the wrong way, often resulting in a punch or rock to the face for his efforts—and now he has sins of his own.

The debate reminds me of the conversations that usually emerge whenever someone famous dies. Do we only highlight the positive aspects of a person's life—the “don't speak ill of the dead” approach—or do we loop in the controversies? Or do we attempt to include someone's complexities?

But Matt probably isn't interested in that kind of conversation. He's so driven to expose everyone's sins that he even uses Doug Durst's infidelity—the one story he swore never to print—against his sister Nora as a weapon when she refused to loan him the \$135,000 he needed to save his church. Her only condition? That he stop publishing the fliers highlighting the sins of the Departed.

Discussion Questions

- How much of what happens to Matt Jamison is of his own making? How much of it is driven by some higher power or fate?
- Where do you think Tom and Christine's story will take them?
- What is the Guilty Remnant's ultimate goal? Do they even have a goal beyond short term items like buying Matt's church and stealing photographs?
- As Kevin Garvey himself wonders, who is the smarter Frost twin: Adam or Scott?

Next Week: Be sure to watch up to episodes 5 and 6, “Gladys” and “Guest,” respectively. (And as an FYI, “Gladys” contains graphically violent imagery that some might find triggering or tough to watch right now. If you want to avoid it, skip 1:30-3:00; you get enough context throughout the episode about what happened.)

Quote of the week

“Here's what you're gonna do. Get the fucking baby, open the box, strip it naked, scruff it up, and you can say that you found it in a ditch or a dumpster or something.”

—Mayor Lucy Warburton trying to give embattled chief of police Kevin Garvey an easy victory

The Leftovers 1x04, "B.J. and the A.C."

Now playing: [Max Richter — "She Remembers"](#)

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