

Living the Dream

by Helen Miele

The thrill of seeing the numbers surge was addictive. An instant dopamine hit of euphoria where everything in life was good, success and happiness reigned, where she was Somebody. The exhilarating, albeit temporary, gratification ignited a desire that left her craving more.

Amy hadn't been one of the popular girls at school. Unfashionable, shy and rule-abiding she led an inconsequential existence. Her family was supportive and loving however and ultimately she emerged from the miserable cocoon of education relatively unscathed. She was different now, attractive and popular, enjoying strong friendships. But she had never quite shaken the memories of being invisible and insignificant. Her academic potential had fallen short of being achieved and any career aspirations she may have once had were sapped during her tedious schooldays.

Her humdrum role as the receptionist in a local insurance office offered plenty of time to dream, obsessively scrolling through the perfect lives of strangers, desperately yearning for the luxurious lifestyle they led. Returning every night to her modest studio flat only intensified the longing to experience the glittering world frequented by the online influencers. Seduced by their motivational clichés: 'Find out who you are and be that person', 'When you change your thoughts, remember to change your world', 'You are your own priority', she ventured a post of her own. Deliberately and carefully curated in flattering lighting it was a joyous, uplifting portrait of a successful, smiling young woman surrounded by a border of hearts; happy. Captioned 'be the love you never received', Inspirational Amy was uploaded to the world.

Somehow this resonated with the internet zombies, encouraging further similar posts which grew her handful of followers slowly and steadily until at some point the numbers started to soar. Energised by this attention Amy cultivated her life online, basking in the adoration and praise of thousands of new friends.

"So real, girl!", "you are my inspiration", "because of you I keep going".

A new truth was born from tales of being shunned by society, surviving bullying, being unloved and unsupported. Bite size video clips boasted of triumph over adversity. She was an entrepreneur, an executive, living the high life, living the dream, an inspiration, a saviour.

Her obsession with chasing likes was all consuming and she declined celebrations, births, deaths, get-togethers, genuine and heartfelt chats, laughter and fun. Happy little shared moments. The once strong friendships dwindled and were ultimately extinguished. Her supportive family were wounded at the re-telling of history and were long since estranged. It didn't matter. She got all the validation she needed with every incoming notification.

Being let go from her job was merely an inconvenience. She inhabited a different life now which could not co-exist with being a lowly office worker in any case. She was busy jet-setting, achieving, socialising, sipping cocktails on sunset bays. Look, the proof was all there online. The drop in finances was a blow but only temporarily.

Financing was sought from a different source, via someone who knew a man who knew a man. When she met the man, she was desperate to impress upon him the urgency of the funding she was seeking. She needn't have worried as he waved her words away.

"We are all in a hurry to be happy," assured the empathetic money lender. Relief cushioned her. The man provided money and the money bought more lifestyle and more followers.

The designer clothes, bags, haircuts, shoes and holidays were justifiably essential in her selfless role of changing lives, reaching out to the lonely and the forgotten, buoying the dejected and unworthy with proof and promises that they too could reach such heights. Brands plied her with goods in exchange for soundbites that fuelled the algorithm. Inexplicably, however, she remained discontented. The next post would fix it though. The one after that, then. 873,421 people were on her side. 873,421 people couldn't be wrong. She had been nothing, and just look at her now!

Just look at her now. Spiralling into despair. Aggressive demands for repayment. Favours owed. Favours repaid. A shattered and soulless existence. She was scared, alone and lonely, with thousands of friends. But not to worry, she existed just one click away – smiling, relaxed, carefree, impressing and influencing the world.

"Influencer" embezzled from family firm' screamed the headline.

'Amy Grant, 24, accused of stealing £250,000 from local insurance company to fund hedonistic lifestyle.'

This particular chapter in her life was also readily accessible online, but this time she did not delight in the publicity. The effect was instant. Numbers plummeted overnight. Hundreds of followers evaporated, then thousands. Venom was spat in her direction:

'Fake!' 'Liar!' 'Loser!' 'Nobody!'

Words relentlessly assaulted her day and night, causing physical and visceral pain. She was detached from, and simultaneously pulled back into, the ordinary world around her with every attack and ever diminishing numbers.

She existed in a fraught fog of denial, trapped between two worlds, and was only vaguely conscious of making her way to court. That particular situation seemed dreamlike to her, and any potential consequences irrelevant compared to reversing the destruction of her online life. Once beloved, her phone had become a hateful appendage which she was compelled to confront, constantly refreshing the screen, desperately hoping to see the numbers soar in support once more. But the only additions were taunts and vitriol, persistent and constant, rapidly advancing and invading like a poisonous army.

Then suddenly everything stopped.

"There was nothing I could do," wept the distraught driver, "she just stepped out – totally engrossed in her phone, in her own little world."