

HOLLY FORREST

Confessions of a Showbiz Reporter



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The fifth book in the bestselling Confessions series. Press junkets. Premiers. Dom Perignon. They're all in a day's work for your average Hollywood celebrity. But, what's it like on the otherside of the microphone? In this no-holds-barred memoir, showbiz reporter Holly Forest reveals the less glamorous side of the world's most glamorous industry: show business.

Содержание

HOLLY FORREST	6
Cyber celebrities	8
Just another sunday night	9
College	12
Getting started	14
Part II: The Lucky Break	16
Publicists	17
London	19
Festivals	21
Premieres	23
Home life	26
Freelance	28
Bodyguards	30
Sources	31
Flirting	34
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Cyber celebrities](#)

[Just another sunday night](#)

[College](#)

[Getting started](#)

[Publicists](#)

[London](#)

[Festivals](#)

[Premieres](#)

[Home life](#)

[Freelance](#)

[Bodyguards](#)

[Sources](#)

[Flirting](#)

[Johnny Depp](#)

[Junkets](#)

[The Family](#)

[The movie of my life](#)

[Almost famous](#)

[Press conferences](#)

[Sarah Jessica Parker](#)

[Boy bands](#)

[Old Rockers](#)

[No personal questions](#)

[Personal questions ... please!](#)

[The good, the bad, and the interview](#)

[Beyoncé](#)

[TV Totty](#)

[The camera adds ten pounds](#)

[Food](#)

[Beauty](#)

[Clash of the egos](#)

[Money](#)

[Kate Moss](#)

[Cannes](#)

[Secrets](#)

[Rihanna](#)

[I'll always have Paris](#)

[Reality TV](#)

[Adele](#)

[Los Angeles](#)

[Technology](#)

[Bruce Willis](#)

[Child stars](#)

[Middle Age](#)

[I Am Cynic](#)

[Watching films](#)

[Tom Hanks](#)

[Demands](#)

[Harrison Ford](#)

[Tom Cruise](#)

[Rappers](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Hugh Jackman](#)

[Smells](#)

[A new age](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Pop quiz](#)

[Footnotes](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

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[About the Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

As you might have heard said before a film, everything here is 'inspired by true events'. However, to protect confidentiality some names have been changed and certain elements of the stories have been fictionalised. Nonetheless, they remain an honest reflection of my experience working in showbiz journalism over many years. Enjoy!

Cyber celebrities

Top ten celebrity internet searches of 2012¹

Kim Kardashian
Justin Bieber
Miley Cyrus
Rihanna
Lindsay Lohan
Katy Perry
Selena Gomez
Jennifer Aniston
Nicki Minaj
Taylor Swift

These ten people are basically my bread and butter.

In my time as a showbiz reporter, the biggest change I've seen is just how much we rely on these internet searches. The web might have started out as a geek's playground in the nineties, but it's now entirely mainstream – and it's my biggest outlet. I write stories that go up on it, I research celebs that I'm interviewing with it and I buy things from ASOS through it when I've got an event to attend. Like it is for many people, the internet is part of my job's daily routine.

In my line of work, though, the internet has achieved a fairly unique breakthrough: it has given *you* more power. You're my boss. True, someone needs to write features about these stars in the first place, but once they're online, it's up to you who you search for. Just look at the first two names for proof. Kim Kardashian and Justin Bieber became global brands purely through the power of the internet; fans latched on to their appeal way before us in the press. I'm not sure the people watching grainy footage of Kim getting it on with her boyfriend were the same as those watching a 12-year-old Justin singing R'n'B on YouTube, but the principle is the same. The media can still do a lot to fuel a showbiz fire, but more now than ever, what's hot is often out of our hands. With a largely free internet at our fingertips, the celebrity world is more accessible than ever before.

So after I've done my bit – writing and researching articles, interviewing celebrities, attending junkets – it's over to you. Who you spend your time looking up determines who we spend our time focusing on. If you resent that eminent scientists and liberal thinkers are missing from the list, start searching for a few and maybe we'll have to take notice. But that's the great thing about modern media: it's no longer so full of snobby journalists hiding out in their ivory towers, bleating about what they fancy and taking no notice of their audience. The internet's too transparent for that. These days, we're all in this showbiz world together.

And what a world it is ...

Just another sunday night

Sunday 12 February 2012. It's the night of the BAFTA Film Awards ceremony and I'm bloody freezing.

We're in the heart of what we call the 'season' – those few months during which all the key awards ceremonies seem to take place, everything from the Brits to the Oscars, the BAFTAs and the Elle Style Awards. The trouble with the 'season' is that it's always during the winter. Fine, maybe, for the celebs who party until the small hours in the heated surroundings of the Royal Opera House or the O2, but for us reporters standing outside on the red carpet waiting for them to talk into our microphones, the setting is just a few degrees away from being positively arctic.

I watch my breath blossom into steam in the icy air and crack open yet another hand-warmer pad, tucking it discreetly into the back of my knickers so that it warms the small of my back. Bliss. There's the first lesson from the showbiz world for you: underneath the opulence there's always something significantly more unglamorous.

I'm huddled behind a rope with a group of fellow reporters, all women in evening dresses as per the rules of such an upmarket event. Even at an occasion like the BAFTAs, it seems odd to see people so smartly dressed packed into a small space like animals. We'd probably look more at home in the orange suits worn by caged prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. Still, we all courteously compliment each other on our outfits, despite recognising that it's difficult to look fabulous when you're shaking harder than a nervous *X Factor* contestant.

An ice-cold wind blows up this back street of London's Covent Garden area, a road that has been transformed into something truly special, with huge spotlights, advertising banners and that all-important crimson flooring. On one side of the carpet are scores of reporters; on the other are crowds of fans. Every reporter is required to wear an all-important accreditation around our necks and be in position about an hour before the famous people actually start turning up. We've now been here about 55 minutes. The tension is palpable. So is the frost forming at the end of my nose.

... And then it begins, not the celebrity procession, but an unstoppable thought growing in my brain. Every time I have to cover one of these events, it's always the same. I can't help it. I'm gritting my teeth; it's still there, a loud scream in my head, shouting out in capital letters as I check my watch for the millionth time:

'I BLOODY HATE THIS JOB!'

The bubbly girl huddled next to me is someone I've only seen reporting from the red carpets for the last few months; she smiles at me and giggles. Newbies – they're the only ones that look happy.

'You okay?' she asks.

'Hmmmmm,' I mumble back.

On the outside I smile back at her. Inside I'm crying. She'll understand one day.

Then, suddenly, a roar of excitement erupts from down the line. I crank my head around to see what's happening. Someone is arriving! I rise up from my frozen slouch, microphone at the ready. The carpet is finally starting to fill, a stream of invited guests, not all famous, but each lucky enough to have a ticket to the British movie world's most important night. The screams in the distance suggest a big star has stepped out of their limousine and is beginning the long walk past the crowds. Around me I hear mumbled suggestions as to who it could be:

'Is it Clooney?'

'Please let it be Michael Fassbender!'

'Knowing our luck it'll be Peter Andre.'

The shouting is getting louder, deafening almost. Camera flashes spark out from the crowds. *Okay, Holls*, I tell myself, *here we go*. It's time to snap out of the black mood. Women with clipboards are scurrying about at the fence in front of me, talking into headsets and suddenly pointing in my

direction. So much action after so much nothing. I shift the hand-warmer pad on my back slightly and take a deep breath. Then someone says ...

‘Brad, this is Holly Forrest.’

In the blink of an eye, Brad Pitt is standing in front of me. Shit! Brad ruddy Pitt! He’s smirking, rubbing his hands together to keep warm and looking at me expectantly. The PR girl who’s introduced him stands silently to his side. After an hour of twiddling my thumbs, I have about half-a-second to crank into gear.

‘Hi,’ I say. Except I don’t. What I actually say is more like ‘huh’. My mouth has become so frozen from the cold that my face is more like a ventriloquist’s than a professional journalist.

‘Oh. Hi, Holly. Are you okay?’

‘Yersh, fine.’

Brad Pitt is looking at me weirdly. In an attempt to regain feeling in my lips I’m pouting like a Page 3 girl, and it’s clearly got him a little worried.

‘We’ve met before, right?’

Suddenly, my face flushes. I can feel warmth in my skin again. In fact, I’m blushing. Well, that’s certainly one way of getting my facial features back into working order, I think – get a major Hollywood heart-throb to say that he remembers you. Who cares if I’ve just been doing ridiculous mouth acrobatics in front of one of the world’s most famous men? None of that matters any more because *Brad Pitt has said that he remembers me*.

Of course, the second lesson of the showbiz world is that celebs often pretend to recognise you, because they know how great it makes you feel. Does Brad *really* remember me? I quickly calculate that I have interviewed him at least three times before so although it’s unlikely, it’s not actually out of the question. In truth, the warm buzz of excitement now washing over me doesn’t mind whether he’s lying or not. If you want to play that game, Bradley, I’ll go with it.

The hour that I’ve been waiting here, slowly freezing and losing the will to live, begins to feel like a distant memory. Cold? What cold? The passion of the crowds, the importance of the night and the fact that I’ve now got Benjamin Button at his most beautiful standing just a couple of feet away and claiming to know me are all combining to remind me of something very important, something that up until a few minutes ago I’d completely forgotten. It’s a feeling that always comes back. It’s all I can do now to stop myself from running up the length of the red carpet in front of me and blurting it out to the crowd.

‘I BLOODY LOVE THIS JOB!’

Shaking any distractions out of my head I focus and the interview begins, a well-rehearsed two-hander that Brad and I have both performed many times. Now my mouth has defrosted I’m quickly into the usual line of investigation.

‘What do you think are your chances of winning?’

‘What attracted you to the role?’

‘How’s the family?’

I know – not exactly Paxman, right? Red carpets, though, aren’t the place for intensity. It’s all just a show and everyone’s got a script to follow. Even Brad:

‘I’m just proud to be nominated ... The role had a lot of scope to it ... Angie and the kids are hanging at home right now ...’

Despite the formality, I’m loving it. ‘How could I *ever* complain about this job?’ I’m thinking, as I occasionally lose myself in his sea-blue eyes. This is my home. The chaos going on around me as more stars arrive; the screams of fans, the hails of reporters and photographers; the antenna in my head constantly listening out for a headline or a scoop: these are my comfort zones. The third lesson in showbiz reporting is that this job has a habit of stirring up conflicting emotions, highs and lows – but ultimately I always come back to the same happy conclusion. Right now, there is no other place I’d rather be.

The beaming new girl calls over to me and I'm back down to earth. My 45 seconds with Brad has finished and he's moved on up the line.

'I saw you, Holly Forrest! You were flirting with Brad Pitt.'

'What? And you wouldn't?' I call back. It's true, though, and I'm still flushing. It's not just that I've forgotten about it being cold. I'm now actually hot under the collar.

Brad Pitt, ladies and gentlemen. When it comes to heating you up, he's significantly more effective than a hand-warmer pad down your pants.

College

I had been fascinated by showbiz for a long time, probably because I came from a very average background. The god-like looks and lifestyles of the rich and famous were far removed from my own sedate upbringing; I couldn't help but be dazzled by their tropical allure. But as a child sat gawping in front of *Top of the Pops* every Thursday night, it never occurred to me that I could make a living from the entertainment world. I was far too meek and mild a character to ever be a performer myself; that celebrities had the guts that I lacked to be in the spotlight was part of their mystique. It was only when I grew older, crucially in those final weeks of my English degree when I really needed to start thinking about how I would earn a salary, that it occurred to me that the life of a showbiz reporter could be the one for me. While I might never emulate my teen heroes – acting like Julia Roberts, singing like Mariah Carey or dancing like Paula Abdul – I could at least bask in their glow a little closer. And, who knows, by mingling with the glitterati, maybe some of their confidence would even rub off on me too? This career could be part enjoyment, part psychiatry.

How did I turn this into reality? First of all, like many career paths, I had to study, which certainly wasn't as enjoyable as I'd hoped it might be. Journalism, I was convinced, could be exciting and revolutionary; the right words, the perfect questions, could inform, entertain and even shape history. Being *taught* how to do that, however, was a strangely monotonous nuts-and-bolts experience – and, like analysing a joke, often lost sight of what made it fun in the first place.

Let's take a trip back to the late nineties, and I'll tell you all about it. Britpop's on the radio, Leo's playing Romeo at the cinema and – like every student in the country – I'm ploughing my way through cult classic *The Beach* by Alex Garland.

Oh, I can taste the pints of snakebite and black just thinking about it ...

I was studying at a small town college in northern England. I was actually only there for a few months but, because I was miserable, it seemed like a lifetime. After my interesting and undeniably free-thinking degree in English Literature, this much more practical postgraduate course felt very dry. Suddenly, after three years of fanciful theories and intellectual posturing, I had to be straight and serious. As an undergrad, I floated about quoting Virginia Woolf and had few worries about the future. Now I was knuckling down and preparing for an actual job.

I'd enjoyed writing for the student newspaper as an undergrad and had watched every episode of *Press Gang* as a young girl; I knew what I wanted to do and was aware that some kind of professional qualifications wouldn't go amiss if I wanted to be a proper entertainment journalist. This was, after all, in the days before anyone could start up a blog and become a 'writer'. Back then wannabe journalists felt the need to actually – shock horror – train. I'd plumped for this particular course simply because it had been the only one with a flyer in my university's careers library.

This postgrad diploma, while adding another few thousand pounds to my student loan, should at least help me to fulfil my dream. By learning the ropes of writing a story and doing an interview I'd be able to then use that knowledge to focus on my chosen field of entertainment. It was a big commitment but – in my head at least – simple. I was confident I'd be joined by fellow open-minded arts students, so what could go wrong?

My peers and lecturers, of course, had other ideas. While the course I chose was no doubt a fabulous one for people wanting to be political heavyweights writing for the *Financial Times*, my showbiz goals were slightly less catered for. All traces of entertainment had seemingly been deleted from our lessons. I spent my days in shorthand classes – an utterly boring skill which teaches you, over many hours, to simply write *a little bit quicker* – and getting 'vox pops' on the streets. God I hate 'vox pops', the technical term for the soundbites journalists collect from people out doing their shopping which you see on news programmes and read in the papers ('vox pop', a rather slang Latin term, translates as 'voice of the people'). Just one glimpse of my sullen face, giant microphone in hand, and

the locals would scurry away from me. Chris Brown would get a better welcome at a women's refuge. This, I would think to myself as I made my way back to college with only the wise words of the local street cleaner on my minidisc recorder, wasn't as much fun as talking about gigs, gossip and the latest happenings on *Hollyoaks*. It was going to be a long few months ...

Getting started

Part I: My First Story

‘Boyzone are outselling The Spice Girls by two to one.’

Not, I realise, a groundbreaking scoop up there with Kate Middleton topless or George Michael caught getting naughty in an LA loo (thank you to *The Sun* for their headline: ‘Zip me up before you go go’). Still, the battle between the Irish crooners and girl power will always be special to me. It was my first attempt to liven up my journalism course, and my first ever showbiz story. It was the scoop that showed me the way.

On that fateful day, half-asleep after another lesson in local government, I was instructed by my tutor to head into town and simply ‘find a story’. This is what, we were told, real journalists do when their publication or broadcaster is short of material. They just find out stuff and record it, like a nosey neighbour with a notebook. So, jotter in hand, I shuffled off into the streets to find a scoop. But I had a problem – if I tried to bluff my way through a chat about politics, the person I was talking to would easily catch me out. That I didn’t know the first thing about NHS funding or interest rates was written on my face. But if I could find an entertainment story, I would be on safe ground. My fellow students could do with a bit of frivolity too.

An hour later, the whole class was back in our makeshift newsroom, preparing to share our freshly unearthed breaking news stories with our sniffy lecturer.

‘The housing market in the area has seen a significant rise in the last few weeks according to a local estate agent,’ said one girl, a 21-year-old like me, but with the smug air of a City banker on 200 grand a week, before snapping her notebook shut with a what-do-you-think-of-*that*? flourish.

‘Very good,’ replied my tutor. ‘That’s just the kind of thing we’re hunting for. Strong, clear stuff. Who’s next?’

A boy who had annoyed me from the beginning of term now piped up. Vocally religious to the point of tedium, he never wasted any opportunity to harp on about his piety.

‘The priest at St Michael’s is strenuously opposed to the prospect of a casino opening on the outskirts of town. I called by the church and he was more than happy to talk to me.’

‘Excellent,’ responded our tutor with ever-growing jollity. Our tutor was a dapper little man with an upper-class way of expression: ‘A top notch story. Follow that one up please.’ The Archbishop of Canterbury in front of me seemed to momentarily forget his modesty and looked extremely pleased with himself.

And then, it came. ‘So ... Holly. Over to you. What eye-opener have *you* got for us?’

Okay. Here we go. I looked down at my notes then back up at the faces staring at me. I knew they wouldn’t like it. My peers were a surprising bunch, all of us were barely out of adolescence, but their earnestly worthy approaches to life were a real downer for me. Their heroes were Kate Adie and Trevor McDonald. Mine were French and Saunders.

‘Boyzone are outselling The Spice Girls by two to one,’ I blurted out, fully aware that this would probably go down about as well as a supermodel at a slimming club.

A couple of snorts came from the audience then a painful silence. The tutor in charge raised a quizzical eyebrow.

‘And this is news because ...?’

‘W-well,’ I stammered. ‘This is the big pop battle of the moment. Boys versus girls. And these sales figures, well they’re a sneak preview into who’s going to win the fight. The guy in HMV said he wasn’t even supposed to tell me but I bought the new Jamiroquai CD from him to help sweeten the pill. Midweek sales figures are a bit of a secret, you know.’ (A few years later websites would proudly print the official midweek sales figures without hesitation. Back then, things were a little more surreptitious.)

Silence. I suspected that the kind of numbers I was interested in – the Top 40 broadcast on the radio every Sunday – weren't the kind he thought I should be spending my time on. That day's FTSE figures, fair enough. But new entries and highest climbers? Big mistake.

'Hmmm, I don't think so,' he replied with his military air. 'It's not really front-page stuff is it? A bit frivolous. Anyone got anything that's *proper* news?'

The Spice Girls, I don't need to remind you, went on to dominate both the music industry and the media all over the world. Everyone wanted to know about them. Posh Spice changing her hair from a bob to a pixie cut might not be as politically significant as the property market or Sunday trading, I knew that, but to suggest it's not headline-worthy nor interesting to millions of people is to underestimate the power of the entertainment world – the industry, incidentally, that is Britain's biggest export. Among my peers my interests appeared frothy, but I knew that when a star arrives that offers something fresh, something different, something exciting, millions of people want to know more. Passions are ignited and we can't get enough. Sat there, head hung low, feeling as out of place as a porn star at Disneyland, I was more determined than ever to immerse myself in this business of escapism. I would prove to these squares that it did have a point. Showbiz was an inspiration to the world and I wanted to be inspired for a living. And to inspire.

Part II: The Lucky Break

At every opportunity over the next few months I dropped a showbiz story into our daily meetings. Eyes never failed to roll, but I didn't care. I'd discovered how to enjoy myself. I kept my head down and, amid the atmosphere of collective paranoia in which my peers fought over the same job adverts in the Media section of *The Guardian* every Monday, I focused on one kind of career in one kind of place: I wanted to be a showbiz reporter in London.

It wasn't long before I came across a 'situations vacant' that suited my ambitions. The advert had explained that the editor of an entertainment magazine in the capital was looking for a junior to help cover the slew of music festivals the summer had to offer and generally assist around the office. Perfect, I thought, as I sealed the envelope containing my CV. Unsurprisingly it was an ad all my fellow students had studiously ignored. After what seemed a lifetime's wait, I got a call asking me to go for an interview with the editor. I couldn't believe it. Apparently she'd liked the chatty, friendly style of my application. It was just after Easter when I finally headed down on the train to London, ready for my moment. The questions asked about the showbiz world didn't catch me out, but I feared the awfully middle-aged green business suit I stupidly decided to wear could be my undoing. The editor sat opposite me in the boardroom, her face non-committal, her outfit effortlessly chic. I journeyed back to college that night hopeful but realistic.

The next evening I found out I'd got the job. I'D GOT THE JOB! I would start as soon as my course finished in June.

So it was, a couple of months later, that term ended and, as my fellow students headed off to write about budgets and elections in a variety of newspapers, I left small town life and headed south to the big city with only a portable TV and bag full of clothes to my name. I would be renting a studio flat on an inner city main road, sharing with my old Uni friend Erica, and earning barely £200 a week. My parents, I could tell, were petrified. But it didn't matter to me. The dream was coming true.

The rest, as they say, is history ...

Publicists

The first people I met once I'd stepped through the doorway into the world of celebrity journalism, however, were not celebrities. They were publicists. And it wasn't long before I realised that while the showbiz world had for many years appeared to me to run effortlessly like a well-oiled machine, it's because of these publicists who are hidden away behind the cogs spraying on the WD40. In the entertainment world, talent and originality count for surprisingly little. Publicity, on the other hand, is everything. For every unrecognised genius *without* a publicist raising their profile, there's a bimbo hogging the limelight with a team pushing them into the papers.

Heading to London that June, wellies on foot, ready for three months of festival-going, I hadn't even considered there were backroom teams running the show. If you'd asked me then what a plugger was, I'd have said some kind of electrician. Now, of course, after many years in the industry, these people are a part of my life, many high on my list of best friends, others mortal enemies. It was only after making this discovery, that when watching episodes of *Absolutely Fabulous* that I totally got what the joke is. Before I laughed at the panto-like silliness of it all but now ... Now, I *know* those characters.

Publicists are the behind-the-scenes string pullers, the reasons why you open up newspapers or log on to a website and see the same faces again and again. Just out of shot, invisible to the general public, publicists are pulling favours with the press to get their client snapped, written about or interviewed. 'Do a feature on this new up-and-comer that I've just signed up,' they might suggest, 'and I'll let you have an exclusive with my big name in a couple of months.' Their lives are a maelstrom of schedules and sweet-talking, BlackBerry's permanently attached to their hands like children clinging to their comfort blankets; their days packed with meetings over skinny lattes, their nights with more meetings over popping champagne corks. If ultimately their job is little more than a very posh take on the nightclub bouncer – 'I can't squeeze you into the interview schedule' their version of 'You're name's not down, you're not coming in' – reporters quickly come to realise that it is these super-efficient sideliners that run the show. If they say 'jump', we say 'how high?' Cross them and we won't be getting close to the big names.

This was just one aspect of show business that I had to learn fast. Plonked into the office on my first day, I was painfully aware that my new colleagues really didn't have the time to hold my hand and teach me the ropes. I'd have to learn the hard way by simply getting stuck in. So it was, after chasing a few leads handed to me by my new boss, I worked out that there are several types of publicist in the showbiz world, each slightly different to the other although all, ultimately, doing the same thing – getting their client 'out there', into the public eye.

It was with a music industry publicist – a plugger – that I had my very first dealings.

We'd just spoken on the phone and arranged, at the request of my boss, an interview with a band's guitarist who had apparently had some of his kit stolen the night before. I was to head to a studio on Holloway Road in London and speak to the unlucky performer about his recent loss. The band were nineties poster boys – complete with floppy hair and smooth-skinned good looks. 'What a great scoop!' I naïvely thought as I made my way to the venue, especially excited at doing a story on a band that I'd loved for several years.

'Just a few days into my first job and I'm already sniffing out stories!' I congratulated myself.

A lovely bloke he was too, sitting on a giant speaker in the middle of the floor of the studio, attempting to sound forlorn at the loss of his favourite Fender. We had a good chat; with me surprised to find it much easier to talk to pop stars than to real people in the street. However, while I don't doubt the robbery, the plugger had obviously seen this whole situation less as time for the band to sit around mourning and more as a great opportunity for a bit of publicity. They did, coincidentally, have a new single coming out and upcoming gigs to promote after all. Suddenly, thanks to some greedy thieves in

North London, there was a ‘hook’ on which to get the band in the limelight again and unbeknownst to me, I’d been dragged right in. The story was mentioned on the television news that night, the band’s new video getting played in the process, and *boom* maybe a few more thousand record sales as a result. So, there was my professional showbiz news debut: as a stooge in a small yet cunning piece of PR spin. And this was with a credible band in the days before reality TV and endless gossip magazines – corners of the industry that now exist on a diet of such carefully fed stories – had really kicked off.

Pluggers would prove to be a big part of my life during the coming months, as I wrote my way through a roll call of late nineties musicians to fill the magazine’s pages. Some were already legends – Tom Jones, Phil Collins; others went on to have long careers – the Stereophonics and Ronan Keating, whose sales figures I had so eagerly announced back in that classroom at college. Many are now, alas, just footnotes in the history pages of pop; hello to Chumbawamba and Kavana. All of them had their pluggers, more often than not cheeky-chappy public school boys in their thirties, who dressed and behaved as if they were 17 and from Hackney. They boasted a passive-aggressive swagger that was part seasoned music industry insider, part market trader. If their drawn faces gave away just how hard they partied you couldn’t dismiss their influence. It quickly became clear that the music business was being run by frustrated rock stars.

Film publicists, though ostensibly doing the same job, are a very different breed. Like music publicists, they may have their own independent companies or they may work directly for a big label or studio. But unlike pluggers, film publicists are a mainly female race of clipboard huggers, who reek of refinement rather than roll-ups. I’ve often wondered if, at exclusive girls’ boarding schools, there’s some kind of work placement scheme within the film industry, since so many of the publicists seem to be only a few pairs of jodhpurs away from being part of the monarchy (both Sophie Rhys-Jones, aka the Countess of Wessex, and Tom Parker Bowles, stepson of Prince Charles, have worked in film and events publicity). To public school girls from the home counties, segueing into PR seems to be as natural as driving a Range Rover and holidaying at your parents’ farmhouse in Provence. Their love lives might sometimes suffer (long hours are part of the job description, since so much is done ‘on LA time’ – i.e. the middle of the night), but what these girls lack in romance, they gain in desperate journalists wanting to be their friends.

Ultimately, I prefer to work with film publicists. With their tall, slender builds and glossy hair, they might have a habit of making my genes feel extremely average, but there’s a classiness there that the pluggers seem to want to avoid. It’s like comparing Jamie Oliver to Nigella Lawson. I guess sophistication just isn’t very rock ‘n’ roll. However, unlike pluggers, who all seem to have a real passion for music (as I said, they’re frustrated pop stars), it’s rare that I meet a film publicist who’s a dedicated *cinéaste*. But they are very good at wearing black and organising press schedules.

Every corner of showbiz has its own publicists, not just music and movies. There are book PRs, television PRs, theatre PRs, fashion PRs and events PRs, arts PRs, the list goes on. Each breed of these fixers, pushers and spin doctors might have slightly different traits but ultimately they all share one very important thing in common: without them, I’d be screwed.

London

The late 1990s. Rush hour. And I was cycling down Oxford Street in London. Ask me to do this now and I'd laugh in your face, warned off by ten years of accident horror stories and, more importantly, the idea of cycling anywhere in the kind of outfits I usually wear. As a green and naïve newbie on the other hand? I was off and pedalling quicker than you can say 'Pendleton thighs'.

This was during my first few months as a salaried journalist at the magazine. A celebrity court case was taking place at the now-closed Bow Street Magistrates Court and I had been informed by my panicking boss late one afternoon that I needed to get down there, and fast.

'Y-y-y-you want me to report on the story?' I stuttered, wide-eyed and in shock.

'Don't be silly, Holly –' She smiled at me in that kind but patronising way bosses are so good at – 'Sophie's down there and the batteries have run out on her recorder. I need you to get down there bloody quickly with these.' She opened up her palm in front of me to reveal a four pack of Duracell.

Yes, my life was sooo glamorous.

'Dappy cow should've taken spares obviously but there you go. If she's not up and running in the next half an hour, she'll miss the post-verdict statement on the steps. With shorthand as bad as hers, I can't rely on her getting anything down. Take my bike. It's locked up just next to the post-room. That'll be the quickest way.'

Her other palm then appeared, revealing a set of keys to a bicycle lock. Hungry to prove myself a willing new employee, I grabbed them along with the batteries and hurried off.

Watching that cute show *Call the Midwife* on TV the other night, I was treated to umpteen scenes of the female stars cycling gracefully around the back streets of fifties London. Poised and pretty, they don't seem to have a care in the world (despite supposedly being in a rush to deliver the babies of hard-up, slum-dwelling Cockneys). This younger version of me, on the other hand, quickly found herself caught in the middle of a stream of cars, all apparently being driven by countless Jeremy Clarksons in a hurry to get home, with only the vaguest idea of how to get to the court house from our offices. Horns papped as I wobbled nervously into the middle of the road; cab drivers hollered as I dithered aimlessly at junctions and tried to remember the right way to go.

I can only imagine what my parents, already worried about my emigration to 'The Big Smoke', would have said if they'd known I was fumbling around W1 on the back of a two-wheeler (sorry Mum!). That said, my boss's bike was a ridiculously chic and hi-tech affair – one of those lightweight mountain bikes that probably cost as much as I was earning in a month. Should I fall off, I was less worried about my own injuries, more about chipping the paintwork on this work of art.

I had only two resources to guide me: an A to Z that I'd scanned briefly back in the office but which I had unhelpfully placed in my bag, and memories of childhood games of Monopoly. The Strand – that was one of the 'red' areas, near to Trafalgar Square, right? I felt for the batteries in my pocket before hooking an uncertain left and praying for guidance. I just needed to get the double AAs to Sophie and everything would be okay. I might even be deemed efficient enough to be given a real story to work on. And I would still be able to write, even with a leg squashed by an impatient London bus driver.

Over the years, I've got to know the bustling streets of sprawling Central London extremely well. I've had to. Showbiz events aren't confined to one place, despite Leicester Square being the most famous location for premieres. Swanky hotels from Mayfair to Embankment, Piccadilly to Covent Garden, fight with each other to host showbiz bashes, knowing that having a major record company or film studio as a regular customer would earn them thousands. I've been to some venues so many times, the concierge welcomes me like an old friend (although, I sometimes wonder if he realises I'm actually a journalist, not some hooker on a call-out). Now, I favour two feet over any other method of transport, what with buses being at the whim of traffic just like everyone else and the hassle of the

London Underground hardly being worth it if the venues are central, and I can just as easily walk. I've also found that pacing the streets every week keeps you in shape almost as much as an intense session of Zumba down at the local sports centre would – and without the annoying instructor. On the days that I do have to take a cab I'm as familiar with the shortcuts and alternative routes as the drivers that take me. (My accountant may baulk at these taxi expenses every year, but has he ever tried to maintain a poker-straight blow-dry while walking in the pouring rain from Park Lane to Soho? I don't think so.)

One thing is for sure – I certainly wouldn't cycle any more. But, back then, on my mission, I was only just learning about the city's traffic chaos. Thankfully, after about 20 or so hellish minutes, I finally reached the court and handed over the batteries to a ridiculously thankful Sophie. I hung around for a few minutes, and watched as the musician who'd been in the dock that day came out on to the steps of the building to read out a statement. He'd been involved in a messy court case with former band mates, all of them arguing over royalties. Now he'd won, he looked relieved that it was all over. I knew how he felt.

Sophie was standing in among the throng of microphones and television cameras, holding out her dictaphone to record every word and even throwing in a few questions to the beaming pop star. Forgetful she may have been, but she was doing what I dreamt of doing.

Still, I had hope that one day soon I'd be given a chance. I'd already learnt several important lessons, after all:

- 1 Always be prepared and carry a spare packet of batteries.
- 2 Memorise the London street map like your life depends on it. Oh, and
- 3 Never cycle down Oxford Street at five o'clock in the evening. I wheeled the bike all the way back to the office.

Festivals

A few weeks after joining the magazine, having made a considerable amount of coffee and run endless errands, I finally got to do what I had been hired to do in the first place: report from some of that summer's music festivals. With a camera and notebook in hand, I set out to get a snapshot of the fashions and fads going on in remote fields that season, unaware that I was about to make a huge discovery about my career choice.

There are more festivals now than ever. Some are legendary, like Glastonbury and Reading; others are out of the way in small towns and normally feature a seventies dad rocker as a headline act. Every summer we have ample opportunities to pop on our jean shorts and cowboy hats, neck pints of warm cider and chill out in sunny fields for a weekend listening to bands we've never heard of. Sounds blissful, right?

Everyone knows that Glastonbury is amazing. Thousands of revellers gathered in a historic setting, all united by a shared love of music and partying. A loved-up crowd singing along to soaring anthems on a balmy midsummer night is a magical experience – at least, this is certainly what I had been told at school by my more adventurous mates, those girls whose parents weren't quite as panicky as my own and who seemingly lived a much more exciting life than mine by being allowed to travel miles to gigs. When I first got the job at the magazine, knowing that I was heading for the festivals, I couldn't wait to make up for lost time.

But this, it turned out, is not how it works for a showbiz reporter. It's hard enough as a regular ticket holder to plough through the mud and crowds to get from the dance tent on one edge of the camp to the main stage at the other in time for the headline act. As a showbiz journalist, with recording equipment and a deadline, you can multiply that difficulty by ten.

When you work in an industry that is – for most people – a leisure pursuit, you learn something very quickly: what was once your hobby is now your bread and butter. What you once did to chill out is now your job. That's not to say I don't still enjoy listening to music, watching the TV or going to the cinema as a pastime; it is, however, difficult to switch off completely. Maybe I've met the actor up there on the cinema screen and, since they gave me really boring answers to my questions, I'm finding it difficult to imagine them as a charismatic action hero (I'm talking about you, Nic Cage). Or perhaps the love song that I'm listening to, all heartfelt and emotional, is hard to swallow since its singer sadly seemed little more than a hard-nosed businesswoman when I met her (and that's you, Christina Aguilera).

It was during my outings to festivals that summer that I had my first taste of this. I was in work-mode, while seemingly everyone around me was soaking up the sun and smoking weed. I spent more time worrying about whether I'd get the interviews I needed than I did actually kicking back and enjoying the gigs.

The schedule of the festival season soon became engrained in my brain – and it still is. In recent years, the Isle of Wight festival, reborn after its legendary status in the 1970s, has been kicking things off in mid-June, but it's still Glastonbury a week or so later that really marks the start of a long summer in wellington boots. Then there's the riotous T in the Park in Kinross-shire, the arty Latitude in a Suffolk forest, the highly commercial V in both Chelmsford and south Staffordshire, the ear-splitting Reading and Leeds festivals, that take place over the same August Bank Holiday weekend as the rave-tastic Creamfields, and then it's all wrapped up at the quirky, boutique Bestival, which takes place back on the Isle of Wight where things all began ten weeks earlier. Not to mention a huge number of smaller festivals around the country and a plethora of branded events in virtually every park in London.

Despite the fact that it's never quite the same when you're attending them 'on the job', some of my experiences at these events were nothing short of incredible; bands always seem to try that bit harder at festivals – with such a variety of people in the crowd, they need to.

But there's one particular experience, a few years into my career, which will stay with me for ever. It was 2002; Rod Stewart was headlining Glastonbury on the Sunday and I'd spent most of the day on the phone trying to arrange an interview. Each time the answer from a record-company minion was the same: 'Maybe. Ask me later and I'll tell you where we are with things.' I'd walked from stage to stage trying to track down Rod's PR team, but to no avail. After a bit more searching and several more unsuccessful phone calls, the sun began to set over the Pilton hills.

With Rod presumably warming up for his set by gargling broken glass, the chances of meeting with my mum's favourite were frankly looking slim. I'd rung up a huge mobile bill and stressed myself out for nothing. With a heavy heart – and a resolution to erase 'Maggie May' from my iPod – I hung up my microphone for the day and headed over to the legendary Healing Fields, which were seemingly at least a mile away from the razzmatazz of the main stage. Determined to forget about work, I sat back with a 'special' chocolate brownie purchased from a stall nearby run by someone who frankly looked like a witch (albeit a nice witch), and basked in the final glow of the sun. Seemingly from nowhere, a girl about my age came up to me and offered to tattoo my hand with henna (feeling spontaneous, I accepted, obviously). A few feet in front of us, a group of women, all dressed in long white flowing robes, gathered in a circle and started to sing some sort of ancient madrigal about flowers and honey. As the luscious chocolate started working its magic, this song began to sound like *The Greatest Thing I'd Ever Heard*. Quite suddenly – and for the first time – I felt what the real Glastonbury was all about. Far away from the feisty crowds and the fast food and Rod Stewart and – crucially – reporting, I was finally relaxing into the true, love-filled, ancient spirit of the festival.

Back in London the next day the tattoo looked awful, of course, and my boss was highly annoyed that I had no interview with Rod for her to run. But that one moment away from the madness, away from the pressure, away from the aching legs and missed deadlines of being a showbiz journalist at a festival, was definitely worth it.

Some other favourite festival moments? Coldplay's first Glastonbury turn in 1999, when they were still just four nerdy university students who loved indie music, was a fabulous statement of intent. Jay-Z's Glastonbury headlining nine years later was a much-needed injection of American swagger into the West Country cow fields. And while I might not have been old enough to see the legendary turn by Nirvana at Reading in 1992, every time I've seen former member Dave Grohl headline a festival with the Foo Fighters it's been pure energy, passion and sweat. (Dave gives great interview.)

Of course, there are always musos who've been to a lot more festivals than I have, and each will relish describing to me – *a mere reporter* – a favourite that was supposedly 'the greatest gig ever' ('What?! You didn't see Amy Winehouse perform with a bunch of Indonesian nose flautists on the Save the Rainforest stage at 3 a.m. on Sunday morning back in 2007? And you call yourself a music fan?!'). Expert I may not be, but I still appreciate a good quality gig. I'm sure many of the bearded boys at Glastonbury were none too pleased when Beyoncé brought some pop bling to the farm in 2011 but personally, I couldn't get enough, though. Showbiz for me has always had talent and glamour going hand-in-hand.

Maybe that's another reason why *working* the festivals wasn't exactly a career highlight: wading through a muddy field at midnight when you haven't washed for 48 hours, you haven't eaten anything except a dodgy burger from a food van *and* you've got a deadline looming, can never be described as glamorous. The backstage press area where reporters lurk might boast proper toilets (I certainly don't care about the 'festival' experience when it comes to sanitation – I will defend my right to a toilet that actually flushes), but even home comforts can't get you an interview with Rod Stewart any more easily.

Premieres

Working premieres as a journalist can be fun simply because of the buzz. You can almost taste the expectation in the air, as you stand behind the rope, all your colleagues squashed up against each other (it helps to get on with other showbiz journos for precisely this reason), each of you excitedly uncertain as to what the next couple of hours will hold. In London there's a premiere roughly every week. The majority don't get the kind of blanket national press coverage that publicists dream of. But when they work, they *really* work, for both the film companies and the attendees. Liz Hurley turning up to the premiere of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in a dress held together by safety pins made her name. Borat arriving at his premiere in a cart pulled by Kazakhstani peasant women guaranteed Sacha Baron Cohen a million column inches. And, while Julia Roberts forgetting to shave under her arms for the premiere of *Notting Hill* might not have been a planned publicity stunt, it got that movie more attention than the PR company could have dreamt of. Somewhere, some film producer is still counting his money and silently thanking a dippy LA maid for forgetting to pack Julia's razor. So, while many premieres come and go uneventfully, some change the face of showbiz. Who will turn up? What will they be wearing? Will the star of the movie stop and talk or not? With a well-known TV presenter usually hosting the night's events from a stage in Leicester Square and whipping the audience into a frenzy with promises of imminent arrivals, it's impossible not to feed off the energy of the night. Fans scream. Paparazzi flashes light up the night. Familiar reporters line the carpet with their cameramen, all hoping to get the best interview of the night. The red carpet has a magical pull. But as a journalist, there's also a downside; once the curtains go up, we have to go straight back to work. When the final celebrity has arrived, the final flashbulb has popped, the final interview wound up, it's back to the office we go to write up the night's events. The guests? Oh, they're in the cinema having a great time watching the film and thinking about how many free drinks and nibbles they can neck at the party afterwards. But me, I'm quickly shoved back into the real world; working late with only my computer screen and mug of cold tea for company, and listening back to the endless soundbites, trying to sniff out a sexy story from it all. As a showbiz reporter you get close to an extremely opulent and glamorous world – but never quite close enough. Which is why, when my first proper invite to a premiere arrived, I went a bit over the top ...

I couldn't believe it. I had been working as a journalist for just over a year, and was well versed in the art of standing behind barriers on red carpets, waiting in the freezing cold for Celebrity X to turn up and possibly say a few words into my microphone. But now I finally had in my hands what I'd always dreamt of: a *proper* invite to a premiere. I looked at it again; even the gold lettering embossed on the thick cardboard was enough to get the butterflies in my stomach flapping like crazy. In just seven days I wouldn't be like all my colleagues, crammed into what's charmingly called the 'press pen' for hours. Oh no. I would be leaving my recording gear happily at home. My time as a voyeur would be over. I would be on the *other* side, glamorously swishing up the red carpet and mingling with the VIPs: a proper guest at a film premiere and party.

I had to start preparing. The bank of snappers gathered on their ladders might want to take my picture as I arrived; I had to look my best. I studiously practised posing in front of my bedroom mirror before I went to bed each night, drifting off to sleep with the imagined sound of a hundred camera shutters chiming melodically in my head.

Why was I invited? Errrr ... That never really crossed my mind, to be honest. I'd had a couple of articles published in the magazine by this point, and I must have thought that I was making a name for myself. This was most likely a reward from a thoughtful film company for a complimentary story. In truth, the whole thing had made me a little ditz. I wasn't used to special treatment. Suddenly, uncharacteristically, all I cared about was being thought of as 'someone' for the night – the mysterious girl on the red carpet that gets the crowds whispering ...

‘Who is she?’

‘I’ve no idea. But if she’s got an invite, she *must* be famous.’

‘True. Over here strange lady! Over here! Sign my autograph book and let me have a photo taken with you!’

Vacuous, I know. But what can I say? I’ve never been fame-hungry, but I have always been fascinated by unlikely celebrities; people like Chantelle Houghton, the girl-next-door that posed as a star and ended up winning *Celebrity Big Brother*. During my short time as a showbiz reporter, I’d already come to realise that sometimes the main difference between ‘the stars’ and ‘us’ is attitude. The stars *believe* that they’re worthy of fame, and as a result, it comes their way. It’s all about conviction. I’d had very little opportunity to actually put this theory into practice, until now, with a red carpet to walk, where I could try it out.

The days before the big night seemed to last a lifetime. I even had to work another premiere in the run-up, and enviously watched the guests saunter up the red carpet without a care in the world. Very soon, I reassured myself, that would be me. I’d bought a new outfit for the occasion, something that was high street, but could never be described as ‘just another dress’. With a low-cut neckline and swishing fishtail, I was out to make a statement. The day before, I humiliated myself by putting on paper knickers and allowing a stranger to spray me mahogany, to give me that LA radiance. Debuting the whole ensemble in front of my housemate Erica that night – who as my ‘date’ was also primping and preening like a *TOWIE* girl – I couldn’t help but think back to the disparaging comments I’d had about my showbiz obsession back at college. Of course, interest rates and global warming are much more urgent topics of discussion than the latest blockbuster in the grand scheme of things, but nothing could compare to this for pure excitement. Showbiz *should* be exciting. Empty it may occasionally be, but is there really anything wrong with simple fun? Back at university, Erica and I had bonded over a mutual love of Ewan McGregor nude scenes and perfecting the moves to ‘The Macarena’, so I knew she’d be my perfect companion. The last person you want next to you at a premiere is someone who takes it all seriously.

Leicester Square seemed extra packed that night; clambering through the crowds to the start of the carpet proved especially difficult in four-inch heels, one of which I’d already managed to get unceremoniously stuck in the groove of a London Underground escalator. I was starting to feel a little sweaty from the exertion, and began to dream about the kind of chauffeur-driven limo that transports most celebs to premieres. I just had to hope I could pass off my hot flush as ‘glow’.

Eventually we reached the security men who were guarding the sacred carpet from the great unwashed and, after flashing my tickets at them with a degree of smugness that even I was surprised by, we were let on to the crimson runway. It stretched ahead of us for about 100 metres, stopping just short of the cinema doors – but now was not the time to pull a Usain Bolt, I would be taking this slowly, savouring every second. On our left were fans and autograph hunters, many of whom would have been camped out since this morning in order to get a good position. On our right, the journalists, familiar faces largely, but they looked different from this angle, as if they were more bored than excited. But I didn’t want to be reminded of my day job. I took a deep breath, blocked them out and began my journey.

And then came the deafening sound of ... silence. As we strutted up the carpet, the colour drained even from my fake-tanned skin as I found myself being firmly put into place. No one shouted my name. No one took a photo. And, of course, from my colleagues in the press pen, there was not one request for an interview. All I saw on their faces was an expression that said ‘Who does she think she is?’

I soon started to quicken my pace, desperate to get the whole experience over with quickly. I’d hoped to feel, just for a moment, like a part of the celeb world; in the end, I’d never felt further away from it. While a red carpet might feel like home for the famous, the screams of fans serving as a validation of their work, for someone unknown like me it is the loneliest place in the world.

Eventually inside, I had another humiliation to suffer. I bumped into a girl from a rival magazine, like me she was there as a guest, and was chatting to a group of people I knew from a local radio station. They'd been sent a whole bunch of invites too. Still dressed in their work clothes, they looked me up and down, smiled sympathetically at all the effort I'd gone to, then carried on their conversation. A journalist trying to be glam was obviously 'so not cool'.

Since that night, I've learnt an important lesson about premieres: eventually *everyone* gets invited. Of course, film companies send out wads of tickets – they want the event to look busy and buzzing. It wouldn't do to have empty seats at a premiere; after all, they don't want their star to look out from the stage as they introduce the movie only to be greeted by the sight of a half-full auditorium. So us 'regular' people in the media get invited. We're needed only for our bulk.

Erica gave my hand a reassuring squeeze as we walked down the aisle. We took our seats – just regular chairs at the back of a cinema I'd sat in many times before. The sheen was rapidly vanishing from the evening. More people, all of whom looked as if they'd come straight from the office, took the seats around us. The only 'celebrities' visible in the vicinity were a dance duo who'd found minor fame on a TV talent show a couple of years earlier. While the ticket may have said that we must be seated by 6.45 p.m. sharp, at 7.20 p.m. we were still no nearer to watching the film. We sat there waiting, uncertain what to say, munching loudly on the free packets of Maltesers that had been placed on our seats. I started to feel nostalgic for the cosiness of my office, with my dazzling computer screen and my trusty cuppa. Finally, after 45 minutes, the producer and stars of the film appeared on the stage to introduce the movie. But, as the lights went down, I saw them slip out of the fire exit with their entourages, heading off into the night to do something far more sexy and exclusive than watching their movie with a bunch of nobodies. I slipped off my high heels and curled up into the seat – as much as I could curl up in that bloody dress, anyway – wishing I could just go home.

Thankfully, I wasn't allowed to. The film, which to add insult to injury, was terrible, wrapped up and Erica virtually dragged me up to the waiting buses that were shipping us all out to a party venue down by the Thames. I knew that I was about to get a talking to.

'Holly Forrest, you listen to me. You might not be a superstar and the movie that you took me to might have sucked big time, but that's no reason for our night to end on a downer, okay? Let's get on this bus, let's sit on the back seat like naughty schoolgirls, then let's go to the party and drink too much and dance like idiots. Are you with me or are you with me?'

I swear Erica could have been a sergeant major in another life.

So that's exactly what we did. Until four in the morning, if you really want to know. And the best thing about all of it? Almost every celebrity we saw there looked miserable, unable to really let their hair down because they know it's never good to be photographed looking worse for wear. But us? We could do whatever we wanted and no one would care – two deliriously drunk, happily carefree nobodies.

Home life

In the same way that I only really understood a lot of *Absolutely Fabulous* after I'd started mingling with similarly hilarious PR women, I only really 'got' a lot of romantic comedy films once I'd started to analyse my own life as a media girl. On inspection, my day-to-day existence looked a lot like the plot of a Katherine Heigl movie – without the benefit of actually looking like her. It's no surprise that so many 'chick flicks' have their lead characters work in journalism (*The Devil Wears Prada*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* to name but a few). It's a world rammed with confused women – women who, on the one hand, are desperate to prove themselves in a career by working every hour that God sends, but on the other wanting to lead a normal life: spend time with friends, have a relationship, maybe even a family. Of course, it is possible to do a bit of both. The fact that it's not exactly easy, however, is the kind of dramatic conundrum that every rom-com screenwriter in Hollywood wets themselves with excitement about.

Take my friendship group as a case in point.

It's a Sunday afternoon and I'm cosying up by the fire in my North London local with my friends, relaxing after a hard week (the previous Wednesday had witnessed the BRIT Awards – always exhausting) and enjoying a massive roast dinner. My housemate Erica is one of my oldest cronies, she's the kind of girl I can talk to about anything. She works in the media too, though less on the journalistic side and more in marketing. At work she's a ball-busting career woman who rules the roost. I've been to meet her at the office on a couple of occasions and seen her in action; her minions flock around her like an entourage around J-Lo. But when she's at home at night in our flat, laid out on the sofa with only a slanket and a Kate Hudson box-set to keep her company, she turns into Bridget Jones. I know that she could morph into a lover, girlfriend, even wife, very easily, the transformation just one online date away. For the moment, though, she seems happy enough being the classic chick flick singleton for whom work is her only significant other.

Then there's Ali, a fellow showbiz writer. She never stops either. Shops, bars, even doctors' surgeries all have their closing times. Ali, however, doesn't follow such specific hours. Her worklife is always ongoing, a 24-hour rollercoaster. It's exactly that which led to her break-up from a boy she'd been with for four years. He just couldn't stand the pace. Since the entertainment capital of the world, Los Angeles, is eight hours behind London time, there's simply no other way to cover a lot of breaking news than to pull an all-nighter. Four years of sharing your bed with his girlfriend's iPad was just all too much for him.

Then there's me. I won't go into detail as to what I was doing when I got the call, late one Thursday night in June 2009, that Michael Jackson was dead, but let's just say that jumping out of bed, throwing on some clothes and running out of the door swearing loudly isn't exactly conducive to passion. Especially when you can't even remember whose flat you're in. Not my classiest moment, but if I'm called in to do a shift, I'm called in to do a shift. As I sat forlornly in the back of the cab that Thursday night, trying to smooth my barnet into something that didn't look so obviously like 'sex hair', I could already imagine Drew Barrymore signing on for my biopic.

The media is littered with examples of what happens when work takes over. Stunning women, ladies who surely would be deemed 'a catch' by a multitude of men, are leading single lives well into their forties – not through choice, but through lifestyle. Sometimes, though, my colleagues just can't meet a guy because they simply don't have the time or the opportunity. Certainly, there are plenty of careers where the hours are long and erratic, but in the media – especially in showbiz – there's one extra challenge for women: you're on-call 24/7, in a work environment packed with more gay men than a Girls Aloud gig ... Hell, even Katie Price would struggle to date with those odds.

Indeed, only my friend Danny has a serious relationship he can boast about, although not with another media-bod. Danny's partner has learnt to deal with Danny's career by simply not getting

involved. His own career – a job in the City that Danny understands about as much as I do nuclear physics – is so far removed from Danny’s job in radio that they keep things fresh by blissful ignorance. Both know their lives require them to do certain things the other would never comprehend, and they just accept that. For some people, your partner not showing an interest in your professional life might sound odd but after several years of trial and error, believe me when I say Danny’s shown us all how it’s done. His home life isn’t constant chats about music or finance. It’s about other stuff that has no link to work. That’s got to be the healthiest way to keep alive a relationship two people so want to last.

Sadly, others find themselves on different paths. My friend Olivia was an events girl through and through, always seemingly at the end of her tether as she put together another showbiz bash or fended off another set of freeloaders looking for tickets to her latest party. She lived and breathed the job, albeit through a liver and lungs battered by regular intakes of gin and tobacco. Olivia would go home in the wee small hours, back to a flat with just QVC and a microwave meal to look forward to, despite having been working with glamorous stars and their publicists all day. That kind of contrast is one that seems even more painful when you reach middle age, as Olivia had. I think it’s this contrast that led to her breakdown. Burnt out and bored with being too sick to work, Olivia pretty soon felt that she had nothing to fight for any more. Within a few months it was all over. Her memorial service was a gathering of colleagues who not only missed their old friend, but were silently praying they didn’t end up like her. Sadly life doesn’t have the happy endings of a rom-com.

So when I find myself working late, slaving over a story about weight loss or a feature on fashion, I constantly give myself reality checks. Showbiz is a big industry and one that fascinates millions – but for most of the time, it’s just a bit of fun. Stressing over something that isn’t the end of the world is pointless. If you do, it could be the end of yours.

Freelance

I worked for the magazine that first hired me for three years before I decided to spread my wings and go freelance. Since that day, I've worked for anyone who wants me. When my friends joke about me being 'a media tart' it's only really their cheeky choice of words that I can argue with. As a freelance showbiz journalist you'll do pretty much whatever is asked of you, as long as you're going to get paid for it. We dream of the easy, one-off, big money job – like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* getting paid by Richard Gere to swan around Beverly Hills – but, ultimately, we're more streetwalker than high-class escort.

Okay, I think I'll stop the hooker analogy there.

I chose this life so I can't complain. After a few years as 'a staffer' I'd met enough people in the industry to realise that I could make things more interesting by being my own boss. With the amount of time we spend talking to other journalists while we're waiting around for stars to turn up at various events, it's easy to keep up to speed on what's happening employment-wise. I knew there was work out there, and my editor at the mag had promised to keep me on as a contributor. Plus, I'd already been offered work at another gossip mag. Working for two rival publications, however, isn't exactly encouraged, so I created some pseudonyms which I'd use to cover my back (no, I can't tell you what they are!) as so many freelancers do. Overall I couldn't wait to go solo.

A typical day? It's a lot less settled than it was when I was a staff writer. After getting up and scouring my favourite news sites – TMZ, MailOnline, Digital Spy – I'll either get dressed and head out for an interview or meeting, or I'll stay in my PJs and get writing. Resisting the charms of daytime TV is the real challenge. That said, on days when there's not so much going on, though, it's important to have a rest and spend time with family and friends. After all, you can't rely on weekends to be free. Recently I've been doing some shifts at an agency that requires me to work through the night – it's seriously tough. But knowing it's only temporary makes it all a lot more bearable.

News agencies are a hugely important part of journalism, yet most people don't even realise they exist. The fact is, so many things are happening in the world at any one time, no broadcaster or publication could possibly have enough reporters to cover them all. Instead, they subscribe to an agency service and use their material to fill in the gaps, material created by freelance journalists, like me. If an editor or producer has a space to fill in their newspaper or a 30-second hole in their radio news bulletin, a quick look at what the news agencies have sent over and their problems are often solved.

So it was that I came to have some of my interviews with celebrities used on TV, albeit with all signs of me totally erased. That's the thing with working for an agency. You're totally anonymous – a journalist with a one-size-fits-all style designed to appeal to any outlet that might want to use it. I actually liked the invisibility of, though. By the time I went freelance, my feelings about not wanting fame were solidified; I'd spent enough time around those who had it, to understand the restrictions it imposed on their lives. By now the last thing I wanted was to be one of those famous showbiz writers who splash pictures of themselves with celebrity 'friends' all over their articles. Working in the shadows, as I'd become accustomed to doing, you find that you still have a fair amount of influence, but none of the hassle. Sometimes becoming well known can be a career ruiner for a reporter. As soon as fame happens, interviewees become wary and put on more of a performance. Things get clouded.

Working as an anonymous writer for an agency also gives you a surprising amount of freedom. Now, at an interview, I can ask one type of question for one outlet and another type for a different outlet, knowing that I'll get paid for each one. These days I may find myself at a lot of the same events that I attended as a 'staffer', but I now have multiple remits and several bosses to please – a great way to keep me on my toes and help me avoid getting complacent. When I was a staff member at the mag, I have to admit, I tended to sleepwalk through some of the stories. I knew I'd be coming back

to work the next day, so where was the challenge? As a freelancer, though, you're only ever as good as your latest story. Without contracts or written agreements, you can be unemployed in the blink of an eye. Intimidating it may be, but it also makes me try harder.

For a bit of extra pocket money, I also supply nuggets of gossip and information to showbiz sites. You might be surprised by how many reporters who are fully employed at magazines and TV stations also do this on the quiet. I'd illicitly done it myself a couple of times during my early career, but as someone always afraid of small print in contracts, I'd been wary of going overboard and ending up in trouble with my boss. Now I'm a freelancer, however, I can supply titbits to whomever I want. All journalists have their sources but many are also sources themselves. Knowing that a bit of information can put food on your table certainly keeps your senses keen.

The last few years haven't been easy, though. As the financial world continues to hover on the edge of a meltdown that I really don't understand, some work has dried up simply because companies can't afford to pay any more; getting a staff member who is already on a fixed salary to do some extra work costs nothing. Paying me, on the other hand, is a luxury that some outlets feel they can do without.

Despite the dangers involved with being self-employed, I love it. It only makes the buzz of getting a story even more exciting, more of a challenge. My accountant may wish that I'd never strayed away from the organised world of a staff job and a salary, especially when he looks at the state of my book-keeping, but I wouldn't change it for the world.

Bodyguards

Waiting around for celebrities might be part and parcel of my job, but no one has it as bad as bodyguards. A celebrity bodyguard needs to have the patience of a saint. Security men are meant to be on hand at all times to protect megastar X from any unwanted hassle or attention, but at the same time they have to be steadfast and invisible. In other words, they have a huge responsibility with none of the rewards. I encounter these boys all the time in my line of work – silent man-mountains who stand outside hotel-room doors or hover a few steps back on red carpets. Whatever is thrown their way, they display no emotion. As the owner of probably the worst poker face in the business, I never cease to be impressed by bodyguards.

Admittedly, even in all my years in the business, I've never actually seen a bodyguard have to do anything vaguely approaching combat. There has been the occasional moment where a bodyguard has had to spread their arms out wide to hold back the paparazzi or a bunch of hormonal teenage fans, but in all honesty, it seems that most of their time is just spent standing around, looking 'hard'. And, unless bodyguards have some kind of zen-like meditative strengths, they must be bored out of their minds. It certainly doesn't seem as exciting as Kevin Costner and Whitney Houston made it out to be.

Having security in one's employ appears to have become less about safety and more about status for celebrities. Katy Perry or Rihanna having a bodyguard is one thing, but I've seen random, mid-level male actors with them too – having a bodyguard as a mark of importance instead of for protection. There's a story that this is exactly what rock legend David Bowie did when he first went to America in the early seventies; Bowie supposedly hired an entourage of brutes to make him look like a superstar in a country where he was virtually unknown. With Bowie's famous theatricality that kind of works – he taught Lady Gaga everything she knows – but a boring B-Lister in need of an ego boost is something else altogether.

It was one of these B-Listers who became the subject of the only story I've ever wheedled out of a bodyguard. This lone security man was on hire 24/7, and one day found himself accompanying his 'celebrity' client on an all-night drinking session around the booze dens of London without, of course, being able to touch a drop himself. He stood and watched in bar after bar, all the while maintaining the appearance that he was ready to pounce on any crazed fan that might throw themselves on this star, even though he knew that was highly unlikely to happen. I got talking to the big man before a junket the next morning while he stood in a hotel corridor and, while not exactly talkative (getting bodyguards to crack a smile is difficult enough, let alone persuading them to talk), he was so exhausted that his normal reticence was certainly less on show. His charge was in his hotel suite, he told me, pointing to the door behind him. In a bid to recover from his long night of partying this Hollywood-nearly man was getting a rejuvenating massage and plentiful room service. All my burly friend had to prepare himself with was a black coffee and a muffin, hardly fuel for another long day of standing outside a hotel room, looking tough. 'I spent all bloody night playing gooseberry,' he said, his stony face finally cracking under the strain. 'I just had to loiter in the background as he snogged the face off some girl he picked up. And the worst thing is, he wants to do it all again tonight.' I got the story of the young Lothario into a couple of papers the next day, but I couldn't feel guilty – it made a pretty boring actor sound like a real stud, so I was probably doing him a favour.

As for the bodyguard ... I salute you. You might think that being paid to essentially do nothing sounds like the greatest job in the world, but as my beefy friend will tell you, even doing nothing is tough when all you want is your bed.

Sources

It's two in the morning and I'm in a cab heading north after a night out in Soho, drunkenly watching the pounds on the meter going up and up and up. I make the same mental note that I always make in this situation, a worryingly regular occurrence: next time, Holly, just get the last train home.

Thankfully, my friend Daisy is in full swing:

'He likes both – girls *and* boys. Quite handy really. He's got this image of being a ladies' man – y'know, sells his films on it and everything – and the fact is, that's true. You can't argue with it. It's just that he also secretly bats for the other team too. Once you know about it, I actually think it's pretty obvious. Have you *seen* how much he hangs out with his mum, ha ha *ha*?'

No combination of letters could accurately capture Daisy's laugh, a piercing Cockney cackle that's potently amplified when lubricated with two bottles of wine. Be glad that you're only reading this, and not listening to it. But Daisy's great fun, and an even better source.

As a showbiz reporter you need to have a network of contacts to rely on for stories. It's true that these days a lot of gossip magazines and websites just make things up and try to pass it off as a fact by writing 'a source says'. And that's fine if the celeb in question isn't fond of taking people to court, or if they're a reality star who, as a breed, are normally so desperate they'll take any publicity they can get. In fact, they probably planted the story in the first place. For most of us, though, we need a source to get the facts needed for an article.

One of the few benefits of my dull journalist training is that I'm rigorous about my sources as a result. If a contact leads me to definite proof of a story, then their friendship is entirely worth the endless pounds I've spent on drinks and food in the bar cultivating it. Daisy is one of those sources; though we've become so close it thankfully doesn't feel like a business arrangement.

Daisy is a stylist-to-the-stars and a fount of information. For many celebrities, their stylist is their best friend. Most celebs aren't inherently chic. Sorry, but it's true. While our daily routine might only boast things as humdrum as running for the tube and painting our nails on the bus, a star's would include sessions with trainers and visits from manicurists and designers to make them look flawless. And it's understandable; if my picture was going to be in every gossip mag and website going then I'd invest in looking close to perfect too. Since being preened and pampered is such a regular occurrence for celebrities, they're often at their most relaxed around their team of beautifiers. The result? It's the stylists who overhear stuff no journalist could ever dig up on their own, be it discussions with managers about schedules, catty comments about another star in the industry ... or something even sleazier.

I met Daisy behind the scenes at an awards show and we've been friends ever since. She knows the deal. Her revelations alone are unlikely to end up printed word-for-word online, but the nuggets she feeds me often morph into bigger stories. I think she rather likes the playground superiority of being able to say 'I know something you don't', and I know she likes the idea of being someway party to a world that isn't her own – the world of journalism. Most importantly, though – and this is crucial for a source – Daisy and I like having a few drinks and a gossip together.

She tells me a lot of stuff, of course, that I can do nothing with. If a star she's working with is secretly trying for a baby with her boyfriend then I'm not going to blow their cover. There's no scandal there; it's all too personal. If that boyfriend is actually a front, though, a cover for the relationship she's having with another woman, but is too desperate for mainstream stardom to admit it? Well, I'm not so keen on letting people get away with lying.

One night over a bottle of red Daisy told me about a recent client – a slightly square middle-aged thespian renowned for his earnest acting – who spent his half hour of being dressed for a photo shoot making lewd suggestions to her. When he'd had enough of her rebuffs, he telephoned a mate and was even more crude about the teenage starlet he was currently starring in a film with. Thanks

to Daisy, I've been closely watching this chap ever since. If the tip-off is anything to go by, he'll have a sexual harassment case hanging over him within a year.

As well as a stylist, there are other 'insiders' it's always useful to be friends with. Such as:

The hotel concierge. Trying to find out if a star really is in town? London might be a city boasting thousands of hotels, but in reality the rich and famous only ever stay at a handful. And I'm not talking about Travelodges or Holiday Inns. Having someone on the ground in Mayfair's swankiest accommodations is always worthwhile, even if they often only answer my questions with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. It was a 'yes' that I heard down the line when I asked a concierge contact at a top hotel if a certain pop star was staying there. Not a story in itself, perhaps, but it certainly gave credence to the rumours we'd heard that his wife had kicked him out of the marital home. As a renowned drinker and party animal, that was going to be one big mini-bar bill.

The door whore. I will be eternally grateful to the guy who used to control the guest list at one particularly poncey club in Central London. It's not that the place was even my scene – the drinks were overpriced and the decor was more S&M dungeon than classy lounge – but through a few visits with friends, I'd got to know him reasonably well and one night it paid off. A famous pop star had been strenuously denying he was marrying his girlfriend that week, but it was rumoured they would both be partying with friends down in this basement hangout for an impromptu joint stag and hen do. As I trotted up to the door, my friend with his clipboard 'umm-ed' and 'aah-ed' and generally became a drama queen for a few minutes, but ultimately he let me downstairs. Yes, he knew why I wanted to go down there, but he also knew that a bit of publicity about his club being the venue for such a rock 'n' roll party wouldn't do him any harm either. After spotting the happy couple in a corner, I sent a text to a photographer friend to wait outside for a shot of them leaving then went about the business of noting everything the duo were drinking, eating and dancing to. Combined with the snap of them coming out of the club at 3 a.m., the piece I wrote prompted more than one person to comment on it being 'so detailed, it's like I was there'. I didn't have the heart to tell them it was because I was.

The clinic receptionist. When you work in a job where celebs take you into their confidence, it's understandably difficult not to get carried away. You become party to some pretty juicy gossip – gossip many would pay you for – and it's only human to succumb sometimes to temptation. That was certainly the case with one receptionist at a plastic surgery clinic who I had in my confidence. Camp as Christmas and eager to share his star spots, I always found out pretty quickly which megastar was having what done to their nose, eyes or forehead. When one of those 'have they or haven't they?' articles is mooted at a morning meeting, I have all the names immediately to hand. And while we are careful not to state anything as 'fact' in a feature, there is no uncertainty in my mind as to whether those names have had work done or not. Every single one, according to my loose-lipped receptionist, will have passed through his doors in the last year. And to think they all put their beauty down to just having 'good genes'.

The publicist. It's assumed that publicists have to follow some kind of moral code, meaning that all their work is officially set up and planned – sit-down interviews for a magazine or studio photo shoots with a top snapper, for example. If only life were that innocent. Getting your client into the press is now a shame-free exercise and publicists are more likely to be heavily suggesting stories and angles to showbiz journalists than waiting for a more traditional promo opportunity to come up. The old adage that 'no publicity is bad publicity' is truer than ever, and publicists will tip off the paparazzi with something as pointless as their client walking down the road in a particularly skimpy dress. I've lost count of the number of times I've been spun the yarn that the good-looking but frankly talentless Mr X is in talks to go over to Hollywood and make a movie, but with an ever-increasing number of spaces to fill in magazines and websites, sometimes that kind of story – however tenuous – is just what I need.

Ten past two in the morning and the cab is dropping me off at my flat. I hand Daisy 20 pounds to cover my share of the fare and remind myself once again to get the train next time.

‘Bye darlin’, ha ha ha!’ Daisy shouts through the taxi window, apparently not caring about everyone trying to sleep. ‘Let’s do it again soon, yeah?’

‘Definitely,’ I reply, trying not to stumble up the kerb.

‘And make sure you remind me – I must tell you about this singer I’ve been working with. Was the face of a charity campaign and claimed to be all “right on” about it, y’know. Actually she was getting paid a fortune for it. She couldn’t give a shit about hungry Africans.’

My ears prick up, sensing a story.

‘Dais, you’re a star. Same time next week?’

Flirting

There was this one actor – a pretty boy who looked as if he spent more time than I did preening himself – who simply took my breath away when I met him. Wow was he beautiful. Puppy dog eyes, a Celtic accent, and bee-stung lips that looked even more kissable in real life than they did projected on to a 15-foot cinema screen – I was smitten. I suspect that he'd had one of those long, tedious days of promotion because, when I walked into the interview room I sensed immediately that he was up for some fun. 'Chemistry' is the kind of cheesy word used by dim WAGs talking about their latest footballer boyfriend, but there was definitely something scientific happening when he and I talked. Well, I say talked. We giggled. We flirted. Any talking we did was the kind of hilarious-at-the-time nonsense that's more suited to a drunken pub date than a professional interview. Still, I left 20 minutes later buzzing from all the pouting and eyelash batting that had just taken place – and that was just from him.

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