

Good
Days



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.

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?’

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

NOTE OF CASE MEETING

15 March 1999, 10 a.m.

Case Meeting: OLIPHANT, ELEANOR (12/07/1987)

Present: Robert Brocklehurst (Deputy Head, Children and Families, Social Work Department); Rebecca Scatcherd (Senior Case Worker, Social Work Department); Mr and Mrs Reed (foster carers)

The meeting took place at the home of Mr and Mrs Reed, whose children, including Eleanor Oliphant, were at school at the time. Mr and Mrs Reed had requested the meeting, which was outwith the regular scheduled sessions, in order to discuss their growing concerns about Eleanor.

Mrs Reed reported that Eleanor's behaviour had deteriorated since it was last raised at a case meeting some four months earlier. Mr Brocklehurst requested examples, and Mr and Mrs Reed cited the following:

- Eleanor's relationship with their other children had almost completely broken down, particularly with John (14), the eldest;
- Eleanor was insolent and rude to Mrs Reed on a daily basis. When Mrs Reed attempted to discipline her, for example by sending her upstairs to the spare room to reflect on her behaviour, she had become hysterical and, on one occasion, physically violent;
- Eleanor had, on occasion, pretended to faint in an attempt to avoid being disciplined, or else in response to being disciplined;

- Eleanor was terrified of the dark and kept the family awake with hysterical crying. She had been provided with a night light and reacted with violent sobbing and tremors to any suggestion that she should give it up, being too old for it now;
- Eleanor often refused to eat the food which was provided for her; mealtimes had become a source of conflict at the family table;
- Eleanor refused point-blank to assist with simple household chores, such as lighting the fire or clearing out the ashes.

Mr and Mrs Reed reported that they were extremely concerned about the effects of Eleanor's behaviour on their other three children (John, 14, Eliza, 9 and Georgie, 7) and, in light of these concerns and also those raised previously during scheduled case meetings, they wished to discuss the best way forward for Eleanor.

Mr and Mrs Reed again requested more information about Eleanor's past history, and Mr Brocklehurst explained that this would not be possible, and indeed was not permitted.

Miss Scatcherd had sought a school report from Eleanor's head teacher in advance of the meeting, and it was noted that Eleanor was performing well, achieving excellent grades in all subjects. The head teacher commented that Eleanor was an exceptionally bright and articulate child, with an impressive vocabulary. Her class teachers had reported that she was quiet and well-behaved during lessons, but did not participate in discussions, although she was an active listener. Several members of staff had noticed that Eleanor was very withdrawn and isolated during breaktimes, and did not appear to socialize with her peers.

After lengthy discussion, and in light of the concerns raised

Gail Honeyman

and re-emphasized by Mr and Mrs Reed about the impact of Eleanor's behaviour on their other children, it was agreed that the most appropriate course of action would be to remove Eleanor from the family home.

Mr and Mrs Reed were content with this outcome, and Mr Brocklehurst informed them that the Department would be in touch in due course regarding next steps.

File note: on 12 November 1999 a Children's Panel Review of Compulsory Supervision Order concerning Eleanor Oliphant took place, at which Mr Brocklehurst and Miss Scatcherd were present (minutes attached).

The Children's Panel concluded that, on account of Eleanor's challenging behaviour in this and previous placements, foster care in a family environment was not appropriate at the current time. It was therefore agreed that Eleanor should be placed in a residential care home for the time being, and that the decision of the Panel would be reviewed in twelve months.

(Action: R Scatcherd to investigate availability of places in local facilities and notify Mr and Mrs Reed of expected date of removal.)

R Scatcherd, 12/11/99

Liars. Liars, liars, liars.

Lady had felt the need to bellow about it outside Audrey Hepburn's window.

Finding out where the musician lived had been easy. He had posted a picture of a lovely sunset on Twitter:

@johnnieLocks

The view from my window: how lucky am I?

#summerinthecity #blessed

It showed rooftops, trees and sky, but there was also a pub in the corner of the photograph, right at the end of the street, its name clearly visible. I found it in seconds, thanks to Google.

The street, like most in this part of the city, was made up of tenements. They all had a secure main front door with named buzzers on the outside wall, one for each flat inside the building. This was the right street. Which side should I start with? Even numbers, I decided. He was an even sort of man, not an odd one. I had a puzzle to solve. I hummed as I worked, and couldn't remember the last time I'd felt like this – light, sparkly, quick. I suspected that it might be what happiness felt like.

It was fascinating to see all the different names on the buzzers, and the manner in which they were displayed. Some were scribbled in biro on a sticker and placed carelessly over the button. Others had typed their names in bold upper case, printed it out and affixed it with three layers of Sellotape. A few had left their buzzer blank, or failed to replace their name when the elements had made the ink run, rendering it illegible. I really hoped he wasn't one of those, but I kept a list of their locations in my notebook, just in case. If I had eliminated all the legible names without coming across his, I'd have to go back and work my way through the list of blank ones.

Ah, but how could I have doubted him? Halfway down the street, the most even of even numbers, there he was: *Mr J. Lomond Esq.* I stood before the buzzer, examining the letters. They were written neatly but artistically in classic black ink on thick white paper. It was so him.

It seemed unlikely that he, a popular, handsome man with the world at his feet, would be at home on a Saturday night, so, just to see how it felt, I gently touched his buzzer with the tip of my index finger. There was a crackle, and then a man's voice spoke. I was somewhat taken aback, to say the least.

'Hello?' he said again.

A deep voice, well spoken, measured. Honey and smoke, velvet and silver. I quickly scanned the list and selected another resident's name at random.

'Pizza delivery for . . . McFadden?' I said. I heard him sigh.

'They're on the top floor,' he said, and hung up. The door buzzed and clicked open. Without stopping to think too much about it, I went inside.

The musician was upstairs on the first floor, in the flat on the right-hand side. There was a discreet brass nameplate above the bell. I stood and listened. I could hear nothing from inside, just the hum of the stair light and faint sounds from the street below. On the floor above, a television was blaring. I took out my notebook and tore off a blank page. I placed it over the nameplate and took out my pencil, then began a brass rubbing. Within moments, I had a stunning facsimile of the plate, which I placed carefully into my bag, between the pages of the notebook. The exterior doors were open and his interior door, a typical Victorian design of mahogany and opaque etched glass, was tantalizingly close.

I stood as near as I dared. I could hear nothing from within,