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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.

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine

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.