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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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II

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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

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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

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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

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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,