

Office Girl

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I work in an office. I have my own desk which has a drawer right under the main surface where inside when I was hired and sat down at it for the first time I found paper clips and little pads of different colors and lots of pens and pencils and rubber bands paper clips push pins—they hurt!—a stapler and boxes of refills oh it gives me such a good feeling to open that and the other drawers along the side of the desk with lots of files from the person who occupied my desk before I occupied it whoever it was and whoever it was was very neat and had a system obviously. I'll probably develop my own my boss said. It feels good to have this desk. It feels good to have a boss and to have her give me things to do like calls to make papers to file people to deliver things to which gives me a lot of satisfaction being efficient and careful with what I say and conscious of my posture and making sure the person who gets what I'm delivering knows that it's the right thing. Then I'm glad to say no problem or you're welcome or that's OK which is how I got the reputation that I have at my job for being a nice friendly person.

Unlike other jobs I've had I get great satisfaction from this one. When a call comes in and someone asks for some information let's say and I have the information or can get the information or even if I don't have the information and don't know how to get it I can at least say as much and not be embarrassed to admit it frankly followed of course by asking the person if they'd like to be transferred to the

person at a nearby desk who does know or might know the answer and if that person isn't there would they like to leave a message and they say OK they'll do that and begin usually with numbers while I'm picking up a pen and peeling a sheet of notepaper from the little pad in my desk drawer and catch up and when I repeat it back to them I get a good feeling for a job well done knowing this is office efficiency at its peak and though I want to tell someone or even walk down the hallways smiling proudly to myself I generally don't tell a soul because I am modest and sensible enough to know I have not done anything special just my job but that's a lot I think in this world doing a job and doing it well or at least doing it right.

I would never complain or gossip about my boss the way some of the other gals do which I think is so rude and so unmannerly and really what does it get you to say isn't she this or isn't she that and did you hear what the people in the other department said about her and so on and so on. These other gals have nothing to teach me about being an office worker that I want to learn. If you don't like your job or the person you work for I want to say to them why not work somewhere else but I don't say this because it gives me a lot of satisfaction to keep my opinions to myself and have the confidence of my own convictions and not feel I have to go around telling everybody this or that as if just because you say it it has some special meaning as if you're special yourself. I know that my boss knows this is the way things should be in an office and if she knew that I know it too she would think more highly of me but you're not going to catch me boasting or drawing unnecessary attention to myself because it's my belief that the only way she's going to see that I'm like her in this

among many other ways is for me just to continue on as I am keeping my own counsel unless I'm asked of course by her whatever and whenever at which time is time enough to tell her exactly what I think about whoever and why.

She dresses so cute so neat my boss with such small compact shoes I'm crazy about the way she looks I want to ask her where she gets her hair cut not that I would or would ever say anything that might sound like a false compliment meant to curry favor in the form of information-gathering because this anyway is the kind of attention to one's person which is information I consider much too personal though I do hear the other gals saying things to each other like what a lovely scarf or earrings as if anyone believed what sounds to me like empty flattery and completely insincere. You won't hear any of that from me.

It's the daily routine which others sometimes don't like but which I do I really do it's the very nature of routine itself that makes me love my job as much as I do. When I wake up the first thing that often comes to my mind is how sad I am in my room which is so small and dark. The noise of the train that goes by every ten minutes comes so regularly I sometimes just lay there for a half hour or so with tears running slowly out of the sides of my eyes and wetting my pillow trying not to hear the sentence this is it this it this is it over and over until I have to clear my throat to block it and that hurts. But then the shower and making coffee and dressing and I'm on the way to work and don't you know by the time I've taken the elevator to the second floor and begun my walk down the newly carpeted hallway with that faint chemical smell that everyone says makes their sinuses

burn but which I actually like I'm OK because it's another day at my job where I'm not alone and nothing truly seriously bad can happen because we're all in it together and if there's a disaster that has to do with the carpet or the elevator or the supply closet or the mail room or the telephone system or any of the gals at their desks why then it's my boss that sees to it that things are taken in hand and put under control. When I come home at the end of such a day walking the few blocks from the train through the park I can only think how lucky truly lucky and fortunate to live in such a world where a day can be spent like that safe and certain that there will be a next day and a next. I can get through the scary nights and the sad mornings knowing that.

I had observed that my boss regularly brings her breakfast to her desk and eats it right there while going through the morning mail and checking her messages and so one day I came in extra early first stopping at the corner store to buy coffee which I rarely drink I prefer strong tea and a muffin so she'd see me already hard at work at my desk even before she settled in herself. I want her to think well of me. I like her so much and most of the time she's so fair and decent to me when she explains a new procedure or asks if I would mind filing this or looking over some numbers it's like we're friends but really not friends I don't think could ever be even if I wanted to which I'm not sure I do because I like her telling me things to do which I would definitely not like if we were friends but definitely do like as she is my boss and I'm eager to please. So there I was sitting at my desk reading the newspaper but not really really just being alert for the moment I would hear my boss coming into the office and when she did I looked

up as if I had been absorbed in my reading hoping she'd notice the coffee and muffin so like the ones she comes in with but she didn't even look at me no good morning or even a nod but just kept going past me and into her office and closed the door behind her and what was she so angry about this early in the morning I couldn't possibly know. I waited for a few minutes to give her time to settle down then knocked softly on her door and opened it a little when she hadn't responded probably I thought because I had knocked so softly but she was on the phone I heard her saying the wine was delicious and she screamed at me to knock before I came in and not to come in because she was busy and how could I be so insensitive and where exactly did I get my training and if this was how I was going to be just how long did I think it was before she found someone who understood that a closed door meant just that.

I headed straight for the ladies' didn't even couldn't in fact raise my head the whole way down the corridor for fear I'd burst if anyone so much as met my eye and finally did let go once I was alone in a stall. It was almost like throwing up my face was so hot my eyes were bulging out my heart was hammering in my chest I thought I could be having one of my attacks. I was banging my open palm against the tile wall until I saw the blood smeared on it then had to make several trips back and forth to the sink wetting paper towels to clean up which anyway calmed me down. All I'd done was try to emulate her good work habits and to notice her changing moods and to softly knock to ask if she needed anything and this was my reward!

And this was only the beginning of my mistreatment at the hands of my boss who now routinely abuses my patient nature and my

attempts to raise myself up in the business world by sharing my ideas which she had encouraged me to do as company policy is to reward and promote from within hence the carefully worded memos and post-it notes I leave on her desk which mainly go without a response though my patience keeps me from reminding her or questioning her business practices or asking her point blank if she's ever heard of company policy which is to reward from within. My boss sometimes is what I think is cruel to me saying things with an uncalled for sneer or looking over her glasses as if she can't believe I don't know the answer to something accusing me of asking the same question just yesterday of which I have no recollection and of which she says see you don't remember and if you can't if I can't trust you to remember things well then I just don't know. I slunk out of her office I couldn't not notice the heads of the other gals turning away as if they hadn't been listening to the whole thing and she shouted out there isn't a defect you can hide from me! She thinks that being boss makes her infallible but I have come to see that this isn't so. Just because she's moved up the ladder of success doesn't mean she knows all there is to know. I know for example just where a comma or semi-colon should go in a business letter just as well as she does it does not come down to a matter of opinion. Everyone is aware of the interpersonal relationship mistakes she makes arguing with the big boss talking out of turn at meetings asking for her budget to be increased well just look at the size of her office compared to other bosses and see if her mistakes aren't the cause. She should be grateful I'm her ally that I protect her by not joining in the general talk about her up and down the hallways which is almost a hundred per cent negative.

I don't sleep those nights when she scolds me but lie awake and play her words over and over my heart hammering in my chest the train going by every ten minutes and now in addition blasting has begun at midnight and wonder why anyone would be cruel to me why anyone would want to speak to me in such a way I'm a decent person a good girl I'm caring and kind and even have certain unusual abilities which admittedly aren't always in top evidence but this is on purpose! this is modesty! or maybe you could say aren't often called upon to be demonstrated especially in an office environment but they could be and people would think differently then my boss especially would think I didn't know I didn't realize such and such about her but now I do and now that I do well things will be different around here over lunch at a table with a waiter and ice water and linen napkins and a foreign menu not the place across the street where everybody goes but on a different avenue altogether just her just her and me though not friends exactly more like semi-equals in the world of business. Or maybe this would only happen once one or the other of us had gone on and gotten a different job maybe it's only then that we could meet in this way and realize over a delicious wine that in fact isn't it funny but here we are speaking the same language after all.

It was a thrill one night when I couldn't sleep to open the telephone directory and find her name wow the way it popped out from all that tiny print wow there it was her name her name spelled out and divulging her exact street address and telephone number so that anyone with a pair of shoes could stride right up to her building and command her attention or call her at any hour of the day or night interrupt her routine or her sleep and say anything at all even if it

made no sense and was disturbing simply in its um simplicity.

Not that night but another night I pulled the telephone onto my lap and punched in her number and waited giddy. *Hello? Hello? Hello?* It was shocking to hear her voice sounding just like but not at all like her office voice our connection was so clear I was afraid she could tell it was me just by my silence. How dare I do what I was doing if she'd known if I'd said hi it's me you know me from work she'd probably fire me on the spot or certainly fire me the next day but what actually happened is that I called her a few more times that night and a few more the next couple of nights and by the end of the week she looked tired as if she hadn't slept well and I felt just fine in fact I wasn't sad at all when I woke up in fact woke up laughing at the memory of last night. *Hello? Hello? Hello?* If she could have heard herself! It really took her down a peg or two in my estimation. It was the kind of thing if I was the kind of person I'm not to tell the other gals in the office just to hear them say good for you.

Some days I took to calling in sick especially if she was particularly cruel to me reprimanding me in front of others making references to some mistake she insisted I'd made when it was actually another instance of her opinion versus mine or maybe it was actually her who'd messed up and me with no recourse. If this was how she was going to be well then I just don't know if she deserves my devotion. Some days I really am sick after a night of not sleeping rehashing in my mind what I did what I could have done to make her change so much when I'm trying so hard to get things right but the way she's been treating me it's like we're on a downward spiral that we can't either of us get out of like we're sisters we're drawn together

in the office so tight so dependent on one another only disaster could tear us apart.

I'm sorry now I made those calls to her. When I see her dragging herself into the office in the morning never early anymore in fact usually late sometimes even calling me to tell me she'll be sleeping in today then coming in at ten seeing her dark circled eyes and the slump in her shoulders which is so so sad because I had always admired her posture and her neat carriage in general so to see it unravel to see her go soft and disoriented it was just about breaking my heart but then she'd go and demand how I could have forgotten to take the file to the branch manager's office and in such a sneering demeaning way as to make me feel so small well then I'm right back into a heart hammering day and all I can do to calm myself at home is to wait until it's late and start calling her. I can't sleep anyway so this gives me something to do.

One morning she called me into her office asked me to close the door behind and I was terrified she'd found me out I was near tears to confess it to her finally and to throw myself down at her feet which I would do it would make me feel better to abase myself in front of her and have her dole out some kind of punishment than to sit in front of her with my good posture glad she couldn't be inside my chest to feel the hammering of my heart it felt truly like disaster was coming like the hammering of my heart was the drumbeat that announced the end of the world as I knew it.

I'm leaving is what she said.

She never looked at me but at her desk instead moving papers around into neat piles lining up her pencils explaining about a new

job new opportunities new horizons new responsibilities new interests I wanted to laugh for some reason but then she did look up and I could see that in addition to the dark circles under her eyes were red blotchy patches and I thought oh my god she's been crying! she doesn't want to leave! It was unbearable to sit and watch her like this I thought I would have to crawl out of my own skin but then I noticed that the pounding had stopped it had stopped the worst had happened and I was glad. She was leaving. I was free of her abuse of her contempt of her orders I would be starting clean and fresh I'd be able to breathe I'd be able to sleep.

The phone rang on my desk so I had a reason to leave her office and for the rest of the day it was business as usual though I could barely stay put and kept inventing excuses to go to the supply room or the copier or outside for a smoke which I don't anyway and even though it was freezing just to get up and move or I would burst with the feeling of I don't even know what it was but it kept up for a whole week and that was that until the party in the conference room down the hall from our office where the heads of departments meet and all the rest of us were excluded from except we could see them through the glass panels built into the wall but now we were all there every one of us from the whole floor and my boss was at the head of the table where someone had plunked down a cake that said goodbye and good luck. Everyone was lined up against the walls looking uneasy like they were pushed there and no one dared venture closer to my boss. I myself stayed in the doorway half in and half out of the conference room. I could barely stand to look at her though it was interesting to see how uncomfortable she was with her smile plastered

on her face and her eyes darting around nervous not finding a friendly face because it was clear that I wasn't the only one who hated her I wasn't the only one who didn't want to be there who didn't want her to be there who was glad she was leaving who wouldn't shed a tear when she was gone and who now just came to say goodbye because that's what you do in an office and because they wanted a piece of that cake. My boss's boss made a speech about how sad everyone was to see her go great opportunities lay in store in her future she'd been such a great asset to the company and I just kept shaking my head thinking about how mean she'd been to me how I would never have to feel that way again glad that I hadn't bought her a present glad that I had refused to chip in with some of the other girls to buy that lovely scarf in the box near the goodbye and good luck cake then everyone was looking at me because the big boss had asked if I wanted to say anything it was my chance to show everyone how I felt my chance to let them know the kind of boss she was. I looked at my boss with that false smile pasted on her face I said no nothing though no sound came out just I shook my head took a tiny step back out the door saw my boss keep that false smile pasted on her face with desperate screaming eyes that was my satisfaction and then it was like an egg cracked open and the party was over.

It's been a week and no one has taken her place in that small empty office. The other girls talk all the time out loud now about what's going to happen who's going to come in will it be someone better or worse a man or a woman and in the meantime there is plenty to do which shows that my boss did not really run the office the work runs the office you just keep at it keep going through one

pile of papers until all of them are dealt with in one way or another and they form another pile of finished work and by that time the day is over and more papers have formed to make another pile of things to do the next day which gives you a hook into the future knowing there'll be something to get up for in the morning that pile of work that keeps a person on track. Now in the evenings I tend to stay late and feel more like my desk is really my own little island of autonomy which I'm very sensitive should stay that way and have informed in no uncertain terms the gal to my left that she keep her greeting cards photos of her children stuffed toys fur topped pens magazines on her desk and not allow them to spill onto mine which is only the right and respectful thing to do having been at my job longer than she has it is only fair that I set the standards that she give me that respect at least though I don't know why she was hired she's so stupid letting the straps of her overstuffed handbag get tangled in the legs of my chair arguing with her husband on the telephone five times a day and not keeping her voice down while she does it. I don't want to know if her husband is out of work that is their business always ending each conversation five times a day with a very insincere love you just drives me crazy but all I ever said was that could she please keep her voice down she looked straight at the ceiling and said give me strength really religious which I doubt she is. If my boss were still here she would not dare behave this way.

My sleep is not good. My bed is narrow. The train passes every ten minutes. The blasting starts at midnight. I'm usually awake just listening for it nothing to do about it though I complained to noise control who said I should write in to make it official which I haven't

done what's the point the blasting will end when the hole is deep enough. I've taken to walking after work not necessarily homeward sometimes in the opposite direction not necessarily avoiding going home but not necessarily not but just walking feeling with each step a shiver go from my heel up my leg into my spine and pound at my temples with each step more pounding I don't know why I'm so angry I should be relieved.

One night after work I found that I had walked all the way out on the west side across the street from her building I stopped the pounding stopped I sat down on the steps of the building across the way to watch the steps of her building not thinking about her just looking at the building thinking she walked up and down those steps every day every morning and night maybe she was home now maybe she was pouring herself a glass of wine or heating up a bowl of soup or peeling a carrot or feeding the bird which are things I do so why shouldn't she do them too?

My head felt better on the walk home. I poured myself a glass of wine and heated up some soup there were no carrots the bird was dead. I sat in my chair listening to the quiet and then the train and then the quiet and then the blasting the quiet the train the quiet the blasting. Then I put the telephone in my lap took a deep breath and punched in her number waited.

Hello? Hello? Hello? □