March 13, 2024 / Where’s Kate?!?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

ALANA CASANOVA-BURGESS (guest host, *Today, Explained*): Something going on with the Princess of Wales…

SCORING IN <Royal Fanfare (a)>

*<CLIP>*

*SAVANNAHLINSCOTT21: “Ok I am so confused about this Kate Middleton thing?”*

*FEMINISTWARRIOR87: “People are noticing that a highly famous woman in a notoriously dangerous public family is basically missing…”*

SCORING OUT

SCORING IN <Red Vines>

*“I have a theory, hear me out. I reckon Kate’s got herself a BookTok account and she’s just locked away reading.”*

*RUSHCAM: My personal favorite theory is that she’s recovering from a BBL. Someone else suggested that she’s Banksy, the EnS gland-based street artist with the unconfirmed identity.*

ALANA: How her absence went from Kensington Palace saying she was recovering from abdominal surgery to WILD rumors and online conspiracy theories, coming up on *Today, Explained.*

*<CLIP> EMRUSCIANO: Can we stop speculating about where Kate Middleton is? It’s none of our business! Let the woman rest. Good for her I say!*

*EVIE.MAGAZINE: “and honestly you could be so right that we’re probably all just a little bit delulu… but let’s entertain it for a second…”*

[THEME]

ALANA: It’s *Today, Explained*. I’m Alana Casanova-Burgess, filling in as host today. The search for Kate Middleton has taken over the Internet. Constance Grady has been covering it for Vox.

CONSTANCE GRADY (senior correspondent, Vox): Kate Middleton has been sort of ambiguously seen twice in the past week. There is a paparazzi photo of her last week driving in a car with her mom.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbp1hZ7kORI&list=RDNSqbp1hZ7kORI&start_radio=1)*> Charlie Lankston, DailyMail.com: They are very grainy photos. We believe that the images were taken shortly after Kate and her mother finished the school run.*

CONSTANCE: And then over the weekend, it was British Mother's Day and Kensington Palace put out a picture of Kate hugging her kids. And this picture blows up the internet.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wocwRIyLzOA)*> Piers Morgan: Lurid conspiracies and wild speculation about the Princess of Wales have dominated conversation about the royals for many weeks. Well, this beaming family photo released to mark the British Mother's Day on Sunday was supposed to end all that.*

SCORING IN <Pretty Wacky>

CONSTANCE: So you look at this picture and at first it seems totally normal. It's like Kate Middleton, her three kids are all around her. She's got her arms around them. They're all smiling really big. It's like a cute, normal Mother's Day picture. And then the more you look at it, the more like weird little things start to jump out at you. First of all, there are trees behind them that are in full leaf. It is March. This picture was supposed to have been taken within the past week. Then you look at Princess Charlotte and there's so many weird things happening with her.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@c4news/video/7345113340827454752)*> Channel 4 News: This part of Princess Charlotte’s sleeve fades away unevenly. Her skirt seems misaligned with her cardigan. And Katherine’s right hand looks blurry.*

CONSTANCE: And one of the things that people clock onto immediately is that she's not wearing a wedding ring.

ALANA: On the her left hand. Right. Yep.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-WquX2fGQk)*> Haylo Hayley: Where the hell is her wedding ring? Why is Kate Middleton not wearing her wedding ring?!*

CONSTANCE: A lot of outlets have talked to Photoshop experts. And they say that it looks like there has been a lot of blurring done with Photoshop's blurring tools.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WZK5M6CXpY)*> TODAY: Photo editors the world over have been dissecting every pixel of this photograph, finding more than a dozen inconsistencies.*

CONSTANCE: So it looks as though some things are being kind of deliberately elided and made to look more coherent than they are on closer examination.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkZCeq_sgPA)*> Andrew Pierce, Daily Mail: They’ve made a right flipping hash of it.*

SCORING OUT

CONSTANCE: So the photo goes out on Sunday, and within a few hours of it going out, it is pulled by international news agencies.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@cbsmornings/video/7345108786635361567)*> CBS: Several news agencies, including Reuters and the Associated Press, have withdrawn the new photo from publication, one saying it’s been manipulated by the source. The agencies have strict rules about altering images.*

CONSTANCE: Kate on Monday puts out a statement posted to her Twitter or X account saying I'm an amateur photographer. I played around with editing tools. I apologize if this caused any confusion or alarm.

ALANA: Bless her heart. Do you think that she actually put that out?

CONSTANCE: Oh man, it's so hard to say because the second you say no, you sound like a crazy conspiracy theorist.

ALANA: <laughs>

CONSTANCE: Someone puts an apology out under Princess Katherine's name. We have no way of knowing for sure that it was Kate.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@wendyroyalpoptalk/video/7345175585364413742)*> TikTok user @wendyroyalpoptalk: Kate admits that she tampered with the photo but won’t release the original photo. I don’t know guys. Nothing’s mathing. Nothing at all.*

ALANA: Did you see someone overlaid the 2016 Vogue cover picture…

CONSTANCE: Mm hm.

ALANA: …of Kate onto this Mother's Day shot from Sunday. And the overlay was almost exact.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@butthatsmyopinion/video/7345269996391697710)*> TikTok user @butthatsmyopinion: This is the picture overlaid with half of it erased. And look how exactly everything lines up. The possibility of these two photos lining up perfectly is near zero.*

CONSTANCE: So I did find this overlay compelling. But I think there's plenty of explanation for it. Just like, Kate has her go-to smile, she's very good at it. Like every time I see her, I'm like, oh, she looks so cheerful.

ALANA: Suggestive, but inconclusive. Ok.

CONSTANCE: Exactly.

ALANA: Okay, so what is happening here? Why do people dissect and analyze this picture so much? Take us back to the beginning.

CONSTANCE: Kate Middleton has not been seen in public outside of these two pictures since Christmas Day of 2023.

SCORING IN <Frosty Magic - APM>

CONSTANCE: So on that day she is photographed with her family going to church in the little village where they all spend Christmas. Everything looks normal. Totally fine. Then she kind of disappears.

SCORING OUT

CONSTANCE: On January 17th, Kensington Palace announces that Kate has entered the hospital the day before for planned abdominal surgery. They say that she will be in the hospital recovering for 10 to 14 days. So this is not like a little outpatient procedure…

ALANA: Mm hm.

CONSTANCE:… and that she will continue to go back to her duties on Easter, which this year is March 31st. They say that all of her forthcoming appointments and scheduled commitments have been postponed. And then on January 29th, they announce that she's back home.

ALANA: Okay, so that seems normal. So she's going to be recovering for a while. It's still not March 31st.

CONSTANCE: Yeah. All of this is pretty normal. We first start to see people being like, well, things seem a little fishy here for two reasons.

ALANA: Can you say who? Who are people?

CONSTANCE: The conspiracy theories about Kate Middleton's whereabouts is arising from royal watchers on the internet. Specifically, it's arising from Meghan Markle fans.

ALANA: Mm.

CONSTANCE: Meghan stans start to notice, hey, Kate's on medical leave and the paparazzi seem to be leaving her alone. Weird. Like, the British paparazzi – the paparazzi that hacked people's phones and voicemails and hides in bushes and harassed Princess Diana to death – they're like respecting Kate Middleton's privacy? What's going on?

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2RntdG-4lA)*> Brett Cooper: One person tweeted and said, “you're telling me that Kate Middleton – the same woman who posed outside the hospital like a freaking supermodel mere hours after giving birth – suddenly requires months of recovery before showing her face? And the British press now magically respects privacy? This feels… sinister.”*

CONSTANCE: Then people start fiddling around with other weird little inconsistencies in Kensington Palace statements like if her surgery is scheduled, why is she having to postpone scheduled commitments, things like that. The point at which things start to reach the mainstream internet is February 27th. So on that day, Prince William is scheduled to an appearance at the funeral of a family connection, and he cancels it very late, citing a personal matter. You only do that for really intense family matters. But no one knows what those could be because the royal family isn't saying right.

ALANA: And so, into this vacuum of information come conspiracy theories?

SCORING IN <Sneaking Suspicion>

<[CLIP](https://www.tiktok.com/@missbeifong/video/7340407888994700590)> *TikTok user @missbeifong: There is an insane rabbit hole of people who have so many conspiracies about Kate Middleton.*

CONSTANCE: So there are a lot of joke theories that she's had a Brazilian butt lift, that she's trying to grow out bad bangs, or that she became the villain from the Glasgow AI Willy Wonka experience.

ALANA: <laughs>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@paulafroelich/video/7341077098531999019)*> NewsNation: She’s run away, she’s on the lam, she’s living out of a van…*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@mara_webster/video/7340825501675654443)*> TikTok user @mara\_webster: It is possible though that it’s all just part of the necessary secrecy of being a contestant on the Masked Singer.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@bravowwhl/video/7345675854367804703)*> John Oliver: There’s a non-zero chance she died 18 months ago. <laughter>*

CONSTANCE: The more serious conspiracy theories kind of fall into two camps. One camp says something's gone really wrong with Kate's health. Like she's in a coma. She physically cannot be made to sit up and put on makeup and take a picture, being like, hello, I'm still alive. The second camp says Kate is dealing with some ambiguous health problem. But the real reason that we're not seeing any pictures of her is she's no longer willing to take them because her marriage with Will is on the rocks. There's at this point, a pretty complimentary profile comes out of Lady Rose of Cholmondeley, who has long been rumored to be having an affair with Prince William.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@unethicalcloutchaser/video/7345266493011103019)*> TikTok user @unethicalcloutchaser: I feel like this is strategic. And yeah. Maybe they’re soft-launching his mistress, and soft-launching a divorce.*

CONSTANCE: Some people think that Kate is dealing with a mental breakdown from the stresses of fame.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@buddhaforeveryone/video/7345240349461286176)*> GBNews: She needs a gap from the pressure. And that’s what’s so unfair. She just needed a break. And people aren’t willing to give her that break.*

CONSTANCE: There's just this giant hole where all of the information about what has happened to Kate has gone, and people are speculating wildly in the midst of it.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@mercurialsarah/video/7345599710603857194)*> TikTok user @mercurialsarah: What is going on with Kate Middleton? Let’s look at her astrology.*

SCORING OUT

ALANA: So how is the palace treating this? Or should I say the firm treating this?

CONSTANCE: Yes. So the firm is largely, broadly speaking, as we learned from Prince Harry, the firm is the apparatus that handles royal matters: the publicists, the press agents. Kensington Palace is the part of the firm that specifically works for the Prince and Princess of Wales. Buckingham Palace, of course, works for the King and Queen. They are separate. They don't work together as the same entity. Often they work at cross-purposes to throw one another under the bus. Kensington Palace has reacted very, very bizarrely to these rumors. They have actually addressed them on the record, which the Palace never does. The general rule is that they don't want to dignify rumors with an explanation. They don't want to give oxygen to these rumors. But in January, a Spanish journalist reports that Kate is in a coma.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@popapologists/video/7345167991429991723)*> TikTok user @popapologists: She says the doctors had to take drastic actions at the moment because of complications that arose during the surgery, the decision was to put her in an induced coma. They had to intubate her.*

CONSTANCE: And instead of ignoring this report, Kensington Palace puts out a statement being like, this is false. She is completely wrong and she does not know what she's talking about. That is wild. That is not something they ever do. The thing is, while they're making these statements, they are not saying anything really about what's happening with Kate. They're just saying, ‘she's doing well. She continues to do well. We told you she was going to come out in public again around March 31st. And that stands.’ They're not adding any information. They're just talking about it in kind of a weird way.

ALANA: Is this out of the ordinary for Kate as well then?

CONSTANCE: Kate Middleton is one of the most dependable members of the royal family, right? She is a star who always shows up and always does her job. For Kate to just disappear is very bizarre and really adds to the confusion from a lot of people watching.

SCORING IN <Tip Toe - APM>

ALANA: Do you have a theory on what's going on with Kate Middleton?

CONSTANCE: I am trying to avoid getting too wedded to one theory or another. I think when she eventually emerges, it is going to remain mysterious where she's been for these past months and weeks. The truth will probably come out eventually, but with this family, it could be like 20 years, the way it was for so many things with Charles and Camilla. I am mostly just marveling at the fact of the cover up and its incompetence, but I think it'll be a long time before we know what's actually been covered up.

SCORING BUMP

ALANA: Constance Grady. Read her at vox dot com.

Coming up… what the Kate Middleton drama tells us about the royals' standing in British society.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

ALANA: It’s *Today, Explained*. I’m Alana Casanova-Burgess, filling in as host today. Annabelle Dickson is a senior political correspondent at Politico, based in Westminster in London and she says the public speculation around Kate Middleton does…and doesn’t surprise her…

ANNABELLE DICKSON (senior political correspondent, Politico): So, you know, there's always an interest in the royal family, um, in the UK and around the world. There's always been theories, remember the era of Princess Diana,

*<CLIP YOUTUBE MIDDLETON Princess Diana conspiracy theories>*

*I just think that the whole thing was a conspiracy. It was never an accident. Like, the whole lot was planned. She was just too good for them, and they had to get rid of her, because she was like the people's princess.*

ANNABELLE: And actually, you is real sympathy for Kate, I think until now there was a sense that people felt she, she should be left alone, but this sort of photoshopped image has created days of drama in, in the UK and negative coverage. So it has really felt like a departure from the sort of usually carefully worded statements, um, that you get from the royal family. And I think what's striking about it is, you know, this is a sign they're probably not really adapting to the kind of digital age and thinking about the pitfalls of the modern media world. And also kind of struggling with the kind of new demand for transparency that's asked for in this day and age by the public.

ALANA: Right. They're probably used to a universe in which they release a photograph to the press, the press publishes it, and then there's, it's really not a dialogue, it's not a discussion, but here you have people really talking back to this picture.

ANNABELLE: Yeah, exactly. And I think also, you know, in the past it's very unusual for the Royals to produce their own pictures. They would either use professional photographers or they would get in an agency, or one of the pools. Those are the sort of national newsroom photographers who take it in turns to go and cover the royals and then circulate the photos. There used to be a lot more reliant on, on that sort of system before. So using a kind of amateur photographer rather than a professional photographer is a trend over the last few years. And sort of before that, it wasn't really an issue.

ALANA: And probably more to the point, not just an amateur photographer, but an amateur photoshopper.

ANNABELLE: <laughs> exactly.

SCORING IN <Loopbox (faded blue)>

ALANA: So the press has suggested that Princess Kate's disappearance was especially damaging or is especially damaging because there's a lack of stability among the royals. Why is that? And what is this instability?

ANNABELLE: Probably the main thing is because we've had this, this double whammy. So. We've had Princess Kate, who, it was announced at the beginning of the year that she was going into hospital to have abdominal surgery and wouldn't be back till Easter. And then very quickly afterwards…

*<CLIP> BBC ANNOUNCER: We've received breaking news from Buckingham Palace, which has announced that the King has been diagnosed with cancer.*

ANNABELLE: And although he's he's been visible, we've seen, we've actually seen quite a lot of him while he undergoes his treatment, even though he's not doing so many public engagements. The fact that we lost two of the four principals, in such a short space of time, has been really a big deal. You have to remember it's only two years since Queen Elizabeth died. And it's a time actually when this next generation, this sort of modern royal family, are trying to kind of work out their place in the world and what they're for.

SCORING OUT

ANNABELLE: The royal family is– still command public support in the uk.

ALANA: Really?

ANNABELLE: There's a majority of the public who still thinks that we should have a monarchy. That's diminishing and that does change. But actually, you know, support for them is holding up. There's questions about exactly how big they should be. King Charles now, he's very, been very keen on a sort of slim back royal family. He's keen to be seen to be a bit more frugal, not the sort of excess and lavishness that some people associate with the royal family. He really wants them to be seen to be very hardworking, that people really feel give them good value for money. And in terms, of trust, I think on the whole it is seen as a trusted institution and one of the reasons focus groups often talk about wanting the monarchy is the fact they're not political, the fact that they rise above politics, particularly amid the political turmoil of the last few years in the UK, they've been seen as this kind of stable force. And that's one of the things that appeals. And really, I think that goes to the heart of why this story has been so interesting. The majority, beyond the sort of fringes, have dismissed the conspiracy theories that they've been reading online but you know, the handling of this didn't help on trust.

ALANA: You mentioned political turmoil. Are you referring to the very high number of prime ministers that the UK has been burning through?

ANNABELLE: Yeah, one of the things that I'm referring to. You know, we've had Brexit in 2016. And then since then we've had, a succession of prime ministers, including Liz Truss who didn't last very long at all,

*<CLIP> CNN: An Economist article compared the total days Truss had been in control to roughly the shelf life of a lettuce. It was a resounding victory for the Greens.*

ANNABELLE: and I remember speaking to someone in 10 Downing Street who was worried about that feeling of instability that the death of the Queen might have at the same time that politics was really in turmoil.

ALANA: So a slightly different political, perhaps lowercase p, political story is the press's relationship with the royal family. Sometimes it's as much of a story as the royal family itself. What's that relationship like right now?

ANNABELLE: Um, do you know, it's been pretty good and it's a symbiotic relationship, you know, the press sells papers, gets website hits from the royals, and the monarchy gets the publicity that they actually need to survive. And actually, King Charles has done a good job with the press since he became king and it was widely thought that actually that his cancer diagnosis was handled really well, the palace were really upfront about it, the press were really supportive but you know, there has been a bit of a change of mood in recent days. One of the things that I think has sort of contributed to that was again talking about this control that Kate Middleton and Prince William like to have over their narrative and the fact that it was them releasing the picture has highlighted a kind of wider frustration with the way that they operate. And, I think that the press do feel that they need the access and it can't always be a kind of controlled message and you know, they're just kind of waiting for morsels as it were.

SCORING IN <Neutral Satoshi>

ALANA: So it, it seem s as though there's genuine concern for Kate Middleton's well being on some level. There's also for, for people who want to trust the royal family, there's some upset over these stumbles. And then for people who hate the monarchy, who view them with suspicion, there's also this maybe sense of delight in watching this play out because it appears that this this is an apparatus that's collapsing from the inside, and people get to watch that.So I know you said that the British public continues to want the monarchy, polling shows, but has the scandal exposed anything about what the future might look like for them, do you think?

ANNABELLE: I think it's shown how, um, fragile things can be, and how these things can kind of take on a life of their own. William and Kate have been hugely popular, and I think they will continue to be. And, you know, we could well see Kate back at work in a few weeks time and them moving on from this. And you know, the royals know that older voters are overwhelmingly in favor, but the next generation is a bit of an unknown entity, I would say. The polls suggest that the younger people aren't so committed to the royal family. And I think the kind of lack of a desire for an elected head of state works in their favor. But things like that can change quickly. The public mood can change quickly.

SCORING BUMP

ALANA: Annabelle Dickson is a Senior Political Correspondent at Politico where she covers government in the UK.

Today’s show was produced by Avishay Artsy, and Jesse Alejandro Cottrell. It was edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and engineered by David Herman.

I’m Alana Casanova-Burgess, and this is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]