

Ask for Things

Mary AKT Gallagher

“You don’t talk to me.”

I coughed on my cherry tomato. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry... You need a napkin or something?”

“Um...no. No. I’m okay.”

“Are you?”

“Yeah... Um, what’s the matter?”

“I just don’t...get you, Maeve. I don’t get you.”

I finally swallowed the tomato. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand-”

He sighed. “Don’t apologize. I’m not asking for an apology. I, just...” He sighed again. “Tell me about yourself.”

I smiled, with my brow furrowed, in what I hoped was the perfect expression of innocent skepticism. “What?”

“We never talk about you, always me. And later I think, ‘wow, I’m a blowhard’, until I remember that I’ve tried to ask you questions about what you like and stuff, and you change the subject. So talk to me.”

“Um...okay... I like *you*.” I smiled. “A lot.”

He raised one eyebrow. I’ve always wanted to be able to do that.

“That’s nice,” he said. “What else?”

I shrugged. “I’m not great under pressure, Will.”

“What pressure? I’m just asking you an easy, informal question.”

“I dunno... I’m not good at talking about myself.”

“But it’s *me*, Maeve. Why can’t you talk to me?”

My eyes darted down and I shook my head. “Why are you asking me this now? What’s the problem?”

“The problem is that you keep deflecting. You answer a question with a question, like you did right there, or you shovel food in your mouth like you did a few minutes ago when I asked you what music you liked... Jeez, Maeve, all I wanted was to know what station to switch to... Or you laugh it off until you think I forgot that I asked you a question – and that’s just a dis to my intelligence.”

I chuckled, although I’ll admit it was a bit forced. “Okay, I think you’re looking at this *way* too closely-”

“And then there’s the laughing it off. Props to you, Maeve, you’ve hit the avoidance trifecta; used ‘em all in one conversation.” His voice loses the sarcastic tone. “Look, *I* like *you* a lot... Or at least the parts you let me see.”

I smirked. “Great line,” I muttered.

“Been working on it all day,” he responded immediately. That’s one of the things I’ve always loved about him – his quick wit. It amazes me how fast his mind works. But his tone sobered and I could tell he was not about to abandon the subject. “I’d like to know more about you, and I’m wondering why you don’t want me to. And it honestly worries me a little bit.”

“I don’t mean to do that, Will. I- I just really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He sighed. “Okay, I’m just imagining things.” He looked into my eyes intensely and I wished I knew what he was looking for so that I could have it there for him to find, but I didn’t. So I gazed back as levelly as I could and hoped he couldn’t see the anxiety that was building with every askance look he gave me. He nodded grimly, and his eyes darted down to the gear shift of his car. “Okay. I guess that’s it.”

I bit my lip. “I-” He looked up.

“Yeah?”

“Will, I don’t- I’m sorry, but I don’t know... I don’t know what you *want*.”

“Look...don’t look at me like that, Maeve... I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I just...I get the feeling that you’re not completely- you know, comfortable with me, and I don’t know why.”

“That’s not true, Will- I always have fun with you.”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean that I don’t know...you don’t seem to want to *tell* me the kind of things a guy should know about the girl he’s dating. The kinds of things that make you...you.”

“Like what?”

“Like your favorite color.”

“I...maroon.”

“Maroon... Thank you!” He threw up his arms in an exaggerated gesture of exasperation that made me laugh. He’s so goofy sometimes that it catches me off-guard,

and I forget that he is the person he is, and fall in love with him a little bit more. And when that happens I love it and hate it at the same time.

“I didn’t realize colors were so important to you.”

“They aren’t. It’s just the first time I’ve ever heard you directly state an opinion, and that’s something to celebrate.”

“Why does it matter so much to you?”

“I don’t know, I just don’t know how you feel about anything. It seems like you don’t think it’s okay to have an opinion around me, and I guess...I hate the idea that I make someone that uncomfortable. Especially my girlfriend.”

“You don’t make me uncomfortable.”

“I think I do. You always seem so tense, and you walk on tiptoes around me. You’re like a really polite houseguest.”

“I’m sorry-”

“Please don’t be sorry! I’m just telling you what I think and asking you a question. You’re not supposed to feel guilty.”

I sighed, feeling like there was nothing to say.

“Okay.”

“Okay, meaning you’ll answer?”

“I’ll...try.” My eyes closed.

There was a short silence, until he said, “If you don’t want to, it’s okay.”

I looked at him, wishing like anything I could understand *what* he wanted from me. “But you just said—”

“And then I saw your face get all red and nervous and realized that you must really not want to tell me about yourself. I’m not trying to get you to do something you don’t want to do. I’m just...trying to figure out what’s wrong, if I’m doing something wrong. Because...you don’t ask for things, Maeve. You don’t ask me for anything, ever. And I don’t know what I’m supposed to take from that. Do you not like spending time with me?”

“*No*... No. I love spending time with you.”

“Then what is it? Why does it always feel like you’re trying to fade into the background? Why do you seem so anxious all the time?”

“I—” My throat caught as I looked from side to side, and all of a sudden I felt like all the air in the car had disappeared. An anxiety attack felt imminent, an overreaction, I know, but it was still happening.

“Maeve, I’m sorry, I just... I hate feeling like I make you nervous. What am I doing wrong?”

I looked at him while I took deep breaths to loosen the tightness in my chest. His eyes are perfect—clear and symmetrical with wide blue irises and very few red lines, but enough to look natural. And at the moment they were filled with concern for me, and I knew that pretty soon he was going to ask if I was okay, in that gentlemanly manner that — pardon the cliché — makes my heart melt

every time. And I also knew that I would have to tell him the truth, in spite of the potential consequences; in spite of the fact that I was nowhere near ready to let go of him yet, even if that was what he would want once he knew how desperately clingy and imperfect I was on the inside, compared to him. I owed him the truth, no matter how small and insecure it would make me look.

I sighed again, shudderingly this time, bracing myself. “Are you all right?” he asked me.

“I’m fine...fine.” I smiled, and I took his hand the way I’ve always wanted to, but was never brave enough to make myself do it before. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Will, I promise... I have had so much fun with you these past few months. And I like you so much. It scares me how much.” His face was unreadable, and I looked down at our intertwined fingers, a picture that is inexplicably beautiful to me. “It really scares me. Because...you’re just so- perfect. You are. You are so smart; you have so many friends, and even more people who just like you from a distance. You are confident, you’re...*really* good-looking.” I blush, when I shouldn’t. I mean, I’m going out with the guy, so obviously I find him attractive. But it still embarrasses me to say so. “You’re on every sports team there is-”

He laughs. “Not Quidditch.” I look up and laugh at the unexpected interruption, and it puts me a little bit more at ease because now I know that he’s not silently staring at me with the mixture of pity and lack of comprehension I was afraid of.

“Not Quidditch... But everything else. And you’re clever, and you’ve got people skills. You’ve got everything going for you, and you are so incredibly out of my league. But when I didn’t know you at least I could think you weren’t a nice guy. Like maybe you were arrogant, and maybe that was your flaw. Maybe the popularity went to your head. And I could feel a little superior, because at least I had something over you. But then you joined the stage crew for the play, and I got to know you... And I found out you were a nice guy. A really nice, *sweet*...wonderful guy. And that clinched it—you were perfect. And it’s hard not to look at myself and wonder what...what on earth you see in me.” I looked at him again, saw his eyebrows creased with that pity I didn’t want, and heard him exhale. And I tried to prepare myself for the fact that I was going to lose him. Because no guy finds an inferiority complex sexy, I can guarantee you that. Being “comfortable with herself/in her own skin” is at the top of every “What Men Want” list in every woman’s magazine in the world. And even if the physical attributes are what they really care about, and they answered the questions like that so as not to seem shallow, low self-esteem would still be an unattractive quality. I accept that.

So I resigned myself to that fact as hard as I could, and kept on with the story so my embarrassment would end as quickly as possible. “...And you asked me out and my heart stopped beating for a minute, because I really just- *never* thought that would happen. But I

figured that I could have fun while it lasted. So I said yes. Then you just kept...kept on being *you*, and being so unbearably wonderful, that having fun while it lasted was no longer an option because I...liked you so damn much, and I didn't want it to end. So that's why I don't – what did you say? Have opinions? - I don't have opinions and I don't ask for things because that's the best way to keep you from finding something about me that you don't like. Because I'm too realistic or cynical or whatever you want to call it to think that this could possibly last if you really got to know me. It sounds crazy, I know, but I guess- that's just me." I bit my lip, and he blinked a few times, and his mouth was open in a way that seemed like he hadn't really registered everything I was saying yet.

But I continued, because I had to tell him everything before I lost the courage that was already incredibly spotty. "And then I realized really quickly that it was going to be so hard to let you go once whatever happened ... happened and we broke up. It would be *so* hard to let you go, and I didn't want it to get any harder, so I tried as hard as I could- I'm still trying as hard as I can- to keep my distance, just so that when you don't-want to be with me anymore, it won't hurt as much as I know deep down it's inevitably going to... It's just self-preservation, Will."

He looked at me like he'd never met me before, and I closed my eyes, but not before a tear slipped out. I wiped it away with my sleeve and prayed to God that he

couldn't see it. It's bad enough that he already knows how vulnerable I am and how low my sense of self-confidence is; I don't want him to think I'm a cry-baby, too. Which I am. It's just one of the many things I was hoping to keep from him as long as possible.

I smiled through the embarrassment, which hurt because of the tightness in my throat. "Hi, I'm insecure," I said. He laughed, which was surprising, not only because it was a really bad joke, but because the tension from my confession was still smothering both of us. Then he stuck his hand out.

"Hi, I'm Will." I grinned, kinda halfway, because I wasn't exactly sure what he was doing. But I took his hand. Because I trust him implicitly, and probably always will, no matter what happens.

"Hi, Will."

"Guess what, Insecure? I interrupt people, I'm a klutz off the field, and I snore. Really loud." He looked to the left, and thought a minute, then said, "I'm not a good public speaker, and I'm kinda OCD about chewing evenly on both sides of my mouth. And my mom says I watch too many horror movies. But that's debatable... And there are probably a billion other things I don't even know about." He leaned forward a little bit, and picked up my chin with a cold hand until my head was level with his. "But I am *not* perfect. And I never expected you to be. And I like you anyways."

I looked at him, not really sure I could believe him, and asked, "Even though I'm crazy?"

He laughed. “Even if you were.” I grinned fully now, and another unbidden tear fell, that I was sure he could see because his hand had forced my face into the light of a streetlamp.

“But-”

“What?” He let my face go. “You really think I’m that kind of person?” I was confused.

“What kind?”

“The kind that would hold it against you for feeling self-conscious sometimes. Do you really think that I would like you any less than I already do if I found out that you weren’t as confident as I am?” He shook his head. “Which, incidentally, is not nearly as confident as you think.” I laughed, which seemed to gratify him, and he smiled again- that amazing smile. The way he said it sounded so funny, but he had hit the nail on the head- that was *exactly* what I was afraid of.

“And do you really think,” he murmured, squeezing my hand, “that I have such poor taste in people that I would hang out so much with someone who is as...faulty as you seem to think you are?” I looked down at my hands and slowly, hesitantly shook my head. He did too. “No. Like I said, I like you. I think you’re great. Even before you were apparently trying so hard to *make* me like you.” And I laughed again. I seem to do that a lot with him.

“How ‘bout that?” I murmured, trying to make the atmosphere a little lighter; feeling guilty for making him feel like he needed to compliment me and build me up.

But then I looked up again and saw that he didn't really appear to mind, and figured maybe once, just *once*, I could let the guilt go. And I did. It was surprisingly easy to do.

“How ‘bout that?” he repeated, and looked at me with that smile that I always used to think could break his face if he wasn't careful, and an expression in his eyes that I'd never seen in anyone's before. Not when they were looking at me, anyway.

And I liked it. *A lot.*