

A Fly in Amber

Online Fiction Magazine

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Key

by Jacob Richardson

★★★★★ (17 votes, average: 4.76 out of 5)

The key I was born with is fairly plain. My older brother, his is so much nicer. His key is perfectly smooth and shiny, like the fender of a '57 Ford Thunderbird cruising down the California coast on a sun-drenched summer day. The notches look like alligator teeth the way a kid would draw them. They're a row of immaculate isosceles triangles forming a pattern of geometrically perfect peaks. The notches are mirror opposites, a short repeating series of precise congruent valleys. His key is even the perfect size. Not too big and not too small it fits snugly in the soft palm of his manicured hand. My key? Let's just say it's not going to win any beauty pageants. It's thin as a dime and tarnished as a penny. The head is a crudely beveled octagon without any sort of cool design etched in the middle. The notches running along the arm are a random array of awkward spikes. Obviously nothing to brag about, but I have seen worse. (One of my friends has this monstrously bulky key that looks like it should be hanging on a dungeon master's belt.) Despite what a lot of people say, it's not about how it looks. It's what I've been given, and I have to accept that. I have to be my key.

In church that's the message they never let up on: *Be your key*. Be your key. They start hammering that phrase in our heads in Sunday school and never let up. Each week the priests focus their mass on a certain topic; one week it'll be generosity, another week is about forgiveness, another humility, but every single one ends with a "be your key" reminder of some sort. *Go my children, with key in hand, and love your brothers and sisters as you love yourself*. It can get old but some people need to hear that. Not many appreciate their birth key for what it is. Most high school kids doll their up, usually coloring them with markers or something cute like that. Rich people-bankers and lawyers for example- have theirs dipped in gold and like to frame the seven-figure insurance policies they take out on them. A lot of celebrities take their keys to professional jewelers and have them glammed up with expensive stones. They've even been using them for ad space. It's not uncommon now to see some A-list actress walking down the red carpet with her key dangling around her neck and the word "Maybelline" or "Samsung" written down the side. Some celebs and artists even loan them out for gallery exhibits, which is pretty absurd since loaning out your key defeats the point of even having one in the first place. I'm not sure if it's intentional or not, but it's pretty obvious they're trying to make their key serve them instead of serving its purpose. I can't help but empathize to some degree since mine does look a bit, shall we say, underwhelming. There have been more than a few times that I wished I could wipe away the sooty gray hue and have it catch light and shine like my brother's.

Thinking about how to be my key and what that means has been on my mind a lot lately. I'm sure that's due to one main reason. An ex I haven't been in touch with for over a year just wrote to me and broke the news that she found her lock. Her search is now officially over. She started the letter telling me about the celebration party she had and then went a little into the actual discovery. She's in a travel abroad program that helps build houses for impoverished families in Africa. According to her, when she's not busy nailing, sawing, sanding, or spackling there isn't really anything else to do. She can't speak the local tongue and is one of only two non-natives in the village. The boredom has been driving her- someone raised on cable stations and multiplexes- to the brink of insanity. All she has to break the monotony is the scarce book collection at the horribly deficient community library. Since thieves can sell anything, even a tattered copy of *Moby Dick*, the books the library has that are in somewhat decent condition are kept in a thick glass case secured by a heavy padlock. One day she sees a book on ancient Eastern philosophies calling to her from inside the case. Instead of having the librarian come over to open it up she decides to try her key in the lock. She puts it in and turns to the left (she's normally chooses left, like me). Lo and behold, it works. The ironic part is that one of the main reasons she decided to go on the trip was to escape being surrounded by the hunt that she feels too many people in our society have become obsessed with. We're all getting too "lock hungry", as she put it, and she needed a break. And then it happened. In a remote, dusty corner of the world she found her lock.

Of course the news is great- phenomenal even- and there is a part of me that's genuinely happy for her, but there's another part, a darker part that feels the searing burn of jealousy slowly cremating this happiness. Before she left I remember saying something nauseatingly cliché like "*I know your lock is out there waiting for you*" and thinking to myself how I didn't want that to be true. I wanted to help her find it, or even better, to have it be on something of mine. While she was in Africa putting up homes, I was in my own

setting aside anything I had with a lock on it hoping that one day she'd get the chance to try them. With one email this vestige of faith has been snuffed out, and now I'm kicking myself for letting that parting remark slip, as if saying them somehow made this all happen. The more I imagine her basking in this new thrilling chapter of her life as it begins to unfold the more I'm forced to accept that I'm not going to be included in that picture. Sometimes this thought of powerlessness makes me so angry I'm sure all my organs and bones have been charred to ash and replaced by a suffocating cloud of smoke. I've been trying to get rid of this feeling, telling myself to stop being so immature, but that's easier said than done.

It's not just her, either. It seems like everyone's been finding their locks in the oddest places. They always say it was when they least expected it. My good friend, Adam (tends to be a right-turner), found his lock a little less than a year ago. It was on the pay phone in a restaurant a little north of the city. He was the first one in our group of high school friends to find his lock so we all got together and threw him a huge party. Paul, my old roommate from college and classic right-turner, found his lock when a mutual friend showed him the foot locker she brought back from home after spring break of sophomore year. He put his key in, turned to the right, and the clasp popped right open. I was there. I saw it with my own eyes. There was no force or deception involved. Recently I heard that one guy I was friends with back in grade school found his on a liquor cabinet he inherited after his father died. I also heard that for the past few years he's been a recurring character at the county jail. On the other extreme a distant cousin of mine bought one of those cheap dollar locks they sell in plastic jars on the counter at gas stations and that turned out to be hers. She's doing great now. Right afterwards she and her husband bought a new house in Mercer Island. They kayak every weekend, take regular hikes on their sprawling alpine property, and have three beautiful kids to keep them company.

One night a couple months ago I was having dinner with Adam. I asked him how he knew that his lock was in that little restaurant. He said, "It's not like there was a big neon arrow pointing to it. I was sitting there, eating lunch- an egg sandwich with home fries, I believe- and I had to make a phone call. I saw the phone on the wall and went over to it. I started dialing, saw the lock, pulled out my key, and tried it. The way I see it you never know, right? It worked. That was it."

That was it. As if it's that easy. For some people it is but others aren't quite so lucky. Sometimes I'll be walking down the street and try my key in a mailbox or newspaper stand. Just a quick turn, usually to the left, and they don't budge. I never tempt fate and turn my key the other direction so I have to withdraw and go on my way. Most failed tries are easy to get over but a couple can be tougher to except, especially when an opening feels possible. Everyone's gone through the harsh disappointment after exhilaration abandons them in the wake of failure. I don't even want to know how many horrible comedies have been made about lock finding. Girls go crazy for these "key-coms". I'll admit that a couple girls I've dated have dragged me to some of these movies. They're always full of the same trite introspection, as if finding your lock is the whole world. I'm not about to join one of those weekend long key therapy retreats advertised in the back pages of free weeklies. Lock workshops and turning seminars don't seem like the best way to spend hundreds of dollars either. And I've never once been on a blind unlocking. I'd rather save my dignity and not be one of the dozen people in a room full of locks collected from the dump or by donation then spend the next ninety minutes fiddling with each one. A waste of time as far as I'm concerned, but it works for some. People also take classes about understanding why they're born with the key they have, but it all sounds like gibberish to me. It should be simple: be your key.

This isn't saying that I haven't been close to success. The first time I thought I almost found my lock was a couple years ago when I was dating this one girl. We had been going out for a few months, and it was getting pretty serious. I liked her a lot. One rainy night when we were about to go to bed, she reaches under her mattress and gently pulls out a small, pink diary. The cover was an Escher design of cartoon goldfish. It had a little lock on it that she had a key for but she whispers for me to try mine. More than one key can fit in a single lock. I took my key out of my pants pocket and held it in my hand between us. We just stared at it holding our breath. I could feel my heart thumping wildly in my chest. It slid in easily, almost all the way down to the base. All but the last millimeter fit inside. I jiggled to the left, left, left. The lock gave some but wouldn't open. It wasn't long after that we stopped seeing each other. So it goes.

Sure, I've been tempted to turn the other way a couple times (who hasn't?), but almost no one has the guts for this. First, the chances of it actually working are so slim it's not even worth the try and second are the urban legends of what happens if it does. Everyone's heard the horror stories about back-turners and the terrible demise they're promised as a result. Parents tell them to their kids as they tuck them in at night. These stories used to scare me so much I'd have trouble falling asleep, afraid that one day I'd be at a lock and someone would bump into me or that an earthquake would jostle my hand both directions. A lot of adventurous people back turn for rebellion or just the thrill of it. It happened all the time a few decades ago but not quite so much anymore. Not surprisingly the ones that end up being back-turners tend to be either those that didn't have good role models when they were kids or those that had a privileged lifestyle growing up.

It's amazing how full of locks the world is. Bank vaults, office drawers, parking meters, speedboats, prison cells. I'm quite literally surrounded by opportunity. Unfortunately, I have this bad habit of misplacing my key when I need it the most. I'll be someplace with

tons of locks like the post office. The walls will be lined with hundreds of PO boxes and I won't have my key on me. I'll pat myself down, search every possible place it could be at and won't be able to find it. Then, invariably, later that day I'll be at the park or someplace without a lock in sight and find it tucked away in the corner of my jacket pocket. Figures, right? When I was a kid my mom made me this little black pouch for it. I would loop it on my belt and hang it on the inside of my pants. She wanted me to always have it on me even though the thought of using it rarely crossed my mind at that age. Now when I do think of lock finding I seem to always be rushing out of my apartment or office and leaving the key behind. Just a couple nights ago I was at a concert and saw this cash register behind the bar. It looked like some sort of aura was radiating from it and directed itself right at me. I could feel the potential but of course I didn't have my key on me. That's why I'm going to stop shoving it in drawers all the time. In fact I just put it on a bracelet. It feels right having it on display despite how plain it is. It's always going to be on my wrist and ready to use at any time because- using Adam's words- you never know. You just never know.

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5 Responses to “Key”

1.  *Shirley* says:
[May 20, 2009 at 11:55 am](#)

Great story! It certainly makes one think about life's gifts and treasures.

2.  *Erik Deiters* says:
[May 20, 2009 at 3:08 pm](#)

This key business is very frustrating. The ongoing search for the right fit makes me worry that my loneliness and anxiety has very little chance of being cured. Yet the prospect of finding my perfect lock is exciting. What a wonderful alternate reality you have created. Thank you

3.  *Simone* says:
[May 23, 2009 at 11:52 am](#)

Enjoyed the Story! Having been on a long search myself...and having taken many 'courses' about key finding...and what locks are looking for in keys...and having watched friends find theirs...and others frustrated and confused why they haven't... I feel some things we are not meant to 'figure' out ... when the time is right... trust...some seasons are for playing, some for searching, some for introspection, some for sadness, others for socializing, and then one season ... is for discovering your lock... enjoy each season as it is here. Thanks for your story!

4.  *Teph* says:
[May 25, 2009 at 11:19 am](#)

Despite bearing the label of fiction, there was more truth in this story than one person alone could find. What struck me the most was how strong the writer's voice was in this piece, and yet how personal it could feel for any reader. His introspection and the way he characterises it, triggers not only the desire, but the need to take another, closer look at one's own life.

As he says, locks come in all forms. Even though it may not be the one he thinks he's looking for, I think the author has already found at least one lock for his key.

5. [The Beginning of Reedu | Nomuda Games | Official Blog](#) says:
[September 29, 2010 at 10:55 am](#)

[...] like a profession that was written in the stars. I love great stories and trying, often failing seldomly succeeding, at coming up with my own to jot down and submit, but solely for literary fiction purposes. Outside [...]

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