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Celebrity State of Mind

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Could downtown's A-list set really be so...normal?

By Leonora Desar

Alec Baldwin is on top of the world, perched high above the deserted city on the rooftop of an exclusive nightclub just before the break of dawn. "Hand that back," he says to Mary-Kate Olsen—or is it Ashley?—who snatches Baldwin's cell phone away before sinking into a designer red velvet couch flush with fallen change and lost cigarette lighters.

Past them, supermodels like skyscrapers in summer blues and lilacs glide past one another like ships. "Leo, have you seen Leo?" they implore tipsily, backlit against the city as Tupac's hologram slips out from some dark corner. Wispy and iridescent, it circles the bar like a fine thread of cigarette smoke before retreating behind the folds of a tightly drawn curtain.

Or so I imagined, along with all other sorts of outlandish, fictitious stories about Downtown celebrities. After all, in our star-obsessed culture, the rich and famous are seductive, mythical beings who flirt and play against only the most lavish of backdrops (which, for some reason or other, always seem to sit high up on rooftops).

To get past the velvet ropes, I asked New York's servers to give me their dish on some Downtown superstars—the scandals! the tantrums! the intrigue! But what they served up was even harder to believe than what I had originally envisioned.

OK, so I didn't expect to hear that Baldwin flirted with the Olsen twins. But I *had* hoped that digging around about the Greenwich Village actor, famed for his Twitter tirades as much as for his talent, would be a good way to go about researching this story. I must be in for some juicy revelations, right?

"He's very friendly and polite," declared a source at Nolita restaurant Emporio.

"He was a super nice guy, a good tipper," gushed a former server at Popover Cafe. "He would always talk to some of the waiters who were also actors and see what they were doing, encourage them."

"Alec's awesome, he makes you feel like you're at the table with him," echoed an insider at Pure Food and Wine, where the 54-year-old star first met his 28-year-old fiancée, yoga teacher Hilaria Thomas. "When you walk by, he says, 'Hey, good to see you.' He'll ask you how you've been and introduce you to someone. He's not wanting you to go away. It's almost hard to pull away from the table because he's engaging you in this really fun, playful, sweet, witty way."

But this was practically criticism compared to what people had to say about West Village star Sarah Jessica Parker, of *Sex and the City* fame.

"She's a real doll, really nice and down to earth, just a regular girl," Prime Burger owner Michael DiMiceli revealed. "I'll never forget it, she was sitting one day by herself, trying to be inconspicuous, and there were a bunch of school kids here on a trip. They recognized her and went over to her one by one. She didn't just sign an autograph, she asked each of them their name. I was very impressed by that."

He was equally impressed when she chatted up his wife and daughter for half an hour. "She was having a regular conversation with them like she was nobody special. That's what I really like about her—she's always nice. She always pays her check, never expects things for free or anything like



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that.”

But if you want to hear someone *really* sing her praises, ask how the actress behaves on a bad night. Parker was dining at Café Luxembourg with husband Matthew Broderick when, according to her server, another patron mistakenly took her jacket. Inside were her lines for the Broadway show *Once Upon a Mattress*, which she was supposed to have learned for rehearsal the following day.

“She was gracious, didn’t lose her temper at all,” said the server. “She was also very personable and real with me. She acknowledged me as a person, not just someone waiting on her.”

You can imagine how, after all of this, I wasn’t exactly shocked when others started raving about Tribeca couple Beyoncé and Jay-Z. “*So nice!*” “*So gracious!*” “*Super normal!*” “*Not at all high maintenance!*”

“Jay-Z and Beyoncé are a casual, sweet couple,” praised one server. “They treat the staff very well, tip very well. They have a normal dinner and don’t ask for special treatment, even though they get it. They’re not picky or particular. You can tell they’re a regular couple enjoying each other’s company more than anything.”

Is there anyone who’s *not* so sweet and down to earth? I asked my sources.

“Katie Holmes was kind of standoffish,” confessed a Downtown waitress. “She was quiet, looked down a lot.”

Oh?

“It was hard for her to eat in the restaurant because the paparazzi kept trying to take photos of her through the windows. She wasn’t nasty or anything—she was respectful.”

The wind had finally left my sails. Where were the scandals? The tantrums? The intrigue? Celebrities were just about as exciting as your average New Yorker (though obviously with more glamorous clothes and high-powered friends). I was starting to see how the gossip rags might get desperate enough to embellish or even fabricate their material. At this point, I’d rather write a tell-all column about Mother Theresa.

“Well, what did you expect?” asked a friend and former server as we wove through Greenwich Village avenues, eyes peeled for familiar, front-page faces. “This is New York, not L.A. Even the most famous people are just living their lives here like everyone else. They get their takeout at the same place every day, go to Starbucks. It’s not an issue of who they are.”

But by now, all I see are celebrities. Celebrities standing beneath the eerie neon of a street lamp, silhouetted. Celebrities just beyond the glass pane of every taxi passing by. In the corner, by the DJ booth, on the red velvet sofas of another supposedly star-saturated lounge we’re about to leave behind.

But wouldn’t you know it? All the superstars and legends are really at home watching TV. The bar’s emptied out, and in the light, the designer couches are not truly red at all—just a deep, dull pink.

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