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ELEANOR OLIPHANT IS COMPLETELY FINE

Written by Gail Honeyman

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Eleanor
Oliphant
is Completely
Fine

GAIL HONEYMAN



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For my family

' . . . loneliness is hallmarked by an intense desire to bring the experience to a close; something which cannot be achieved by sheer willpower or by simply getting out more, but only by developing intimate connections. This is far easier said than done, especially for people whose loneliness arises from a state of loss or exile or prejudice, who have reason to fear or mistrust as well as long for the society of others.

' . . . the lonelier a person gets, the less adept they become at navigating social currents. Loneliness grows around them, like mould or fur, a prophylactic that inhibits contact, no matter how badly contact is desired. Loneliness is accretive, extending and perpetuating itself. Once it becomes impacted, it is by no means easy to dislodge.'

Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City*

Good
Days



1

WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME what I do – taxi drivers, dental hygienists – I tell them I work in an office. In almost nine years, no one's ever asked what kind of office, or what sort of job I do there. I can't decide whether that's because I fit perfectly with their idea of what an office worker looks like, or whether people hear the phrase *work in an office* and automatically fill in the blanks themselves – lady doing photocopying, man tapping at a keyboard. I'm not complaining. I'm delighted that I don't have to get into the fascinating intricacies of accounts receivable with them. When I first started working here, whenever anyone asked, I used to tell them that I worked for a graphic design company, but then they assumed I was a creative type. It became a bit boring to see their faces blank over when I explained that it was back office stuff, that I didn't get to use the fine-tipped pens and the fancy software.

I'm nearly thirty years old now and I've been working here since I was twenty-one. Bob, the owner, took me on not long after the office opened. I suppose he felt sorry for me. I had a degree in Classics and no work experience to speak of, and I turned up for the interview with a black eye, a couple of missing teeth and a broken arm. Maybe he sensed, back then, that I would never aspire to anything more than a poorly paid office job, that I would be content to stay with the company and save

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him the bother of ever having to recruit a replacement. Perhaps he could also tell that I'd never need to take time off to go on honeymoon, or request maternity leave. I don't know.

It's definitely a two-tier system in the office; the creatives are the film stars, the rest of us merely supporting artists. You can tell by looking at us which category we fall into. To be fair, part of that is salary-related. The back office staff get paid a pittance, and so we can't afford much in the way of sharp haircuts and nerdy glasses. Clothes, music, gadgets – although the designers are desperate to be seen as freethinkers with unique ideas, they all adhere to a strict uniform. Graphic design is of no interest to me. I'm a finance clerk. I could be issuing invoices for anything, really: armaments, Rohypnol, coconuts.

From Monday to Friday, I come in at 8.30. I take an hour for lunch. I used to bring in my own sandwiches, but the food at home always went off before I could use it up, so now I get something from the high street. I always finish with a trip to Marks and Spencer on a Friday, which rounds off the week nicely. I sit in the staffroom with my sandwich and I read the newspaper from cover to cover, and then I do the crosswords. I take the *Daily Telegraph*, not because I like it particularly, but because it has the best cryptic crossword. I don't talk to anyone – by the time I've bought my Meal Deal, read the paper and finished both crosswords, the hour is almost up. I go back to my desk and work till 5.30. The bus home takes half an hour.

I make supper and eat it while I listen to *The Archers*. I usually have pasta with pesto and salad – one pan and one plate. My childhood was full of culinary contradiction, and I've dined on both hand-dived scallops and boil-in-the-bag cod over the years.

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After much reflection on the political and sociological aspects of the table, I have realized that I am completely uninterested in food. My preference is for fodder that is cheap, quick and simple to procure and prepare, whilst providing the requisite nutrients to enable a person to stay alive.

After I've washed up, I read a book, or sometimes I watch television if there's a programme the *Telegraph* has recommended that day. I usually (well, always) talk to Mummy on a Wednesday evening for fifteen minutes or so. I go to bed around ten, read for half an hour and then put the light out. I don't have trouble sleeping, as a rule.

On Fridays, I don't get the bus straight after work but instead I go to the Tesco Metro around the corner from the office and buy a margherita pizza, some Chianti and two big bottles of Glen's vodka. When I get home, I eat the pizza and drink the wine. I have some vodka afterwards. I don't need much on a Friday, just a few big swigs. I usually wake up on the sofa around 3 a.m., and I stumble off to bed. I drink the rest of the vodka over the weekend, spread it throughout both days so that I'm neither drunk nor sober. Monday takes a long time to come around.

My phone doesn't ring often – it makes me jump when it does – and it's usually people asking if I've been mis-sold Payment Protection Insurance. I whisper *I know where you live* to them, and hang up the phone very, very gently. No one's been in my flat this year apart from service professionals; I've not voluntarily invited another human being across the threshold, except to read the meter. You'd think that would be impossible, wouldn't you? It's true, though. I do exist, don't I? It often feels as if I'm not here, that I'm a figment of my own imagination. There are days when I feel so lightly connected to the earth that the threads that tether me to the planet are gossamer thin, spun sugar. A

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strong gust of wind could dislodge me completely, and I'd lift off and blow away, like one of those seeds in a dandelion clock.

The threads tighten slightly from Monday to Friday. People phone the office to discuss credit lines, send me emails about contracts and estimates. The employees I share an office with – Janey, Loretta, Bernadette and Billy – would notice if I didn't turn up. After a few days (I've often wondered how many) they would worry that I hadn't phoned in sick – so unlike me – and they'd dig out my address from the personnel files. I suppose they'd call the police in the end, wouldn't they? Would the officers break down the front door? Find me, covering their faces, gagging at the smell? That would give them something to talk about in the office. They hate me, but they don't actually wish me dead. I don't think so, anyway.

I went to the doctor yesterday. It feels like aeons ago. I got the young doctor this time, the pale chap with the red hair, which I was pleased about. The younger they are, the more recent their training, and that can only be a good thing. I hate it when I get old Dr Wilson; she's about sixty, and I can't imagine she knows much about the latest drugs and medical breakthroughs. She can barely work the computer.

The doctor was doing that thing where they talk to you but don't look at you, reading my notes on the screen, hitting the return key with increasing ferocity as he scrolled down.

'What can I do for you this time, Miss Oliphant?'

'It's back pain, Doctor,' I told him. 'I've been in agony.' He still didn't look at me.

'How long have you been experiencing this?' he said.

'A couple of weeks,' I told him.

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He nodded.

'I think I know what's causing it,' I said, 'but I wanted to get your opinion.'

He stopped reading, finally looked across at me.

'What is it that you think is causing your back pain, Miss Oliphant?'

'I think it's my breasts, Doctor,' I told him.

'Your breasts?'

'Yes,' I said. 'You see, I've weighed them, and they're almost half a stone – combined weight, that is, not each!' I laughed. He stared at me, not laughing. 'That's a lot of weight to carry around, isn't it?' I asked him. 'I mean, if I were to strap half a stone of additional flesh to your chest and force you to walk around all day like that, your back would hurt too, wouldn't it?'

He stared at me, then cleared his throat.

'How . . . how did you . . . ?'

'Kitchen scales,' I said, nodding. 'I just sort of . . . placed one on top. I didn't weigh them both, I made the assumption that they'd be roughly the same weight. Not entirely scientific I know, but—'

'I'll write you a prescription for some more painkillers, Miss Oliphant,' he said, talking over me and typing.

'Strong ones this time, please,' I said firmly, 'and plenty of them.' They'd tried to fob me off before with tiny doses of aspirin. I needed highly efficient medication to add to my stockpile.

'Could I also have a repeat prescription for my eczema medication, please? It does seem to become exacerbated at times of stress or excitement.'

He did not grace this polite request with a response but simply nodded. Neither of us spoke as the printer spat out the paperwork, which he handed to me. He stared at the screen again and

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started typing. There was an awkward silence. His social skills were woefully inadequate, especially for a people-facing job like his.

‘Goodbye then, Doctor,’ I said. ‘Thank you so very much for your time.’ My tone went completely over his head. He was still, apparently, engrossed in his notes. That’s the only downside to the younger ones; they have a terrible bedside manner.

That was yesterday morning, in a different life. Today, *after*, the bus was making good progress as I headed for the office. It was raining, and everyone else looked miserable, huddled into their overcoats, sour morning breath steaming up the windows. Life sparkled towards me through the drops of rain on the glass, shimmered fragrantly above the fug of wet clothes and damp feet.

I have always taken great pride in managing my life alone. I’m a sole survivor – I’m Eleanor Oliphant. I don’t need anyone else – there’s no big hole in my life, no missing part of my own particular puzzle. I am a self-contained entity. That’s what I’ve always told myself, at any rate. But last night, I’d found the love of my life. When I saw him walk on stage, I just *knew*. He was wearing a very stylish hat, but that wasn’t what drew me in. No – I’m not that shallow. He was wearing a three-piece suit, *with the bottom button of his waistcoat unfastened*. A true gentleman leaves the bottom button unfastened, Mummy always said – it was one of the signs to look out for, signifying as it did a sophisticate, an elegant man of the appropriate class and social standing. His handsome face, his voice . . . here, at long last, was a man who could be described with some degree of certainty as ‘husband material’.

Mummy was going to be thrilled.

2

AT THE OFFICE, THERE was that palpable sense of Friday joy, everyone colluding with the lie that somehow the weekend would be amazing and that, next week, work would be different, better. They never learn. For me, though, things *had* changed. I had not slept well, but despite that, I was feeling good, better, best. People say that when you come across ‘the one’, you just know. Everything about this was true, even the fact that fate had thrown him into my path on a Thursday night, and so now the weekend stretched ahead invitingly, full of time and promise.

One of the designers was finishing up today – as usual, we’d be marking the occasion with cheap wine and expensive beer, crisps dumped in cereal bowls. With any luck, it would start early, so I could show my face and still leave on time. I simply *had* to get to the shops before they closed. I pushed open the door, the chill of the air-con making me shudder, even though I was wearing my jerkin. Billy was holding court. He had his back to me, and the others were too engrossed to notice me slip in.

‘She’s mental,’ he said.

‘Well, we know she’s mental,’ Janey said, ‘that was never in doubt. The question is, what did she do this time?’

Billy snorted. ‘You know she won those tickets and asked me to go to that stupid gig with her?’

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Janey smiled. ‘Bob’s annual raffle of crap client freebies. First prize, two free tickets. Second prize, four free tickets . . .’

Billy sighed. ‘Exactly. Total embarrassment of a Thursday night out – a charity gig in a pub, starring the marketing team of our biggest client, plus various cringeworthy party pieces from all their friends and family? And, to make it worse, with *her*?’

Everyone laughed. I couldn’t disagree with his assessment; it was hardly a Gatsbyesque night of glamour and excess.

‘There was one band in the first half – Johnnie something and the Pilgrim Pioneers – who weren’t actually that bad,’ he said. ‘They mostly played their own stuff, some covers too, classic oldies.’

‘I know him – Johnnie Lomond!’ Bernadette said. ‘He was in the same year as my big brother. Came to our house for a party one night when Mum and Dad were in Tenerife, him and some of my brother’s other mates from Sixth Year. Ended up blocking the bathroom sink, if I remember right . . .’

I turned away, not wishing to hear about his youthful indiscretions.

‘Anyway,’ said Billy – he did not like being interrupted, I’d noticed – ‘she absolutely *hated* that band. She just sat there frozen; didn’t move, didn’t clap, anything. Soon as they finished, she said she needed to go home. So she didn’t even make it to the interval, and I had to sit there on my own for the rest of the gig, like, literally, Billy No-Mates.’

‘That’s a shame, Billy; I know you were wanting to take her for a drink afterwards, maybe go dancing,’ Loretta said, nudging him.

‘You’re so funny, Loretta. No, she was off like a shot. She’d have been tucked up in bed with a cup of cocoa and a copy of *Take a Break* before the band had even finished their set.’

‘Oh,’ said Janey, ‘I don’t see her as a *Take a Break* reader,

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somehow. It'd be something much weirder, much more random. *Angling Times? What Caravan?*

'*Horse and Hound*,' said Billy firmly, 'and she's got a subscription.' They all sniggered.

I laughed myself at that one, actually.

I hadn't been expecting it to happen last night, not at all. It hit me all the harder because of that. I'm someone who likes to plan things properly, prepare in advance and be organized. This came out of nowhere; it felt like a slap in the face, a punch to the gut, a burning.

I'd asked Billy to come to the concert with me, mainly because he was the youngest person in the office; for that reason, I assumed he'd enjoy the music. I heard the others teasing him about it when they thought I was out at lunch. I knew nothing about the concert, hadn't heard of any of the bands. I was going out of a sense of duty; I'd won the tickets in the charity raffle, and I knew people would ask about it in the office.

I had been drinking sour white wine, warm and tainted by the plastic glasses the pub made us drink from. What savages they must think us! Billy had insisted on buying it, to thank me for inviting him. There was no question of it being a date. The very notion was ridiculous.

The lights went down. Billy hadn't wanted to watch the support acts, but I was adamant. You never know if you'll be bearing witness as a new star emerges, never know who's going to walk onto the stage and set it alight. And then *he* did. I stared at him. He was light and heat. He blazed. Everything he came into contact with would be changed. I sat forward on my seat, edged closer. At last. I'd found him.

*

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Now that fate had unfurled my future, I simply *had* to find out more about him; the singer, the answer. Before I tackled the horror that was the month-end accounts, I thought I'd have a quick look at a few sites – Argos, John Lewis – to see how much a computer would cost. I suppose I could have come into the office during the weekend and used one, but there was a high risk that someone else would be around and ask what I was doing. It's not like I'd be breaking any rules, but it's no one else's business, and I wouldn't want to have to explain to Bob how I'd been working weekends and yet still hadn't managed to make a dent in the huge pile of invoices waiting to be processed. Plus, I could do other things at home at the same time, like cook a trial menu for our first dinner together. Mummy told me, years ago, that men go absolutely crazy for sausage rolls. The way to a man's heart, she said, is a homemade sausage roll, hot flaky pastry, good quality meat. I haven't cooked anything except pasta for years. I've never made a sausage roll. I don't suppose it's terribly difficult, though. It's only pastry and mechanically recovered meat.

I switched on the machine and entered my password, but the whole screen froze. I turned the computer off and on again, and this time it didn't even get as far as the password prompt. Annoying. I went to see Loretta, the office manager. She has overinflated ideas of her own administrative abilities, and in her spare time makes hideous jewellery, which she then sells to idiots. I told her my computer wasn't working, and that I hadn't been able to get hold of Danny in IT.

'Danny left, Eleanor,' she said, not looking up from her screen. 'There's a new guy now. Raymond Gibbons? He started last month?' She said this as though I should have known. Still not looking up, she wrote his full name and telephone extension on a Post-it note and handed it to me.

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‘Thank you so much, you’ve been extremely helpful as usual, Loretta,’ I said. It went over her head, of course.

I phoned the number but got his voicemail: ‘Hi, Raymond here, but also *not* here. Like Schrödinger’s cat. Leave a message after the beep. Cheers.’

I shook my head in disgust, and spoke slowly and clearly into the machine.

‘Good morning, Mister Gibbons. My name is Miss Oliphant and I am the finance clerk. My computer has stopped working and I would be most grateful if you could see your way to repairing it today. Should you require any further details, you may reach me on extension five-three-five. Thank you most kindly.’

I hoped that my clear, concise message might serve as an exemplar for him. I waited for ten minutes, tidying my desk, but he did not return my call. After two hours of paper filing and in the absence of any communication from Mr Gibbons, I decided to take a very early lunch break. It had crossed my mind that I ought to ready myself physically for a potential meeting with the musician by making a few improvements. Should I make myself over from the inside out, or work from the outside in? I compiled a list in my head of all of the appearance-related work which would need to be undertaken: hair (head and body), nails (toe and finger), eyebrows, cellulite, teeth, scars . . . all of these things needed to be updated, enhanced, improved. Eventually, I decided to start from the outside and work my way in – that’s what often happens in nature, after all. The shedding of skin, rebirth. Animals, birds and insects can provide such useful insights. If I’m ever unsure as to the correct course of action, I’ll think, ‘What would a ferret do?’ or, ‘How would a salamander respond to this situation?’ Invariably, I find the right answer.

I walked past Julie’s Beauty Basket every day on my way to

work. As luck would have it, they had a cancellation. It would take around twenty minutes, Kayla would be my therapist, and it would cost forty-five pounds. Forty-five! Still, I reminded myself as Kayla led me towards a room downstairs, he was worth it. Kayla, like the other employees, was wearing a white outfit resembling surgical scrubs and white clogs. I approved of this pseudo-medical apparel. We went into an uncomfortably small room, barely large enough to accommodate the bed, chair and side table.

‘Now then,’ she said, ‘what you need to do is pop off your . . .’ she paused and looked at my lower half ‘. . . erm, trousers, and your underwear, then pop up onto the couch. You can be naked from the waist down or, if you prefer, you can pop these on.’ She placed a small packet on the bed. ‘Cover yourself with the towel and I’ll pop back in to see you in a couple of minutes. OK?’

I nodded. I hadn’t anticipated quite so much popping.

Once the door had closed behind her, I removed my shoes and stepped out of my trousers. Should I keep my socks on? I thought, on balance, that I probably should. I pulled down my underpants and wondered what to do with them. It didn’t seem right to drape them over the chair, in full view, as I’d done with my trousers, so I folded them up carefully and put them into my shopper. Feeling rather exposed, I picked up the little packet that she’d left on the bed and opened it. I shook out the contents and held them up: a very small pair of black underpants, in a style which I recognized as ‘Tanga’ in Marks and Spencer’s nomenclature, and made from the same papery fabric as teabags. I stepped into them and pulled them up. They were far too small, and my flesh bulged out from the front, sides and back.

The bed was very high and I found a plastic step underneath that I used to help me ascend. I lay down; it was lined with towels and topped with the same scratchy blue paper that you

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find on the doctor's couch. Another black towel was folded at my feet, and I pulled it up to my waist to cover myself. The black towels worried me. What sort of dirty staining was the colour choice designed to hide? I stared at the ceiling and counted the spotlights, then looked from side to side. Despite the dim lighting, I could see scuff marks on the pale walls. Kayla knocked and entered, all breezy cheerfulness.

'Now then,' she said, 'what are we doing today?'

'As I said, a bikini wax, please.'

She laughed. 'Yes, sorry, I meant what kind of wax would you like?'

I thought about this. 'Just the usual kind . . . the candle kind?' I said.

'What shape?' she said tersely, then noticed my expression. 'So,' she said patiently, counting them off on her fingers, 'you've got your French, your Brazilian or your Hollywood.'

I pondered. I ran the words through my mind again, over and over, the same technique I used for solving crossword anagrams, waiting for the letters to settle into a pattern. French, Brazilian, Hollywood . . . French, Brazilian, Hollywood . . .

'Hollywood,' I said, finally. 'Holly would, and so would Eleanor.'

She ignored my wordplay, and lifted up the towel. 'Oh . . .' she said. 'Okaaaay . . .' She went over to the table and opened a drawer, took something out. 'It's going to be an extra two pounds for the clipper guard,' she said sternly, pulling on a pair of disposable gloves.

The clippers buzzbuzzbuzzed and I stared at the ceiling. This didn't hurt at all! When she'd finished, she used a big, fat brush to sweep the shaved hair onto the floor. I felt panic start to rise within me. I hadn't looked at the floor when I came in. What if she'd done this with the other clients – were their pubic hairs

now adhering to the soles of my polka dot socks? I started to feel slightly sick at the thought.

‘That’s better,’ she said. ‘Now, I’ll be as quick as I can. Don’t use perfumed lotions in the area for at least twelve hours after this, OK?’ She stirred the pot of wax that was heating on the side table.

‘Oh, don’t worry, I’m not much of a one for unguents, Kayla,’ I said. She goggled at me. I’d have thought that staff in the beauty business would have better-developed people skills. She was almost as bad as my colleagues back at the office.

She pushed the paper pants to one side and asked me to pull the skin taut. Then she painted a stripe of warm wax onto my pubis with a wooden spatula, and pressed a strip of fabric onto it. Taking hold of the end, she ripped it off in one rapid flourish of clean, bright pain.

‘*Morituri te salutant*,’ I whispered, tears pricking my eyes. This is what I say in such situations, and it always cheers me up no end. I started to sit up, but she gently pushed me back down.

‘Oh, there’s a good bit more to go, I’m afraid,’ she said, sounding quite cheerful.

Pain is easy; pain is something with which I am familiar. I went into the little white room inside my head, the one that’s the colour of clouds. It smells of clean cotton and baby rabbits. The air inside the room is the palest sugar almond pink, and the loveliest music plays. Today, it was ‘Top of the World’ by The Carpenters. That beautiful voice . . . she sounds so blissful, so full of love. Lovely, lucky Karen Carpenter.

Kayla continued to dip and rip. She asked me to bend my knees out to the sides and place my heels together. Like frog’s legs, I said, but she ignored me, intent on her work. She ripped out the hair from right underneath. I hadn’t even considered that such a thing would be possible. When she’d finished, she asked

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me to lie normally again and then pulled down the paper pants. She smeared hot wax onto the remaining hair and ripped it all off triumphantly.

‘There,’ she said, removing the gloves and wiping her brow with the back of her hand, ‘now doesn’t that look *so* much better!’

She passed me a hand mirror so I could look at myself. ‘But I’m completely bare!’ I said, horrified.

‘That’s right, a Hollywood,’ she said. ‘That’s what you asked for.’

I felt my fists clench tight, and shook my head in disbelief. I had come here to start to become a normal woman, and instead she’d made me look like a child.

‘Kayla,’ I said, unable to believe the situation I now found myself in, ‘the man in whom I am interested is a normal adult man. He will enjoy sexual relations with a normal adult woman. Are you trying to imply that he’s some sort of paedophile? How *dare* you!’

She stared at me, horrified. I had had enough of this.

‘Please, leave me to get dressed now,’ I said, turning my face to the wall.

She left and I climbed down from the couch. I pulled my trousers on, consoled by the thought that the hair would surely grow back before our first intimate encounter. I didn’t tip Kayla on the way out.

When I returned to the office, my computer still wasn’t working. I sat down gingerly and called Raymond in IT again, but it went straight to his preposterous message. I decided to go upstairs and find him; from his voicemail greeting, he sounded like the kind of person who would ignore a ringing telephone and sit around doing nothing. Just as I pushed my chair back, a man approached my desk. He was barely taller than me, and was wearing green

training shoes, ill-fitting denim trousers and a T-shirt showing a cartoon dog, lying on top of its kennel. It was stretched taut against a burgeoning belly. He had pale sandy hair, cut short in an attempt to hide the fact that it was thinning and receding, and patchy blond stubble. All of his visible skin, both face and body, was very pink. A word sprang to mind: porcine.

‘Erm, Oliphant?’ he said.

‘Yes – Eleanor Oliphant – I am she,’ I said.

He lurched towards my desk. ‘I’m Raymond, IT,’ he said. I offered him my hand to shake, which eventually he did, rather tentatively. Yet more evidence of the lamentable decline in modern manners. I moved away and allowed him to sit at my desk.

‘What seems to be the problem?’ he asked, staring at my screen. I told him. ‘Okey dokey,’ he said, typing noisily. I picked up my *Telegraph* and told him I’d be in the staffroom; there was little point in my standing around while he mended the computer.

The crossword setter today was ‘Elgar’, whose clues are always elegant and fair. I was tapping my teeth with the pen, pondering twelve down, when Raymond loped into the room, interrupting my train of thought. He looked over my shoulder.

‘Crosswords, eh?’ he said. ‘Never seen the point of them. Give me a good computer game any day. *Call of Duty*—’

I ignored his inane wittering. ‘Did you fix it?’ I asked him.

‘Yep,’ he said, sounding pleased. ‘You had quite a nasty virus. I’ve cleaned up your hard drive and reset the firewall. You should run a full system scan once a week, ideally.’ He must have noticed my uncomprehending expression. ‘Come on, I’ll show you.’ We walked along the corridor. The floor squeaked beneath his hideous training shoes. He coughed.

‘So . . . you, eh, have you worked here long, Eleanor?’ he said.

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'Yes,' I replied, increasing my pace.

He managed to keep up with me, but was slightly out of breath.

'Right,' he said. He cleared his throat. 'I started here a few weeks ago. I was at Sandersons before. In town. Do you know them?'

'No,' I said.

We reached my desk and I sat down. He hovered, too close. He smelled of cooking and, faintly, of cigarettes. Unpleasant. He told me what to do and I followed his instructions, committing them to memory. By the time he had finished, I had reached the limit of my interest in technological matters for the day.

'Thank you for your assistance, Raymond,' I said, pointedly. Raymond saluted, and heaved himself to his feet. A man with a less military bearing was hard to imagine.

'No bother, Eleanor. See you around!'

I very much doubt it, I thought, opening up the spreadsheet which listed this month's overdue accounts. He loped off with a strange bouncy walk, springing too hard on the balls of his feet. A lot of unattractive men seem to walk in such a manner, I've noticed. I'm sure training shoes don't help.

The other night, the singer had worn beautiful leather brogues. He was tall, elegant and graceful. It was hard to believe that the singer and Raymond were members of the same species. I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. There was throbbing pain and the beginnings of an itch *downstairs*. Perhaps I should have put my underpants back on.

The leaving do started around half four, and I made sure to clap extravagantly at the end of Bob's speech and say 'Hear, hear,

bravo!’ loudly, so that everyone noticed me. I left at 4.59 p.m and walked to the shopping mall as fast as the chafing occasioned by my newly hairless epidermis allowed. I got there by quarter past, thank God. *Bird in the hand* is what I was thinking, given the importance of the task, so I simply headed straight into the first big department store I saw and took the lift to the electrical department.

A young man with a grey shirt and a shiny tie was staring at the banks of giant TV screens. I approached, and informed him that I wished to purchase a computer. He looked scared.

‘*Desktop laptop tablet,*’ he intoned. I had no idea what he was talking about.

‘I haven’t bought a computer before, Liam,’ I explained, reading his name badge. ‘I’m a very inexperienced technology consumer.’

He pulled at the collar of his shirt, as though trying to free his enormous Adam’s apple from its constraints. He had the look of a gazelle or an impala, one of those boring beige animals with large, round eyes on the sides of its face. The kind of animal that always gets eaten by a leopard in the end.

This was a rocky start.

‘What will you be using it for?’ he asked, not making eye contact.

‘That’s absolutely none of your business,’ I said, most offended.

He looked like he might cry, and I felt bad. He was only young. I touched his arm, even though I hate touching.

‘I’m afraid I’m a bit anxious because it is absolutely imperative that I am able to go online this weekend,’ I explained. His nervous expression remained in place.

‘Liam,’ I said slowly, ‘I simply need to purchase some sort of computer equipment that I can use in the comfort of my own home in order to conduct some internet-based research. I may

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in time send electronic messages from it. That is all. Do you have something suitable in stock?’

The boy stared heavenwards and thought deeply. ‘A laptop and mobile internet access?’ he said. Why was he asking me, for goodness’ sakes? I nodded and handed over my debit card.

When I got home, slightly giddy at how much money I’d spent, I realized that there was nothing to eat. Friday was margherita pizza day, of course, but my routine was, for the first time ever, somewhat out of kilter. I recalled that I had a flyer in the tea towel drawer, something that was put through my letterbox a while ago. I found it easily and smoothed it out. There were money-off coupons along the bottom, which had expired. I guessed the prices would have gone up, but assumed that the phone number had stayed the same, and they presumably still sold pizzas. Even these old prices were ridiculous, though, and I actually laughed out loud at them. In Tesco Metro, the pizzas cost a quarter of that price.

I decided that I’d go for it. Yes, it was extravagant and indulgent, but why not? Life should be about trying new things, exploring boundaries, I reminded myself. The man on the other end of the line told me that the pizza would arrive in fifteen minutes. I brushed my hair, took off my slippers and put my work shoes back on. I wondered how they managed with the black pepper. Would the man bring a pepper mill with him? Surely he wouldn’t grind it over the pizza while he stood on the doorstep? I put the kettle on in case he wanted a cup of tea. They had told me on the phone how much it would cost and I looked out the money, put it in an envelope and wrote *Pizza Pronto* on the front. I didn’t bother with the address. I wondered whether it was the done thing to tip, and wished I had someone to ask. Mummy wouldn’t be able to advise. She doesn’t get to decide what she eats.

Gail Honeyman

The flaw with the pizza plan was the wine. They didn't deliver it, the man on the phone said, and actually sounded quite amused that I'd asked. Strange – what could be more normal than pizza and wine? I couldn't see how I was going to acquire something to drink in time to have with the pizza. I really needed something to drink. I worried over it as I waited for the delivery.

In the end, the pizza experience was extremely disappointing. The man simply thrust a big box into my hand and took the envelope, which he then rudely ripped open right in front of me. I heard him mutter *fuck's sake* under his breath as he counted the coins. I had been collecting fifty-pence pieces in a little ceramic dish, and this had seemed the perfect opportunity to use them up. I'd popped an extra one in for him, but received no thanks for it. Rude.

The pizza was excessively greasy and the dough was flabby and tasteless. I decided immediately that I would never eat delivered pizza again, and definitely not with the musician. If we ever found ourselves in need of pizza and too far from a Tesco Metro, one of two things would happen. One: we would take a black cab into town and dine at a lovely Italian restaurant. Two: he would make pizza for us both, from scratch. He'd mix the dough, stretching and kneading it with those long, tapered fingers, stroking it until it did what he wanted. He'd stand at the cooker, simmering tomatoes with fresh herbs, reducing them to a rich sauce, slick and slippery with a sheen of olive oil.

He'd be wearing his oldest, most comfortable jeans, a pair that sat snugly on his slim hips, bare feet tapping as he sang softly to himself in his delicious voice and stirred. When he'd assembled the pizza, topping it with artichokes and fennel shavings, he'd put it in the oven and come and find me, take me by the hand and lead me into the kitchen. He'd have set the table, a dish of

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gardenias in the centre, tea lights flickering through coloured glass. He'd slowly ease the cork from a bottle of Barolo with a long, satisfying pop and place it on the table, then pull out my chair for me. Before I could sit, he'd take me in his arms and kiss me, his hands around my waist, pulling me so close that I could feel the pulse of blood in him, smell the sweet spiciness of his skin and the warm sugar of his breath.

I'd finished eating my poor-quality pizza and was jumping up and down on the box, trying to crush it small enough to fit into the bin, when I remembered the brandy. Mummy always said that brandy is good for shocks and I'd bought some, several years ago, just in case. I'd put it in the bathroom cabinet, with all the other emergency items. I went to check and there it was, behind the rolled-up bandages and the wrist supports – a half bottle of Rémy Martin, full and unopened. I unscrewed the cap and took a drink. It wasn't as nice as vodka, but it wasn't bad.

I was very apprehensive about the laptop, never having set up a new computer before, but it was actually pretty easy. The mobile internet thing was straightforward, too. I took the brandy and the laptop to the kitchen table, typed his name into Google and hit return, then put my hands over my eyes. Seconds later I peeped through my fingers. There were hundreds of results! It seemed that this was going to be quite easy, so I decided to ration the pages; after all, I had the entire weekend, so there was no point in rushing.

The first link took me to his own web page, which was entirely taken up with photographs of him and his band. I moved closer to the screen until my nose was almost touching it. I had neither imagined him, nor overestimated the extent of his beauty. The

next link took me to his Twitter page. I allowed myself the pleasure of reading the three latest messages, two of which were wry and witty, the third utterly charming. In it, he was professing his professional admiration for another musician. Gracious of him.

Next, his Instagram page. He had posted almost fifty photos. I clicked on one at random, a head shot in close-up, candid and relaxed. He had a Roman nose, perfectly straight, classically proportioned. His ears were also perfect, exactly the right size, the whorls of skin and cartilage flawlessly symmetrical. His eyes were light brown. They were light brown in the way that a rose is red, or that the sky is blue. They defined what it meant to be light brown.

There were rows and rows of photographs on the page and my brain forced my finger to press the button and return to the search engine. I scanned the rest of the sites that Google had found. There were video clips of performances on YouTube. There were articles and reviews. This was only the first page of the search results. I would read every piece of information that I could find about him, get to know him properly – after all, I’m very good at research, and at problem-solving. I don’t mean to boast; I’m merely stating the facts. Finding out more about him was the right thing to do, the sensible approach, if it turned out that he was going to be the love of my life. I picked up the brandy, a new notebook and a fine-tipped pen that I’d borrowed from the office, and went over to the sofa, ready to make a start on my plan of action. The brandy was both warming and soothing, and I kept sipping.

When I awoke, it was just after 3 a.m., and the pen and notebook were lying on the floor. Slowly, I recalled getting sidetracked, starting to daydream as the brandy slipped down. The backs of

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my hands were tattooed with black ink, his name written there over and over, inscribed inside love-hearts, so that barely an inch of skin remained unsullied. A mouthful of brandy remained in the bottle. I downed it and went to bed.