




PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

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She spent 11 hours on her phone every day. She had a screentime application that told her so. Suggesting in a passive-aggressive way that this might be a bad thing. This app, which itself existed and depended on a world of late-stage smartphone capitalism, congratulated her when she was 10% down on her screen time at the end of the week. Why? What a failure to have spent less time doing a thing that lets you feel the most numb.

She never felt anything but misplaced excitement in the face of an emergency. A night out and maybe you lost your phone? Coming home and trying to figure out if it's your front door which has been kicked in? Withdrew £100.00 and immediately lost it?

No fear, just a placid joy at the promise of the inconvenient knot of disasters needing to be untangled. And maybe she was just pleased to have a story. A story that would help her get out of socialising, diligence at work, and attending family events, for as long as she could string it out. Because the best stories become excuses.


When she thought someone might be walking past her to stab her as she walked home in a crepuscular fugue – when she thought she might die – that may be the most alive she ever felt. The whole acid attack craze was a good one.

A lot of her time on her phone involved her internally debating whether or not to google Neil Patrick Harris' Amy Winehouse death cake¹. Since reading about that on Reddit she thought about it actively throughout the day. Every day. The description on Reddit made it sound horrific. Neil Patrick Harris himself had decided to have a mortuary picture of Amy Winehouse's (maybe rotting, she did not know) corpse printed onto a cake at a party. Reddit made it clear how easy it was to find pictures. Just a click away. Type some words onto your screen and you can traumatise yourself for life.

Maybe not knowing was worse. Maybe not googling the pictures and imagining what the cake – specifically the image on the cake – looked like, was much worse. Google the picture, see it and move on.

* Author's Note: Content warning, this image search contains a graphic image. Please search with caution.





Her memory was so bad that soon the image would dissipate, becoming nothing more than a blur of grey, green and brown hues framed by garish pastel-coloured icing.

She wondered if Neil Patrick Harris thought about the cake anywhere near as much as her. If any of the celebrities who'd attended the party and had a slice of the Amy Winehouse death cake thought about it as much as her. She wondered how it tasted. And if the fact it had a picture of such a horrific, inappropriate thing made it any less deliciously sweet.


When she got something she really wanted – a job she'd applied for, good news from a health check or even a mortgage on a house – she felt flat. Incapable of summoning the emotion expected of her even in a performative way.


She operated sometimes almost as a private investigator with the intensity around which she monitored the obscure celebrities that most interested her. She found secret dropboxes and google drives, legal files with celebrities' mobile numbers unredacted and uncovered connections between burner

accounts that made her realise certain influencers were having affairs. She longed for the rush of uncovering something genuinely massive – shopping the story to a journalist or maybe even writing it herself. She didn't quite long for a Watergate scandal size scoop. But more an Armie-Hammer-is-a-cannibal scale scoop. Not something that would be remembered forever and discussed in history books, but maybe enough to be a question on an obscure pop culture trivia round in 15–20 years.

The only thing she ever worked towards consistently was her Alec Baldwin blog. She interrupted her Amy Winehouse death cake debates by checking his and his wife's social media. Writing long updates on Reddit and waiting for the serotonin rush of rewards and positive responses from anonymous accounts who also found themselves preoccupied with the movements of a minor, fading actor and his incredibly strange wife.

Her screen time was sometimes interrupted by the fact she did not feel organised enough to charge her phone consistently. At night she scrolled until she dropped to sleep. Waking up to the bad news





that was a phone on 2% and the grim reality that she would have to lie constrained to a certain position to scroll. Throughout the day she never felt positioned near enough a socket to scroll and charge at the same time. Meaning she charged her phone at brief, 10-minute intervals and was constantly having to accept the defeat of its inevitable near death, predictably returning for a recharge to 12% before draining her phone all over again.


Between her 11 hours scrolling through a well-trodden path of Reddit pages, Instagram profiles and mounting, easily-deleted emails, she did not have much time for anything real. Her internet path was as familiar as the house one grew up in, or the muscle memory that takes you home.


She was constantly frustrated that the few times a year she impulsively read a chapter of a book she felt clever. Like her brain was a muscle and it was thanking her for its high-intensity workout. The more time she spent online, the more her brain felt like it was surrounded by a dense fog that stopped her from remembering basic things like names, places and even what she did yesterday. Yet how could the work

she was doing not be equal to or more than reading a book? How did it not allow her brain to swell with the vigour of a day's work well done?

As a child, she hadn't existed in the real world either. Her brain was so overpowering when creating stories that she often didn't know what was truly happening. She remembered her childhood best friend, Diego Maradona, and the sadness she felt when she'd seen him on TV as an adult and realised that the timeline on which he existed in real life made it highly unlikely he could have been her best friend. That, and the fact that small children don't often have mid-40s Argentine footballers in their bedroom every night indulging in co-conspiratorial plans to avoid swimming lessons at school.

She remembered that she never knew the difference between an advert and a TV show. She would see snappy, persuasive 30-second clips and think they were wonderful stories that should have really been expanded into something longer. She'd watch a Snickers advert and think, wow, I can see why people tune into this show every night. Sometimes when the adverts would start she'd finally






look up, thinking now was the time to live. Now was the time to truly be entertained. In her dreams she would carry on these adverts, hearing and seeing them progress into full soap operas in her head. The level of hyperreal texture and kitsch detail she created made her sure as she watched them in her dreams that she was a genius. In the morning she would wake up and be unable to remember a thing. She'd smile, thinking she'd achieved a form of theatre, esoteric in its temporality.


Scoop was a word that made her feel sick. It made her think of Waugh and Cat Litter. But one day she managed to find, through an elaborate process of googling and finding highly personal details about Alec Baldwin online, an intensely dark secret that could potentially end his career and personal life. Nothing illegal. Just something so deeply embarrassing and shameful that it would sadly outweigh shooting a cinematographer dead in severity when it came to the field of industry and a public judgement. She thought about how she might serve this delicious meal to the world. Perhaps she could sell it to the Fox News journalist who'd been mildly grooming her for four years via direct messages.

She reminded herself of the Fox News reporter's words every day. *You are a brilliant investigative journalist.* Words made even more precious due to the fact the reporter rarely took breaks from tweeting about the need to ban abortion and relax gun laws.

She could write this scoop on her own blog, which was erratic in both its use and views but often made an impact in the small communities she depended on impressing. She could start a burner account on social media and share it online in a series of funny yet hitting tweets.

She didn't sleep for days, knowing the information she had was so huge that she could really and truly rupture the ecosystem of celebrity gossip. She chewed her lip until it bled at the excitement of people congratulating her and her investigative skills online. She felt out of breath at the idea of writing this information up in a way that would lead people to think she had led an innovative and expansive critique of celebrity culture — as opposed to a deep desire to just generate more of it. She loved the idea that she would harness this power online,






yet the man in the corner shop would not know a thing. He would not know the breaking news about Alec Baldwin, nor that she had in fact revealed it. To him, she'd carry on being a normal person. A normal person who spent £8.43 in one go on chocolate bars at 7am, having visibly not slept.

She picked a scab that had mostly healed until it bled when she had to take breaks from thinking about this, in order to do her 'job' or call the electricity company. Every second not preparing this information for her scoop was time that someone else might uncover this information. It was unlikely anyone had uncovered what she had. But if they did, and posted it online, she would have to congratulate them on forums whilst also trying to subtly and non-smugly convey that she already knew the same information and was already in the process of releasing it and it was therefore not a clearcut victory. The scar she had picked was so nearly healed that it was exhausting pulling at it to bleed again. But she managed to, and felt her existing anxiety become drowned out by the sharp pain in her arm and the disgust she had at the sight of blood under her already dirty nails.

And then she woke up one night with the realisation that what she wanted to do with this information was nothing. That it did not interest her anymore – and that perhaps she had wasted her time even thinking about Alec Baldwin's private life for so long. She tried to muster the strength to carry on preparing to release this information – carry on contributing to the Alec Baldwin gossip pages to which she'd spend so much time ensuring she was a respected, veteran member. But she didn't care. She didn't even care enough to bother being surprised at this sudden U-turn her brain had taken without warning her or asking for permission. And so she deleted the screenshots from her phone, got rid of the PDFs she'd saved and erased the blog entry she'd drafted.

She never again had the urge to even return to the forum or the information that she was fairly sure she exclusively held. It didn't even feel like a form of power to her – just a footnote on an obsession in her life that she could hardly even remember. So poorly formatted it lost all meaning. She saw Alec Baldwin was the top headline once in her regular, guilty checks of the celebrity news section of the





Daily Mail and she didn't even stop to read. It wasn't even a conscious thing.

If she told her therapist they might congratulate her on moving forward out of the swamp of celebrity obsession. But she didn't speak to her therapist anymore. Too busy, in fact, with finding out the truth about another public figure. An influencer even more desperately minor than the last obsession. In fact, so minor that he hardly showed up online.

