

TABLOID TALES

NO DETAIL IS TOO SMALL, NO INTRUSION TOO BIG: IN THE WORLD OF CELEBRITY JOURNALISM, ANTONIA BLYTH DISCOVERS THAT ONLY THE FITTEST AND MOST THICK-SKINNED SURVIVE



KATSUYA
by STARCK

SUPERIOR COURT
COURTHOUSE

THE TINIEST
DETAIL OF
WHAT STARS
LIKE JESSICA
SIMPSON ATE AT
A RESTAURANT
SUCH AS THIS
CAN BRING IN
BIG BUCKS FOR
REPORTERS

HEAD-SHAVING,
UMBRELLA-
WIELDING
BRITNEY SPEARS
SPARKED A
PAPARAZZI
FRENZY KNOWN
AS "BRITNEY
MANIA"

SINCE BECOMING
ENGAGED TO
SCARLETT
JOHANSSON,
ACTOR RYAN
REYNOLDS HAS
GONE FROM
"RYAN WHO?"
TO A TOP
TABLOID TARGET

SCOPE: GETTY IMAGES; WESTLEY HARDAVE; SNAPPER MEDIA; BIG AUSTRALIA



Powerful binoculars and a walkie-talkie – to keep in touch with paparazzi – are tools of Hannah's trade.



Perez Hilton's favourite cafe is a regular hangout for celebrity journalists.



Hannah's only role at this particular circus is to catch a glimpse of Spears, confirm for the magazine that she arrived and how long she was inside.

Then it's on to a "doorknock" at Spears's rumoured new vocal coach's place in Beverly Hills (getting the address is as easy as typing a name and rough age into an online national database). No-one answers the intercom so Hannah heads off again, cruising the palm-lined streets, windows down, Prada shades firmly in place and hair whipping in the wind.

Being a spy of sorts can be cool, but not all jobs are this cruisy. Even notoriously thick-skinned Hollywood hacks can blanch at the tasks they're sometimes required to undertake. Hannah recalls being asked to confirm the overdose death of Domino Harvey (the bounty hunter immortalised by Keira Knightley in the movie *Domino*). "I sat in the car for ages, trying to make myself do it. Then another reporter arrived, so I jumped out of the car to get the job done first.

"As I went up the path the reporter guy literally hid behind me, he was so scared. I could hear the family hysterically crying on the patio. I said, 'I'm so sorry, I'm from the press, is it true about Domino?' and they screamed at me, 'Yes! Get out! Get out!' I was shaking all the way home. I even hate thinking about it now, it was so horrible."

Hannah meets her friend Sophie, 23, another British freelancer, at the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf cafe, where Perez Hilton used to sit daily, creating his celebrity blog, until he finally got an office. The talk between the women is all about work.

Sophie says her worst story was also a "death knock" – on Heath Ledger's uncle. "I felt sick," she recalls. "I told my boss I didn't want to do it and he just said, 'Not every job will be one you want.' You feel like you can't say no because as a freelancer, your boss can cut off your work at any time. But to me, to disturb someone in their time of grief is the worst job possible. Luckily, there was no-one home."

Beneath the bright lights of Hollywood Boulevard, a dangerous game is being played. A slim young woman, a notepad tucked in her jeans pocket, breathes heavily in the cool night air. Dark shadows ring her eyes, and her face, although pretty, looks worn by a thousand nights like this one. She has run five blocks to get to the Katsuya Japanese restaurant, on a tip-off that singer/actress Jessica Simpson has just bought sushi for dinner. She's late – a flock of paparazzi has already taken flight – but the young woman is unperturbed.

After all, she doesn't need to speak with Simpson. She's after the finer details – what the starlet ordered, how many kilojoules it had and whether she was with a new man. Odd behaviour or a public display of affection will score bonus points and, potentially, a pile of cash for this Hollywood reporter.

British-born Hannah, 28, is one of only 15 or so celebrity reporters who comb every doorway, department store and dustbin from Beverly Hills to Malibu to satisfy our seemingly insatiable appetite for news of the latest celebrity break-up or breakdown.

It has become big business in the past 10 years, thanks largely to a slew of wry celebrity websites such as perez Hilton.com, which gets more than four million hits a day. Long-established US celebrity titles such as the *National Enquirer*, *People* and *Us Weekly* have been joined in recent years by *OK!* and *In Touch Weekly*. Australia is experiencing a similar surge in celebrity magazines, while broadsheet newspapers that once kept a snooty distance are climbing aboard, too.

Tabloids will pay thousands of dollars for a single quote from an A-list star, or a story about them dancing on tabletops in the latest trendy bar, and hundreds for what Lindsay Lohan ate for breakfast. But where do these stories come from?

Deploying CIA-style espionage skills, reporters such as Hannah pose as extras on film sets, crawl through undergrowth, knock on unfriendly doors and sleep in their cars, all before dining at exclusive restaurants and dancing in the VIP areas of the hottest clubs.

Minute details, such as what size dress Victoria Beckham bought at an up-market boutique, can take several days' work.

Back inside the dark cavern of Katsuya, Hannah is having problems. No-one will publicly speak to a reporter so, posing as a fan of Simpson, she chats to two waitresses, the barman, the manager and a valet parker. Suddenly lips loosen and Hannah gleans that the star tipped \$100 on a \$90 tab and was here with a baby. Whose baby? Did she act maternal? Is she broody? Does this mean there'll be a wedding soon? One tiny detail and Hannah has a scoop.

Just then, a petite blonde woman arrives at the restaurant, looking harried. "Reporter," Hannah snorts. "*In Touch* magazine." The blonde blanks Hannah, although they have worked the same round for years. "She won't get anything. Now that I've been here asking, the waiters will get wise and clam up."

Hannah works hard. Her day began at 7.30am outside the downtown LA courthouse waiting for Britney Spears's custody case appearance. For the first time since their acrimonious split, Kevin Federline and Spears are to appear together in public, a prospect that has drawn every TV news crew, paper, website, magazine and paparazzi agency, and Hannah knows them all. Big, scary-looking men hug her and ask about her upcoming wedding to fellow pap photographer Westley, or "Wes".

Today, Hannah will be paid a "day rate" by one of the British publications for which she freelances. They will generally pay reporters for a whole day, in this case \$500, whether an assignment takes hours or just 10 minutes. Good celebrity "hacks" – they're mostly women – can earn \$120,000 a year.

"WE LAY ON HORSE DUNG IN A FIELD FOR TWO HOURS, WAITING FOR MARY-KATE OLSEN," SAYS ONE CELEBRITY REPORTER



Scarlett Johansson and fiancé Ryan Reynolds (right) share this LA mansion – which Hannah (left) stakes out after receiving a tip about the star couple fighting.



A close second is the time Sophie had a gynaecological exam to try to find out from Ashlee Simpson's doctor if the singer was pregnant (he was discreet). She endured a Brazilian wax after following Spears's mum to the waxing parlour. She deadpans, "It's hard to ask subtle questions when you're on all fours with your arse in the air."

A phone Sophie calls "the chirp" beeps and a disembodied voice shouts from it: "Ryan Reynolds, Crunch gym on Crescent Heights."

"Copy that!" yells Sophie. The paparazzi all carry push-to-talk phones, essentially long-range walkie-talkies known as "chirps" for the distinct double-beeps they give. Being invited into a pap's chirp network is a great honour, one Sophie earned through eight months of sitting by the side of the road with 50 kamikaze tough guys, buying them coffees, driving at 160km/h to keep up with them and never getting in the way of a shot.

At the gym, the girls are tense. There's no sign of the actor's bike in the parking lot, so Sophie takes off to Malibu on another job. Hannah waits for fiancé Wes to show up. Reynolds is big news because he recently got engaged to actress Scarlett Johansson.

Wes and Hannah are a formidable team. She does words; he does pictures. The two decide to duck down in the car for a while. The two-hour wait seems interminable, is unbelievably boring, and ultimately fruitless. All for a glimpse of an actor. But an exclusive shot with a quote is worth thousands.

That night, Hannah and Wes scout out a hot nightspot where management feed Hannah stories to publicise their "private" club. They drink until 2am, and after just two hours sleep, a British paper calls. Can Hannah head over to Johansson's house? She and Reynolds apparently had a fight last night. Did he stay over? Did she kick him out?

It's 5am and Hannah sets off for the Hollywood Hills, still in her pyjamas. Her car is full of magazines and half-read books and, although she's untroubled by the solitude, Wes often comes along for the ride in case there are picture opportunities.

By 11am, with no sign of Reynolds, there's time for a shower and change, then back for a quick look over the fence in case his bike is visible. It's not, so she moves on to Spears's house down the road. Word is she'll go to the gym today.

Hannah, who grew up in the British countryside as part of a big, close family, didn't always want to be a celebrity reporter. "It was a toss-up between journalist and primary schoolteacher, if you can believe that." After graduating from journalism college, she tried, unsuccessfully, to get a job on a local paper. Then her cousin, who owns an LA media agency, offered her a two-month internship. "I loved it," says Hannah. "I've been here six years. You can't beat LA. The lifestyle is ridiculous and, to be honest, I can get away with working three or four days a week if I want."

She met Wes when they were sent to Utah together to cover Mary-Kate Olsen in rehab. "After a week of looking for her, we followed a van to an equestrian centre then had to lie on horse dung in a field for two hours, waiting for her. It was awful."

Some would see rolling around in manure as an apt metaphor for a celebrity reporter's tactics – hidden cameras, false identities, even a fake booze problem. "I had to go to an AA meeting to follow Mary-Kate," confesses Hannah. "It was terrifying – introducing myself and saying I was an alcoholic. I went bright red and was shaking. The saddest part was afterwards I met a friend for a drink, and saw a woman who'd been awarded a chip for 'five years sober' having a huge glass of wine."

On one particularly scary occasion, Hannah found herself facing the wrath of an A-lister's security detail. "We found out Tom Cruise was shooting a movie scene in a cemetery," she continues. "We hid the camera in a shoebox and walked around saying we were looking for a grave. I overheard Tom say, 'Today I heard my baby's heartbeat for the first time,' which was huge. Nobody knew how pregnant Katie was then, and now I had it. Then we saw Katie, whipped the camera ▶



Hannah hopes a celebrity will unwittingly drop their guard during a "doorknock".



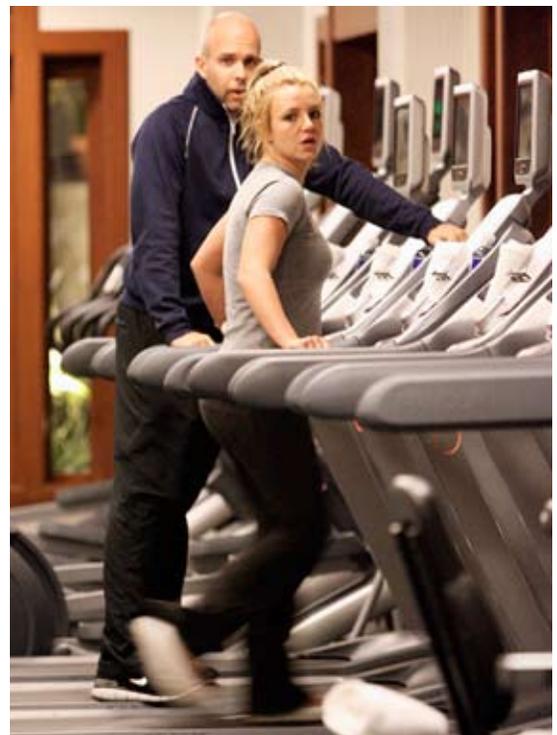
When Mary-Kate Olsen took a daytrip during rehab, Hannah and paparazzo Wes were there, too.

WESTLEY HARGRAVE; SCOPE; BIG AUSTRALIA; SNAPPER MEDIA

celebrity report



Britney Spears's home and her SUV (right) are under constant surveillance, and she can't escape the press even at the gym (far right).



Hannah has carefully nurtured a symbiotic relationship with the LA paparazzi.

out and took pictures. Security yelled at us and we started running. My heart was pounding as we jumped in the car. They interrogated us for an hour, but had to let us go because technically we'd done nothing wrong."

However, nothing sells quite like sex. One British paper assigned Hannah to follow *Desperate Housewives* heart-throb Jesse Metcalfe, who was rumoured to be cheating on his British girlfriend, Nadine Coyle from the band Girls Aloud. "I followed him, with no sleep, while he partied for two days," reveals Hannah. "I had to stand in a club alone until he left at 2am, then when he bought a random girl flowers, the paper had me knock on his door to show him a picture of this girl and ask who she was. Luckily his mum answered and told me he was in bed. But the really awful part was having to go to his girlfriend's house and tell her Jesse bought the flowers, and ask how she felt. That time, I sat in the car for 30 minutes thinking, 'I can't do this.' Thank God she wouldn't come to the door."

Sent to Las Vegas to follow the UK's Chelsea football team, Hannah hit paydirt when a prostitute disappeared into a room with a married player. "I had to sit at the high-stakes gambling table and lose \$400 of expenses cash before it happened," she laughs.

But seeing it wasn't enough. "I knew I had to get her to admit they'd had sex – you have to be sure before something like that gets out – so I went up to her and asked her if she knew who she'd just had sex with, and if she was a prostitute. That was so hard. The girl got upset and her madam came and dragged her away." But Hannah got what she needed and the British press went crazy.

Back at Spears's, three hours of waiting ends with the appearance of her SUV. A huge pack of pap cars races down the road, followed by Hannah. Red lights are run; cars drive directly into oncoming traffic, zipping

down winding canyon roads at 100km/h. When the pack moves out of sight, Hannah calls a pap. Spears is heading to the gym. Hannah must wait to see how long she stays, then follow her in case she goes to dinner.

By 8pm, the singer is back at home and Hannah is off the hook, unless a pap calls her. "At the height of 'Britney mania', I'd get calls all day and night just saying, 'She's out!' and everyone would be racing to follow. Now she's calmed down, most people have moved onto other celebs."

Did the obviously fragile singer deserve to be hounded like that? "I don't feel sorry for celebs who bring it on themselves," states Hannah defiantly. "It annoys me when they've used the media to get into the spotlight and then go mad when they're asked questions."

In fact, both Hannah and Sophie cite Kate Moss, Jessica Alba and Jessica Biel as offensive, saying they often shout, "Get a real job!" when they see a pap or reporter. Recently, at LA International Airport, Moss tried to run over some paparazzi with a luggage trolley on which her daughter was precariously perched. Others want it both ways. In the past, Lindsay Lohan reportedly used to feed information to journalists about her then rival Paris Hilton. Victoria Beckham has long been rumoured to tip off the paparazzi, especially when she likes the particular outfit she's wearing, while Perez Hilton regularly calls paps to get his burgeoning image publicised.

Later, sitting with Sophie at The Beverly Hills hotel watching Demi Moore, Ashton Kutcher and family eat tortilla soup and lobster eggs Benedict in the corner, she warms to the theme: "These people get paid millions just to stand around and the minute they're out of their front door, they're fair game."

So do Sophie's family and friends think she has a "real" job? "They think it's really glamorous!" she laughs. "But then they think I swan around for a living. They don't realise it's stressful and hard work. My job makes me nervous every single day." ■



At this iconic hotel, Demi Moore, Ashton Kutcher and family (below) eat breakfast – under Hannah's gaze. Left: Jesse Metcalfe is unimpressed at being papped.



SCOPE: AUSTRALIA; PICTURE MEDIA; BIG AUSTRALIA; WESTLEY HARGRAVE

