

## Let Everything Happen To You

There is a type of lock that opens only if you stop wanting to open it. You can't cheat: you have to truly give up all hope of succeeding.

You insert the key, keep trying and trying, until your mind enters into a kind of Zen state where it no longer matters whether you achieve what you set out to do. Then, when you no longer expect or hope to ever do anything but wriggle a key in a small hole for the rest of eternity, it gives.

Elle's bike lock is such a lock. She doesn't know how it works, or why it can read her mind, but she's getting better at entering the mental zone the lock wants her in. Sometimes it only takes a couple of minutes. Today – thirty seconds. It's good practice, because Elle really needs to learn how to stop wanting things. That's her problem, always: wanting too hard.

Elle locks her bike in front of Kyla's house. She and Linus have been summoned to help Kyla choose an outfit for her audition. It makes sense that Kyla wanted them both there: Linus is too gushing, Elle is over-critical, so they level each other out.

Not that it's going to matter. Kyla's hair is cut close to the skull, and she is so skinny that you'd need at least two of her to make an Elle, so really, she looks like a pixie in pretty much anything she wears. But it turns out, Elle is wrong about that. Turns out, there is a kind of dress that can make even someone as flawless as Kyla suddenly twice as pretty. Black lace and sequins and actual

bird feathers. Revealing lots of skin, but not too much. Kyla twirls around in her creation, and Elle watches Linus watching Kyla. Watches his eyes go hazy. Watches him swallow twice before he manages to say: *Wow*. And then a very quiet, husky croak: *You look gorgeous K*.

*You really think so?* Kyla is pleased. All Kyla's dresses have names. This one is called: *Someone Else's Feathers*.

*And what do you think, Elle?*

Elle thinks that Linus' love for Kyla is the purest, most beautiful, and most wasted thing in the world. She doesn't say that to Kyla. She says: *This is your best one yet. Definite yes. They're going to love you in this*.

Kyla looks even more pleased with herself now, because Elle is not usually very generous with her praise.

They run lines with her, though really there's no need. She's perfect for the part. Elle would bet anything that she's going to get it, but no one would enter into such a bet with her because they'd know they'd lose. She tells Kyla this. Kyla gives her a hug and then Linus gives Kyla his good luck stone. Kyla smiles and puts it in her audition bag. Elle feels upstaged because she didn't think to bring a talisman, so she's glad that she at least said some nice things. It wasn't hard, and it was the truth. She doesn't resent Kyla. Not anymore. Not since she's become Zen-lock-master Elle.

Afterwards, Elle takes Linus home and holds him while he cries on her bed. Linus is crying because Kyla will soon be a film star and hook up with someone famous and then his situation is going to be even more hopeless than now.

Holding a crying Linus is the closest thing to happiness Elle knows. She can do almost all the things she daydreams about. Put her hand through his hair. Touch his cheek. Put her nose close to his neck and breathe him in, his sweet scent. Holding Linus always makes her heart beat so quick that it hurts. Everything about Linus is sweet, not just the way he smells. Which is why Elle's in love with him, and Kyla is not. Linus would be the kind of boyfriend who picks wildflowers and writes you love notes and hides them in surprising places. Who'd remember something you once mentioned you liked, and even though he can't afford it, still get it for your birthday. Who'd lay down his life and donate his kidneys for you.

This kind of thing will never do for Kyla.

So Elle is teaching Linus how to overcome all this innate sweetness and be the kind of boy that Kyla might want, which is no boy at all. Kyla wants 'a man'.

Elle knows a thing or two about men, because Elle has a boyfriend of her own. Elle's boyfriend is all rugged stubble and crooked teeth. He has a motorbike, and almost half a million followers on Instagram. Ethan is very different from the kind of boyfriend Linus would be. Elle has a theory about why Ethan likes to fuck teenage girls such as herself rather than women his own age. She thinks that maybe it's because girls like her never say no to anything, and don't complain. Elle does not complain that Ethan never wants to take any couple pictures, only wants her taking endless pictures of him posing in his leather jacket. (He put her on Instagram once, but he had to crop out her head because her face looks too young and if anyone found out about them that would invite a world of trouble for obvious reasons.) Elle thinks that Ethan really does love her, in that he is completely obsessed with her body. Elle's body is very soft and round in all the right places, and Ethan says

he is addicted to it. Ethan does not smell sweet. He smells of cigarettes and leather, and his cum tastes like mouldy grapefruit. Elle has many theories about what Linus would taste like.

Maybe like custard, or an ice-cream sundae. But then again Linus is not the kind of boy who would even necessarily think to make you swallow his cum, so that's another thing she's going to have to teach him about.

The lesson today is how to tell a girl to take off her clothes and get on all fours. In theory, it's not that hard, because literally all you have to do is say it unsmilingly with a little bit of menace in your voice, because that is sexy. Smiling is not sexy. And crying, she is very strict on that, crying is, unfortunately, also considered to be very unsexy. (By people like Kyla.) *Look into my eyes*, she instructs Linus, *and imagine that I'm her*.

Linus is the kind of boy who is very good at imagining, which is another thing he and Elle have in common.

Elle can tell that he is imagining successfully, because right now he is looking at her with that familiar hazy longing that makes his eyes go dark grey. For a tiny moment, Elle allows herself a fantasy of her own: That the world is a different place, where everything is well ordered and good and as it should be, a place where Linus would look at her like this, and mean her. And now that she's started, she cannot stop, keeps imagining, imagines what it would be like if he looked at her like this, and meant it, and kissed her. She lets it all happen to her body, the tug in her stomach, the rush of blood, the butterflies. And for another couple of seconds, they are standing in front of

each other, eyes locked, staring into each other's imaginings. Then Elle pulls herself together, thinks about the bike lock, goes to her Zen place, and lets him go.

*Right, she says, less of the smiling. Corners of your mouth down. Narrow your eyes. You can frown if you like. Make your voice low and hard, and then repeat after me....*

It's not going well. It's Linus' voice that's the problem. Even if Elle weren't in love with his dimples and eyelashes and his smell (and with the way he looks at Kyla and cries about Kyla and worships Kyla) she would still be in love with only his voice. It's a voice that is very gentle, very warm, a voice to give you goose-bumps, but with the best will in the world it is not an ideal voice for convincingly telling someone she is a little cum-slut and Daddy is going to show her just exactly what you get for being a naughty girl.

Once, when she was very drunk, Elle had asked Linus a question. A question that had been haunting her. She hadn't meant to ask it - it had spun out of her drunken mouth of its own accord. This was how it went:

*Linus?*

*Hm?*

*Linus, do you ever - wonder - what it would all be like if - if you and I?*

*Yes, she had wanted him to say. Yes, I wonder that every night.*

It's not what he said. In fact, he did not say anything. But he did something: He kissed her on the forehead. This kiss is the thing that Elle has thought about most in her entire life. She could have

founded a whole university dedicated only to the interpretation of this gesture. She had googled it endlessly, posted on internet forums: What does a kiss on the forehead mean? The truth is, she knows. A kiss on the forehead means that he understands what you are asking and wants to let you know that he likes you, but not in that way.

Elle used to think that Kyla was a bad person for stringing Linus along, keeping him around for occasional confidence boosts. She doesn't anymore. She is enlightened. To ease the burden of loving someone else more than they love you back, you keep someone around who loves you a little more, to offset the balance. Everyone does it.

In some twisted way, she might be doing the same with Ethan. Risking nothing by being with him, when one word from her might get him convicted as a sex-offender.

Even Kyla, who's on the cusp of becoming a famous film star, makes dresses out of magic and weighs less than a glass of milk, is riddled with a million little insecurities and moments of self-doubt and jealousy. Kyla is jealous that Elle has a kinky sex life and a secret adult boyfriend. Elle caught her scrolling through Ethan's Insta-Feed with a strange glow in her eyes.

Above all, Elle understands that Linus is doing the same thing with her. That he notices the way her voice lights up towards him, that he can make the hair on her arms stand up just by whispering in her ear. That he likes knowing there's someone who'd lay down her life and donate her liver for him, even though it's the wrong person.

Linus is exhausted - from the crying, or his lesson in dirty talk. Elle asks if he wants to stay over, but he shakes his head. Not tonight. Elle's parents never mind sleepovers. They love Linus, everything that is non-threatening and adorable about him. They always smile indulgently over any protestations that Elle and Linus are just friends. (Elle's parents do not love Ethan, because they do not know he exists. It's better this way, Elle is 99% sure that they would let him go jail.)

Next day, Elle and Linus both get an alarming summons from Kyla. They arrive at her house to find Kyla in a manic rage, ripping out feathers from her dress and throwing them all over her bedroom. She went to the audition. It did not go well.

She had been told she was too young for the part. *Too fucking young, Kyla howls. They did not even let me read!* And then she drops on top of a pile of black feathers, and starts sobbing.

Elle and Linus look at each other and have the kind of telepathic conversation that only works if you know each other very well.

*Now here's your chance,* Elle says with her eyes. *She's in a uniquely bad place and needs someone to take care of her and boost her ego. Someone kind, who knows about tears.*

*Wish me luck,* Linus says with his eyes, and then something that she doesn't quite catch. Maybe it is: *Thank you.*

*Don't mess up the dirty talk,* she blinks, then quietly backs out of the room. She feels her heart crumble up into a fine sand, but she also feels very noble, and a little bit proud. She feels an inexplicable wave of tenderness for Linus and Kyla and also herself as she closes the front door behind her without a sound.

Out of habit, she checks her phone to see what Ethan is up to. Ethan has posted a new selfie, a close-up of his face looking thoughtful in a haze of smoke, brow furrowed. It has 112 likes so far.

The caption reads:

*Go to the limits of your longing. / Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. No feeling is final.*

Elle frowns. Those are lines by a German poet whom Elle loves. Now she wishes she'd kept this poem to herself. Ethan hasn't even bothered to put any quotation marks or credit, trying to make out they are his words. Maybe, Elle thinks, she should just get her act together and break up with him already. Let him go, let everything go. It would be a hard and brave and honest thing to do. She could do it; she can do anything in her most enlightened frame of mind, when she is one with the world. She takes her eyes off her phone, gets her key out and slows her breath, her heartbeat, ready to practice her Zen unlocking method.

As always, Elle had locked up her bike in front of Kyla's house. Only, there is something very wrong with the front of Kyla's house right now: There. Is. No. Bike.

It must have been stolen. And with it, the lock. The loss of her stubborn bike lock is a wrench, a physical ache. Elle feel some very strong emotions all at once, but she does not allow herself to cry, because she is not part of the club of the people who cry. Instead, she kicks at a tree trunk and stubs her toe. That lock had been her spiritual teacher. Maybe, she thinks, this was now its last and final lesson in giving up any desire, any wish for control.



She starts walking homewards, but changes her mind. She thinks about the limits of her longing.

She sends a poop emoji to Ethan. Then, to clarify: *Feel like shit. Bike got nicked. You free to pick me up?*

She knows that whatever he is doing right now, he will drop it for a booty call. She won't say anything about the lock. He wouldn't understand.

*Hang in there, sexy, he replies, seconds later. Daddy's coming to sort you out.*