

**ELIZABETH DAY**

**FAIL**

**Everything I've  
Ever Learned**

**OT**

**From Things  
Going Wrong**

**MOH**

# HOW TO FAIL

Everything I've Ever Learned  
from Things Going Wrong

ELIZABETH DAY

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## Dedication

For my godchildren: Imogen, Tabitha, Thomas, Walt, Billy, Uma,  
Eliza, Elsa and Joe.

## Epigraph

'Failure is the condiment that gives success its flavour'  
Truman Capote

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## Introduction

One of my earliest memories is of failure.

I am three years old, and my sister is ill. She has chicken pox and is lying in her bedroom upstairs, hot and crying, the duvet twisted around her small limbs, while my mother tries to soothe her by placing a hand on her forehead. My mother has cool palms that feel good against your skin when you're sick.

I am not used to seeing my older sister like this. There are four years between us and she has always struck me as the epitome of wisdom. She is someone I adore and admire in equal measure, the person who looks after me and allows me to sit on her back while she crawls around on all fours pretending to be a horse. The person who, before I was born, told our parents firmly that she would like a sister, please, and could they get on with the business of producing one? Whenever my sister draws a picture or makes a castle out of Lego, it is always so much better than my own attempts, and I will lose my temper at this perceived injustice because I so desperately want us to be the same, her and me. My mother will have to remind me that I'm younger, and all I have to do is wait a few years to catch up. But I'm impatient and don't want to wait. I want, as much as I've ever wanted anything, to be just like my sister.

Now, seeing her wet cheeks and pale face, I am upset and fretful. I don't like her being in any sort of discomfort. My mother is asking my sister what she would like to make her feel better, and my sister wails 'a hot-water bottle' and I see a way that I can help. I know where my mother keeps the hot-water bottles, and I toddle off to the cupboard and pick out my favourite one, which has a furry cover made to look like a bear, with a black button nose. I know that a hot-water bottle must be filled, as the name implies, with hot water. I take the bear to the bathroom, a place I associate with the much-hated evenings my mother washes my hair and I fix my eyes on a

crack in the ceiling until the unpleasant task is completed. The single thing I hate more than having my hair washed is having my toenails cut.

The only tap I can reach is the one in the bathtub rather than the basin. Leaning over the enamel lip, I stretch forwards to place the hot-water bottle under the nozzle and turn on the tap with the red circle, not the blue, because I've learned that blue means cold. But I do not know I need to wait for the hot water to heat up. I imagine it just comes out, automatically, at the requisite temperature.

When I try to put the cap back on, my stubby fingers cannot quite fasten it tightly enough. No matter, I think – the most important thing is to get this hot-water bottle to the invalid as quickly as I possibly can so that she can start feeling better, stop crying, and become my composed, calm and clever older sister again.

Back in the bedroom, I hand the hot-water bottle over to my sister whose tears stop at the sight of it. My mother looks surprised and I feel proud that I have done something she didn't expect. But almost as soon as the hot-water bottle is in my sister's grip, the cap loosens and cold water pours out all over her pyjamas. She wails and the sound is worse than the crying that came before it.

'It's c-c-c-cold!' she stutters, glaring at me with incomprehension, and my mother starts stripping the sheets and telling her everything's going to be fine, and they both forget that I'm standing there and I feel a swelling of acute shame in my chest and a terrible sense of having let down the person I love most in the world when I was only trying to help, and I'm not sure what I've done wrong but I know this probably isn't, on reflection, how hot-water bottles are made.

My sister recovered from chicken pox, no thanks to me, and I learned in the fullness of time about boiling kettles and waiting a few seconds to pour the hot water carefully in through the rubberised neck, tightly winding the cap back on after you'd pressed out the excess air. I also learned that even if your intentions are good, the execution of a task can sometimes be lacking if you don't have the necessary experience. This is one of the most vivid recollections of my childhood: clearly my failure to help when I most wanted to made a big impact on me.

It wasn't actually a big failure, or an exceptional one, but then failures don't have to be notable to be meaningful. As I got older, I would

experience greater failures, which were harder to come back from. I failed exams and a driving test.

I failed to make the boy I liked fancy me back.

I failed to fit in at school.

I failed to get to know myself properly in my twenties, existing in a succession of long-term relationships where I outsourced my sense of self to another person.

I failed to understand, at the time, that people-pleasing was never going to be a fulfilling way to live. That in pleasing others, you end up failing to please yourself. That in doing so, you are trying to shore up your dwindling internal confidence by collecting the positive opinions of others, without realising that this never works; that it is the equivalent of ignoring a fire-breathing dragon by lighting a candle from its flame.

I failed at a marriage and was divorced by thirty-six.

I failed to have the children I always thought I wanted.

I failed, over and over again, at playing tennis with any degree of confidence.

I failed to acknowledge big, difficult feelings such as anger and grief, preferring instead to mask them with easier, more pliable emotions like sadness.

I failed by caring too much about the unimportant stuff and things I could never hope to control.

I failed to speak up and find my voice when I was being taken advantage of at work and in my intimate relationships.

I failed to love my own body. I fail still. That is a constant work in progress, but I love my body more than I used to and I am grateful, now, for the honour of inhabiting this miraculous, functioning thing.

Self-acceptance is, I believe, a quietly revolutionary act but for years I failed even at that.

Along the way, I loved and I lost. I had my heart shattered. I changed jobs. I moved houses and countries. I made new friends and shed old ones. I endured breakdowns and break-ups.

I grew older. I came to understand myself better. I finally understood the importance of spending money on wheeled suitcases and winter coats. As I write this, I'm approaching my fortieth birthday, which is older than my mother would have been in that early memory of hot-water bottles and

sisterly devotion. And if I have learned one thing from this shockingly beautiful venture called life, it is this: failure has taught me lessons I would never otherwise have understood. I have evolved more as a result of things going wrong than when everything seemed to be going right. Out of crisis has come clarity, and sometimes even catharsis.

In October 2017, a serious relationship ended. The break-up was unexpected and brutally sudden. I was about to turn thirty-nine. Two years earlier, I had got divorced. It was not an age at which I had anticipated being single, childless and facing an uncertain personal future. I needed, in the language of modern self-help culture, to heal.

So I went to Los Angeles, a city I return to again and again to recharge and write. It is a place where I breathe more easily in the certain knowledge that the sun will probably shine again tomorrow and the eight-hour time difference means blessedly few emails after 2 p.m. I was ghostwriting a memoir for a political activist at the time, and although I felt vulnerable and flayed of a layer of skin, I would spend my days assuming the voice of a strong woman who knew exactly what she thought. It was an interesting dichotomy, returning to my own uncertain self after a day at the laptop, giving expression to this woman's forceful and eloquent beliefs. But it helped. Gradually, I began to feel stronger as myself too.

It was while I was in LA that I first had the idea for the *How To Fail With Elizabeth Day* podcast. I'd been downloading a lot of podcasts, because listening to music post break-up made me feel sad, but listening to nothing made me feel alone. One of the podcasts I subscribed to was the renowned relationship therapist Esther Perel's *Where Should We Begin?* in which anonymous couples agreed to be recorded as they discussed their issues. Perel would prompt and cajole and sensitively offer her insights, and I was gripped by the way in which her clients would reveal their most vulnerable and intimate selves. At the same time, I was having conversations with my friends about heartbreak and loss and tapping into their stores of accumulated wisdom.

I began to think about what it would be like to do a series of interviews with people about what they had learned from things going wrong. If I examined my life, I knew that the lessons bequeathed by episodes of failure were ineffably more profound than anything I had gleaned from its slippery