

Fifty Sights to See Before You Die: A Short Story

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

For years, popular media has pushed a narrative that science and technology are bad, scary, or dangerous; from films to books to television shows, we have all been inundated with the message that we need to be intimidated by these things. However, it is not these developments that we ought to be afraid of; it is more important to focus on the people who use them, how they are using (or not using) them, and how it affects the people who actually *need* them. My short story, *Fifty Sights to See Before You Die*, explores these ideas through a lens that has become familiar to all of us over this year so far – a pandemic, how it affects the lives of the people experiencing it, and what might happen when a new treatment is administered (or withheld).

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Finally, I'd like to thank my mom and dad for encouraging me to keep going throughout this project (and dealing with quite a number of panicked 3AM phone calls). I love you.

Process/Analysis Statement

Here I am, finding myself right back where all the trouble started — a blank page. I'm not the first person to struggle with it, and I won't be the last; even in the story itself, the character Emelia finds herself staring at a blank texting field with no idea how to find the words to fill it. A blank document is one thing; putting pen to paper (or hand to keyboard) is quite another.

Over the past year, I have made so much more progress than I ever thought I could on this project. I doubted my ability to write a story long enough to do the project justice, I doubted my ability to write anything interesting or creative or that relates to my field at all, I doubted my ability to write any thesis at all. I had to overcome all those worries piece by piece; sometimes they became so strong it was hard for me to write anything at all. Yet I have gotten all the way here, to the point that I am writing about the process of creating it, and that means I have to confront that blank page once again.

When I started this project, I honestly had no idea where I wanted to go with it. I knew I wanted to write a short story that showcased how technology can both harm and help, depending on how it is used and who gets to use it, but I did not know where to take that idea. Should I make it one story, or two, or two-in-one? Who were the characters? What was the technology or discovery I wanted to focus on? I had so many questions to answer — and then I had to actually

write. I tried to start about a thousand times, but none of the ideas I came up with were satisfying or inspiring; I had nothing to say that had not already been said before.

My first concept had to do with pollution clean-up; one character lived in part of a city where new technology had been used to clear the air, and the other lived in a neighborhood that was not important or affluent enough that anyone had bothered to do the same. While the first character thrived, the second found it harder and harder to breathe. I tried to pull from my own experience to write it — I have asthma, and I happen to live in that tiny corner of northwest Indiana that has more steel mills than you can count. But the harder I tried to write it, the more it escaped my grasp; the characters never coalesced into something that made sense, and I never managed to untangle the plot. The draft just wasn't working, so I went looking for a better idea.

I thought that, perhaps, if I looked further into the future, I might be able to find something interesting. After all, there are thousands upon thousands of questions and ethical dilemmas when it comes to developing technologies and new discoveries — and thousands upon thousands of fears, both founded and unfounded. For example, many people still refuse to eat food containing GMOs (genetically engineered organisms), though there is no real evidence that they are inherently harmful. Careless genetic engineering, or companies creating GMOs with more regard to profit than to consumers, are both very understandable things to fear, at least in my opinion.

Nothing I came up with, though, seemed to make any sense or feel at all realistic. I wanted a little bit of sci-fi, but I did not want something so detached that it did not feel real at all. New technology surrounds us, and it is used (or not used) to both bad and good ends every single day. I did not want this story to feel like something that could never actually happen, because it already is.

Then, in the space of about two weeks, my life was turned entirely upside-down, and I realized that I should not look further out into the future — I should look closer to home.

In February 2020, I was getting through college. I was going to my classes, visiting my friends, running club meetings, stopping by my favorite restaurant in the Village for lunch once in a while — all the things your average student does. COVID-19 was a distant, passing thought. I had heard it was here in the States now, but it was far away from here, my university in the middle of Indiana; it was not anything to worry about. I assumed this would be yet another swine flu or bird flu — a disease that everyone on the news claims is going to end the world for six months, but nothing actually happens and the world keeps spinning. Later that month, my teachers were starting to talk about what we would do if our classes were changed to online learning. By March, they were. Several of my friends never came back from spring break. Only a few weeks later, Ball State closed the dorms and the dining halls, and that was it — while I lived in an on-campus apartment, I depended on the dining halls to eat. I had to go home.

We all went through the beginning of the quarantine, and it was a shock to all of us. It was not how I expected my senior year of college to go, but it was what I got. For a while, I thought the experience would finally break me; I would have to give up on trying to write a thesis, and go without a chance at my Honors diploma. The next time I sat down to write, though, the words suddenly started to flow. At first, I thought what I was typing was just a mess of feelings and nothing else; another draft that I would need to scrap and start over. Somewhere in that jumble of emotions about the strange situation I had been shoved into, though, a character started to emerge; someone who was living through the same unexpected circumstances, and who was processing her own fear and worry in a world she no longer quite understood. This was the beginning of Ophelia. Even though I did have to heavily rework that very first draft before it was anything presentable, the passage that was once just a mess eventually developed into the opening paragraphs of my story. Suddenly, I had a jumping-off point — and things only continued to grow from there.

Ophelia and Emelia's world is a lot like ours, and the two of them are pretty typical teenagers. Emelia loves parties, Ophelia tags along for Emelia's sake, the two have been best friends for years and have little traditions like sending each other snapshots of their pets. There is nothing strange about either of them, but there is certainly something strange about the circumstances they have been put in. While the disease plaguing their world is bacterial rather

than a virus, they have still been pushed into the same situation we are in — quarantines, masks, and an aura of fear hanging over everything.

Unfortunately, that fear pushed them both in very different directions.

The split between them eventually comes down to one simple thing: Emelia's family has money, and Ophelia's does not. When faced with a pandemic, Emelia retreats into denial, and for the most part, she stays there. There is no reason for her to do anything else — her brother encourages her with his conspiracy theories, and she cannot see the disease touching her life in any serious way. Ophelia, on the other hand, tries to deny what is happening, but ultimately cannot afford to. She is very aware that it is unlikely her family would be able to pay for treatment if she got sick, so despite how much she wants to pretend everything is alright, she does not have that luxury. When those two viewpoints combine, they conflict; Emelia is angry at her best friend for refusing to participate in pretending nothing is wrong, and Ophelia envies her ability to just pretend this is not happening and never face any real consequences for it. Their conflict comes to a head when Ophelia finally agrees to go to one of Emelia's parties — and in the end, they both pay a terrible price for the decisions they've made.

Where the story detaches from our world, though, is their ability to cure the disease. The ideas of creating bacteriophages that target specific diseases, or even building nanobots, have been discussed in the medical field for a long time — but we do not yet have the knowledge to make these treatments available yet. In the world of the story, though, we do; a bacteriophage

treatment is developed that successfully cures the ailment. That is a valuable discovery. But, again, it is not the discovery itself that truly matters. It is how that knowledge is applied or not applied, how technology is used or not used.

How treatment is given, or not given.

Emelia's family can afford to provide the experimental treatment that saves her life when she contracts the disease. Ophelia's family, on the other hand, is not so lucky. The disease was passed from Emelia to Ophelia, and while Ophelia recovered, it was not before her dad contracted it as well. He was not as lucky as Ophelia, and the treatment was far beyond their family's means. Everything leads to yet another case of a rampant problem that we could solve, but choose not to: a completely preventable death happens anyway, because the patient cannot afford to live.

Every day, every time I am online, every time I take a look at social media, I see at least one person crowdfunding to pay their medical expenses, or to pay their loved ones' medical expenses, or to afford a surgery that could save their or someone else's life. Every day, I live with the knowledge that, with one bad day, I could be the next person who has to do that. No one's life should be sacrificed when we can prevent it; no one's life should depend on the whims of strangers on Facebook and Twitter. Yet, that is the reality we live in. Ophelia's character was the first one that came to me, because I painted some of her experience with mine. The conversation she has with her father in her second point-of-view section — in which she professes that a

vaccine is in development, and her father retorts that it could be a very long time before it is ready — is based on a real conversation I had with my own father. I have always been aware that my family sometimes struggles with medical expenses. I have always been aware that if something were to go *really* wrong, we might be doomed. That sort of knowledge is not easy to live with; it weighs on you. That is the weight Ophelia has to carry throughout the story, and it is too heavy to be denied away.

Emelia, on the other hand, does not have any of that weight on her back. She knows her family can afford to deal with anything that happens, so she can easily pretend that nothing will. Nothing will happen to her, after all, so what does it matter? But she is not immune to fear, and a pandemic is a scary thing. The more she tries to plug her ears and close her eyes, the more the world will not let her. She cannot process this, so she lashes out. She, too, was drawn from experience, but more experiences I have observed than ones I have lived. When you are not affluent yourself, growing up in an affluent area can be difficult. Watching someone else breezily not worry about things you have always had to keep in the back of your mind is a hard thing to do. I tried to imbue Emelia with that sort of breeziness; she denies her fear entirely, because she has never been forced to do otherwise. She is not completely selfish or without feeling, though; she clearly cares about her friend deeply, even if she does not understand her choices.

Neither one of them is a bad person. Their decisions are informed by different experiences, and they just cannot see things from the other person's perspective.

The process of writing was much easier once I had figured out who the characters were — and once I had realized that this story was much more character-driven than centered on science or technology. After all, those things matter because of the people that *make* them matter. If we want to understand how it helps or harms, we have to take a close look at the people it affects. And the process was made even clearer when I realized the story was not centered around Ophelia alone. At first, I was writing from her perspective only; Emelia seemed like more of a selfish, uncaring background character than the multifaceted person I wanted her to be. So I tried alternating between both of their perspectives, and the story finally began to click into place — this was, essentially, a story about two friends, the decisions they make, and the repercussions of those choices. To get a clear view of the events, we had to look through *both* of their eyes.

And we had to do it now. The story is written in present tense rather than past tense; you are *in* the experience with the two of them, rather than watching it from the outside. Like I said, questions about technology and its uses are happening right now, and they will keep happening far into the future. None of this is a thing of the past, so the past is not where the story fits. Especially with our own very real pandemic still raging, I could not justify consigning the story to history.

Soon, though, this project will be consigned to history. I have arrived back where all the trouble ended: a page that is no longer blank. There is nothing more fearful than a blank page; there is nothing less fearful than a filled one. Every time I write, whether it was for the story

itself or right now, creating this essay, the blank page hands me a silent challenge, and expects me to meet it. All I can do is try to rise to the occasion. This time, though, maybe the occasion rose to me. COVID-19 left me with a jumble of emotions; instead of holding on to them, I translated them to the page.

One day, I will try to cure diseases as a microbiologist. For now, though, I will continue to document it.

Written Thesis (*Fifty Sights To See Before You Die*)

OPHELIA

She squeezes her eyes shut. Maybe, just maybe, if she does it hard enough and for long enough, she'll open them and see something different; there'll be a forest trail or a mountain vista or the view of the city from the window of her apartment in Paris, and she'll look outside and see every door thrown wide open and all the people milling about in the streets without a care in the world, and she'll walk down the stairs and step out onto a wide, sunny avenue, and wander lazily away down a street lined with tiny shops and cafes with wrought-iron tables and chairs, and she'll realize this, all of this, was nothing but a very bad dream —

She opens her eyes. This is not a dream, and she has no apartment in Paris and she never will, and all she can see is the grey wall of her apartment staring back at her, the same as it always was. At this point, she'll take *anything* different. Even just a poster falling down.

Her *Fifty Sights To See Before You Die* poster stays stubbornly mounted right where it is, mockingly returning her baleful glare, the photograph of the Eiffel Tower printed on it the closest she'll probably ever get to Paris.

Her phone buzzes. Thank god — a distraction.

EMELIA: ophi

EMELIA: ophiiiiii

EMELIA: you coming tomorrow or nah?

... Perhaps not as much of a distraction as she thought.

OPHELIA: i can't :c

OPHELIA: my parents insist it's bad this time

Her parents also shouldn't be controlling her actions anymore. She's nearly eighteen, for God's sake. But it's too far to walk, they're the ones with the car keys, and they're insisting everyone stay inside. That "this one's real." Her dad had tried to convince her by showing her an article full of incomprehensible tables and graphs; she'd nodded in all the right places, and he seemed to be content enough with that. She may not believe it's real any more than she believed in any of the last five apocalypses her parents had declared, but she's become something of an expert at convincing them she does.

EMELIA: your parents *always* insist it's bad

EMELIA: and it never is.

EMELIA: can't you just sneak out?

EMELIA: you did it before, you can do it now

It's not as if Eme is wrong. She could sneak out; somehow, while her dad's screamed at her to tell him how she gets out a million times, he's never come to the simple conclusion that putting an easily-climbable trellis right below her window might be the answer to that question. There's nothing preventing her from leaving this room and padding away into the night, meeting Eme halfway and bumming a ride off of her. She stares out her window. A cool breeze wafts in,

the night air inviting; it's no view of Paris, but at least suburban sprawl is something other than the clock on her wall.

She stands up, steps towards the sill.

Something makes her stop.

There's a breeze blowing in; *something* should come with it. The laughter of the neighborhood kids, or the rowdy shouts of the teenagers who like to hang out in the field behind the houses, or perhaps the smoke from one of their bonfires — but there's nothing.

All is silent. Still.

Like something is waiting for her out there, something that's not Emelia and her brand-new car and her boyfriend who always stinks of weed no matter how many time she tells him to clean the hell up at *least* before she comes over to her house, something that's seeking her out, something she doesn't want to be found by.

She's not even sure when she slammed the window shut, but it's closed now.

OPHELIA: sorry, eme

OPHELIA: maybe another time

Somehow, Eme feels as distant as Paris.

EMELIA

Emelia hates Andy's band.

She always has, she always will. She'll never miss an opportunity to bitch, at length, about how shit their music is to anyone who will listen. Their lyrics are uncreative, they only use the same three pop chords in every song even though they brag constantly about being more real and authentic than 'anything they play on the radio these days,' and, possibly the worst crime of all, their lead singer isn't even hot.

Okay, that's not really their worst crime. And their music isn't even really that bad. It's just that Andy happens to be none other than her ex, and admitting that their music, if derivative as hell, is super catchy — that would be losing whatever weird little game they've been playing since Andy unceremoniously dumped her for someone else, and Emelia isn't about to do that.

Even if, sometimes, their music is okay. Especially now, when it's blaring all around her from a set of speakers haphazardly set up in someone else's backyard, while she's got a drink in her hands now and she had one before and she'll have another in the future, while she's nodding her head to that pounding bassline and humming along to the melody and thinking about finding her boyfriend and dragging him out into the middle of the floor to dance with her, because wouldn't that be such a power move?

She instinctively turns her head to go over the idea with Ophi, abruptly realizes Ophi isn't there, and scowls. Suddenly Andy's bassline is no longer so transcendent; all she can think about is how he definitely lifted it from one of those emo bands they'd listened to in middle school.

He's not even sneaky about it — !

Oh, well. He'll get sued by some way more famous band one of these days, and she definitely isn't going to be his shoulder to cry on when that finally happens. She rolls her eyes and turns her back on the speakers, on the makeshift dancefloor that's become of Brandon's deck, on the partygoers and on Andy's stupid stolen bassline and everything except the promise of another drink, and steps right through the back door into the house to catch a break.

Someone's got the television on; Emelia looks over, but loses interest as soon as she realizes it's just the news. Another scowl crosses her face at that one — here she is, skipping this week's episode of *Enchantress* for this shitty party, and they can't even have the decency to at least turn the television channel to the only good damn show that's on right now. It's not like there'll be anything on the news they need to hear about. All they do is talk about that disease. Like they did with swine flu, like they did with bird flu, like they'll do with the next world-ending plague that does absolutely nothing at all to end the world.

She kinda wishes it would end the world right now, so she wouldn't have to put up with this anymore, this lingering here in the doorway where she can't quite hear Andy's soulless lyrics but his overblown bassline at least keeps her from being able to parse what's happening on CNN.

She texts Ophi to see if she's changed her mind since yesterday.

EMELIA: ophiiiiiii. you have to be here, seriously. you can't miss this.

Read 11:22 PM.

EMELIA: okay. okay, fine, ophi. you got me. i'll be real with you.

EMELIA: this party sucks, okay? the live entertainment was stupid andy and his stupid band because of course it was and my idiot boyfriend is probably high as fuck and half-asleep on a couch somewhere and people are still talking about that stupid disease even though it doesn't matter and i wish they would all just shut up and have fun for five minutes and i'm tiredddd.

EMELIA: can you please just come over so i at least have someone to hang out with? please.

Read 11:25 PM.

EMELIA: at least say something!!!

OPHELIA: why don't you just go home, eme?

She snaps her phone closed, incandescent with anger, and decides she isn't going to talk to Ophelia again until she apologizes. For being rude, for leaving her on read, for not showing up, for — for leaving her alone, trapped between Andy and a television spouting medical terminology that has no meaning to her other than the way it twists her stomach into knots. She goes to look for her boyfriend.

Ten minutes later she finds him high as fuck and half-asleep on a couch in the basement and decides to go home without him.

OPHELIA

"Or maybe we'll all die first," her dad jokes at the dining table. She knows him well enough to know it's only halfway a joke. Her mom's elected to deal with it by just continuing to eat as if he said nothing at all.

Ophelia's elected to deal with it by responding, which is a stupid idea, she knows it's a stupid idea, there's no world in which it *wouldn't* be a stupid idea, but she does it anyway, because the sound of silence is ringing against her ears and damn it she's the only one here who's ever going to fill it and she tries, so hard, not to think about how it's like that same damn silence has taken over the world —

"Oh, they've made a vaccine for it," she said, casually. "Didn't you hear?"

Silence again. Forks scrape across plates. Her dad breaks it about a millisecond short of the moment where she was about to start screaming. "No, actually. I didn't."

An opportunity — latch on, don't let it go! If she can convince *him* this isn't happening, get someone else to admit that everything is going to be fine and normal and tomorrow when she opens her window she won't be looking out into the forest behind her neighborhood searching for something stalking towards her out of the trees, then maybe, just maybe, it'll all be alright.

She really needs someone to tell her it's all going to be alright.

"Yeah. They're working on a vaccine. It's already in Phase I trials," she explains, desperately. "That means they've already got it ready for testing on humans. It normally takes *years* to get that far. That's why they're trying to push it through fast."

He nods back at her, thinking. "It could still take years to get it to the point it's actually *ready*, though."

"Still!"

He shrugs, almost imperceptibly. "Still."

It's the agreement she wanted, and it's not what she wanted at all. Now her mother's just pretending the both of them aren't there.

Forks scrape across plates.

She can't bring herself start screaming, even though she really, truly wants to.

EMELIA

Emelia stares at her phone, at her texting history, at the empty message field that's become more intimidating to her than all the blank Word docs that need to contain five-thousand-word essays by tomorrow morning in the world. The fear of the blank page is bad; not knowing what you're supposed to say to the one person you always, always know how to talk to is worse.

She minimizes the app again. Pulls up the keypad, taps her recents, stares at Ophelia right there at the very top — but something stops her from pressing the button. She keeps thinking that, maybe, if she calls, she'll be able to think of what to say when she hears Ophi's voice, or know what to do when Ophi tells her, or that Ophi will give her the gift of pretending everything is normal between the two of them.

When everything's strange in the outside world, that's the one thing that's supposed to stay normal, isn't it?

She taps Ophi's name, brings the phone to her ear, listens as the phone rings once, twice. "SERIOUSLY?" her dad shrieks into his own phone, so loud she can hear it two rooms over. She jolts, drops the phone, accidentally smacks the "End Call" button when she picks the thing back up. Ophelia didn't even have a chance to answer.

"We've been planning this trip for months," she hears him say, still ten times louder than he needs to be. "Years! You can't just do this —"

Her phone buzzes. Her stomach sinks.

An email, just like she thought. From the cruise line, just like she thought. Apologizing for the inconvenience, just like she thought. She puts down her phone without even opening it; the subject line of the message was enough. Her father's shouting had been enough. Ophelia not showing up last night had been enough, not being here to nurse her through this morning's hangover (or at least commiserate with her) had been enough, leaving her on read had been enough, telling her to go home was enough. The *news*, of all things, being on at the party last night had been enough.

The world being the way it was had been enough.

Her phone buzzes again. Instinctively, she spares it a look. Ophi, sending over a cute picture of her dog, as if nothing's happened. Eme can picture her sitting in her house, staring at her phone, waiting for a picture of Eme's dog in return. A peace offering.

A minute ago, Emelia would have latched onto it like a lifeline.

Now, she opens up the texting app just to close it — just to leave her on read.

Boyfriends could be embarrassing bores at parties, and exes could steal basslines from bands she hasn't liked since sixth grade in what she's perversely sure is some kind of weird attempt to impress her, and cruises could get cancelled, and the news could talk about nothing but apocalypses that were never going to happen, but what goddamn *right* does her best friend have to be one of the things going wrong in her life? One of the things that's not right with the world?

...And what right does Emelia have to judge her? It's not like anything's right in her world, either.

Her brows furrow; her expression softens. She knows she's being selfish. Sometimes she just forgets how to be anything else.

She still can't quite bring herself to text back, but she takes that picture of her dog anyway.

OPHELIA

Ophelia sighs. “Could you turn that off?”

He’s watching the news again. He’s always watching the news now. She’d thought he was always watching it before, her dad, always had to be turning the TV on to check that the world hadn’t ended when all he needed to do was look out the window and make sure it was all still there, but now it was twenty-four-seven, constant, the background noise to her life in the way her own thoughts used to be. Today they’re saying something about the disease, they’re always saying something about the disease, this time it’s some piece on a new bit of tech that will fix it — something about phages? — that won’t actually fix it, because it never fixes it. It doesn’t make her feel any better. She’d learned not to start feeling any better, by now.

“I’m watching it,” he says, because he hasn’t. That’s the thing about her dad. As much as he’s always preparing for the worst, he never, ever stops hoping for the best. It’s a good quality. She can’t stand it right now.

She puts her headphones over her ears and does her very, very best to drown it out. And, sure, she can play her music loud enough to cover up the sound of the television, but she just can’t seem to bury that little bit of hope in her own heart in guitar riffs and piano lines.

That — that, she gets from her dad.

EMELIA

She’s watching the news again.

She doesn't even know why. It's not like she cares about it; her family didn't expect to walk into their living room and find Emelia's eyes glued to CNN, of all things. Especially not on a Friday night. If she didn't have some party to make an appearance at — which, this week, she doesn't — she'd be curled up in front of the couch with the new episode of *Enchantress* blaring so loudly her mother can't sleep — which, this week, it isn't. Instead, she's listening to another report on the origin of the disease. This one thinks it has something to do with dogs; she eyes her precious Marbles at first suspiciously, then concernedly. He just barks at her once, impassive, and goes back to sleep.

There's a white-hot core of rage that's nested itself somewhere right in the center of her ribcage; it might be where her heart's supposed to be. The news feeds it.

She's not sure why she feels the need to feed it.

"That's all fake, you know," her brother adds helpfully, when he peeks into the room to see what she's watching. "No one actually believes in it."

"I know," she lies. Whether it's fake or not, she knows plenty of people who believe it. She glances at her phone, checks for a text from Ophi. Nothing.

"Then why do you watch that shit all the time?" he asks. She doesn't answer. He starts off on a rant about how this whole thing is just a government conspiracy, but when it becomes apparent that she's just not listening, he grumbles something about no one in this house hearing him out and retreats to his bedroom.

One of the newscasters says something about staying at home to control the spread of the disease. Another says something about mandatory masks. Yet another says something loud and angry about the economy, voice indignant, face red. When one starts talking about how it could be a year or more until anyone develops an antibiotic that's effective against it, Emelia cuts him off. She flicks over to the channel Enchantress plays on, but she's already missed most of the episode, and judging from the dialogue she hears in the few seconds after changing the channel, it seems like they've just killed off her favorite character.

She sighs and turns off the TV.

OPHELIA

Her phone's buzzing. She doesn't check it.

She knows who it is, anyway. It's Emelia, begging her to go out again. She does this, whenever Ophelia *gets stubborn*, as she puts it; she'll text her over and over again until the constant buzz of her phone (or crowding on her screen, if she gets sick of it and sets it to silent) annoys her into relenting. It's irritating but... sometimes she needs it. She can admit to that much. There's a fine line between not going out because you're taking care of yourself and not going out because you're isolating yourself, and she's never been the best at staying on the right side of it. Tonight, though, the sound just makes her stomach turn. Why doesn't Emelia *know*?

And, for once in her goddamn life, Ophelia doesn't want to have to know. She wants that freedom, the ability to just laugh anything off, to wander out into the world without worry about how today will affect tomorrow, because if anything bad happens, she can make it go away with a wave of her hand. She wants to live like that, for just one night.

But she can't afford to, in more ways than one.

Her eyes flicker to that poster again. *Fifty Sights To See Before You Die*. Who's she kidding, anyway? She'll never see any of them. Emelia will, and she'll still be here, looking at the pictures of the trip as they go up on Instagram.

OPHELIA: i can't, eme.

OPHELIA: you know it's different for me.

OPHELIA: another night, okay?

EMELIA: laaaaaaameeeeeeee

EMELIA: fine though. *i'm* gonna go have fun

She puts down her phone.

At least it doesn't buzz again.

EMELIA

This shit *isn't* great.

Seems like she should really just give up on a party when her friend boasts there's gonna be live music; even when it's not Andy, it always somehow turns out to be Andy. Case in point: tonight, when the kid from across town whose name she could never quite remember (Hayden? Cayden? Kaidan? Carter?) decided he and his band weren't showing up to the bonfire at the beach because it was "too dangerous." And who'd been ever-so-willing to fill their spot but Andy, Andy and his stolen basslines that apparently aren't the only things he steals?

Even the catchiness is wearing off by now. She's starting to legitimately hate them. Emelia sighs, draws a series of spirals in the sand by her feet with a piece of driftwood, tries to listen to the waves crashing against the shoreline. They're subsumed by a song that's almost painfully original; she'll give it that much, at least. It's not part of the band's usual lineup (god, she hates that she knows their usual lineup), and she hopes to high heaven that it doesn't become part of it. This song's just objectively not good. Andy should go back to stealing.

He belts out a line about isolation. She realizes this song must be new.

At least she's not the only one who seems to feel this way about it — when she gets up and starts wandering down the shoreline, drifting further and further from the bonfire's brightness, she notices that at least a few of the other people at this party have had the same idea. The voices and laughter she'd been just on the edge of seem to pursue her, want to pull her right back into the center of things.

Normally, she'd be all about that. Normally, she'd grin and quip about how clearly a party wasn't a party without her there and laugh when everyone else did and melt right back into the life of things, where she was supposed to be, and she'd wonder why she was on the sidelines in the first place, why she'd ever leave the spotlight when it was so warm, why she didn't realize she was always meant to be at the center of the flames, dancing faster and burning brighter than they did.

Tonight, she just walks further away from the fire. She shivers in the night air; she should have brought a jacket.

She turns to ask Ophi if she can borrow hers, sees empty air, and then remembers once again that she's not here. She tries texting again, gets left on read again. She doesn't really know what she expected. She thinks about leaving. She thinks about the distance between her and Ophi, the distance between her and the rest of the party, the distance that has absolutely nothing and absolutely everything to do with the disease, the way the drummer in Andy's stupid insufferable fucking band had taken to wearing a face mask and their stupid insufferable heavy-handed lyrics about isolation and how even her escapes had all ceased to be escapes.

She looks back at the bonfire, the light and warmth and noise filtering in from just a little ways down the shoreline. Something red-hot and raging bangs on the center of her chest from the inside out, tries to scream its way out of her lungs, tries to cut her heart in half.

She runs — doesn't walk, runs — back to the party.

This, whatever it is, isn't taking anything else from her.

OPHELIA

Things are looking up!

Well, they are according to the television, which her dad is still glued to like it's religion, like he needs it to live, like he'll fall down into some perilous little corner of hell without its electric embrace. He's starting to let go, now, though, just a little; instead of having it on every hour he's awake, it's only most of them. After all, things are looking up.

The news says they've cured it. Or are curing it, or are preventing it, or have almost figured out how to get rid of it, or have realized it was harmless after all. That last one's a straight-up lie, an obvious lie, but that didn't stop Eme from texting the article she saw online about it to her with a smug 'I told you so' of a caption. Ophelia hasn't responded, and her phone hasn't buzzed with one of those characteristic double, triple, quadruple texts. That's got her a little worried, honestly, but she hasn't decided yet whether she's worried enough to check on her or annoyed enough not to. (That's also a lie, a straight-up lie, an obvious lie. She'll check in on Eme later, ask if she's upset, check that she's okay, comfort her if — when, really — she isn't.)

But — back to *it*. (It always comes back to *it* — doesn't it?) The cure is working, apparently, the something-or-other about phages; a little viral particle that kills only the disease, then dies off itself once the bacteria are gone and it's got nothing to invade. She doesn't know the

specifics of it. She's not a biologist. Neither is her dad, even though he thinks he is — he keeps parroting back what he hears about it on the news, in the five hours a day he's still watching, watching, watching like breathing takes a backseat to CNN. He thinks he's become some sort of expert; he keeps giving impromptu lectures about it at dinner, while she and mom sit there in silence, forks scraping against plates, the clink of ceramic more sensible than anything their father is saying.

Ophelia doesn't care *how* it works, just that it *does*. Just that the chatter of the television in the background isn't quite so incessant, now, and that even when it is, she can stomach listening to it; that everyone's talking about the bright sunspots of hope on the horizon, that everything's going to go back to normal soon. Because everything's going to go back to normal soon.

That's a lie. That's a straight-up, obvious lie. Nothing is going to go back to normal soon. Perhaps nothing will ever go back to normal again. But now the television, the blessed television, the thing she's starting to find herself stuck to like glue, like religion, like breathing takes a backseat, is making it a lie she can tell herself again. An easy lie. The comfortable lie she told herself when all this started, and the comfortable lie she'll tell herself as it doesn't end, and doesn't end, and doesn't end.

She sits on the couch. Watches the television. Does not put her headphones over her ears and turn them up loud. Tunes out what her dad is explaining about targeted bacteriophages.

Tunes out what the newscasters are saying about cures, and expenses, and distribution, and success rates. Only listens to the sweet sound of hope drifting in.

Lifts up her phone to text Eme, ask if she's got any weekend plans.

EMELIA

It's perfect out.

It's one of those flawless late-summer nights that teeters on the edge of fall, of which there are only ever a few in a year — just cool enough for a bonfire, just warm enough that you don't start to freeze if you walk away. The sun is setting, silhouetting the trees, leaving them indistinct blurs in the breeze flowing through the leaves. She's sipping something she's poured into a red cup, leaving her worries indistinct blurs as it flows down her throat. There are smiles everywhere, some genuine, some razor-edged and toothed and false with jealousy, just the way she likes them. It sharpens the pleasure of being you when everyone else wishes they were you, too. Her boyfriend is across the yard, setting up with *his* band — not Andy's! — to throw a few songs to the crowd. Ophi is at her side, cracking some joke about Emelia and boys in bands.

Emelia is right where she belongs, and everything is as it should be. For once, there are no cracks in the facade — because there's no facade at all, of course. Everything is just going back to normal, like she always knew it would.

She points out someone inside the house (they're at Brandon's place again) — you can see him through the porch's glass door, the kitchen light illuminating him, making his hair visible in all its very, *very* purple glory. "He said he was dyeing it red yesterday," she whispers conspiratorially, unable to suppress a giggle as she speaks. "I *told* him those box dyes don't work. Guess that's just what you get if you don't listen to me." The giggling gets worse. Ophi joins in, just a little. It sounds strained somehow, but Emelia does her level best not to pay attention to that in the least. No cracks.

She sneezes.

It's just a sneeze. It's nothing, really. But Ophelia starts backing away like Eme is a poisonous snake, a hornet's nest, something dangerous and untouchable and that Ophi wants to get away from very, very fast.

The anger that sits where her heart is supposed to be — or, no, on second thought, those are lazy words, inadequate words, the anger doesn't replace her heart, there's a hollow just below it in the center of her ribcage that feels built to hold this, like she would be incomplete without it, like she was missing a piece of herself once and she doesn't know how she couldn't tell that before — flares up again, white-hot as it's ever been. "What? You think it's that stupid disease? I thought you were *over* this, Ophi."

She's not being fair. She knows it even as she says it. But then, instead of getting angry back, Ophelia schools her face into one of those smiles. The razor-edged, toothed, false, jealous ones she likes to see so much on other people's faces.

She realizes she does not like them on Ophelia.

"Nah, you're right," she says, in a voice that makes it very clear she believes Emelia is wrong. "It's stupid," she continues, in a voice that makes it very clear she believes it is not.

"I have allergies, remember?" She rolls her eyes, regrets it as soon as she's done it; retreating into hostility is an instinct, something she wears like a second skin, like armor — but lately, what has it done for her?

Well, it's too late to turn back now.

Ophelia does just what she shouldn't do, though. If she blew up, yelled, went home and refused to text Eme back, that would be easy. That she could summon up righteous fury against; that she could convince herself was really more Ophi's fault, wasn't it? But Ophi just seems resigned, just keeps that fake smile plastered to her face — that smile that has the audacity to have *jealousy* in it. Eme's life is being taken apart bit by bit, and Ophi can find something to be jealous of?

"Yeah, I remember." It sounds so small and defeated that all the rage leaves Emelia in an instant — then returns, ten times stronger for the humiliation of having been vanquished.

“Fine. I’ll just go home, if you’re *soooo* worried about it.” She says it, and she hates it as she says it, and she hates herself for being unable to direct this rage anywhere else when she knows full well it’s not Ophelia that deserves it.

“Eme, *wait—*”

It’s too late, though. She’s said it, so it’s too late to take it back. She can feel all those eyes on her, all those wonderful, horrible fake smiles beaming her way, and the only way not to disappoint them is to follow through.

Ophelia will get it. She knows image is the most important thing, no matter how hard anyone pretends it’s not. She lets the rage roll back up and consume her doubts in a wave of *it’s all fake, anyway* as she snatches her keys from her purse and stalks through the side gate out of the backyard.

OPHELIA

This isn’t happening.

It’s as simple as that. This isn’t happening. This can’t be happening. None of this is happening at all. She’s finally starting to get how Emelia feels about all this, just a little; pretending it isn’t happening is so much easier than acknowledging it just might be.

Another shiver comes over her, even though she’s already hidden herself away in her room, wrapped herself in blankets, dragged her scarf out of the back of her closet even though

it's the middle of summer; she coughs again and winces, half from her sore throat and half from the fact the cough is getting worse. She snuggles down deeper into her blankets. Maybe if she just warms herself up a bit, this'll all go away. Maybe it's just a regular cold. Maybe it's just allergies!

...Never mind that Ophelia has never had allergies before.

Maybe she should just make like her namesake and jump in the river before her selfish decision to go out hurts anyone else. She should've known better than to trust Emelia, Emelia who'd been going out every single day. She should've known better than to go out herself, should've known that Emelia can afford this and she simply can't, should've, could've, would've —

—
“Ophi, dinnertime!” Her mother's voice, calling from the kitchen.

“I'm not hungry, eat without me!” she calls back — and winces again. Her voice sounds a little hoarse. All she can do is hope that no one notices.

Her hands have started to shake, just a little bit.

She keeps telling herself it's just a regular cold.

She hears a knock at her door. She should've known better than to hope.

“You doing alright in there?” Her dad says, cheerily, happily, jokingly, as he cracks open her bedroom door. “I've never known you to turn down—”

She looks up at him.

All the color drains from his face.

He says, fearful, hushed — “Ophelia, what did you *do*?”

EMELIA

Her brother rolls his eyes. “She doesn’t have it. She’s just being dramatic.”

Emelia has never wanted to throw a punch more in her life, but she’s so sick she can barely stand, so that’s not going to happen. (Besides, she didn’t pay a lick of attention when her dad taught her how to make a proper fist that one time, and she’d probably do it wrong and break her thumb anyway.) “You still think it’s a government conspiracy or whatever? Now? Really?” He looks at her as if she’s just said the stupidest thing in the world. “Obviously. You’ve just got a regular cold. Stop being so dramatic.”

“I hope I give it to you,” she spits, words venomous. Perhaps actually dangerous — she could spread it right to him, shouting like that. (Well, whisper-shouting, because that’s as much as she can manage.) And she doesn’t mean it, regrets the words as soon as they leave her mouth, wants nothing less than for her precious brother to catch what she’s caught.

Even if he is a bit of an idiot.

Her mom practically runs back into the room, and gives him a scathing look as she does — “What did I tell you? Get *out* of here.” Emelia used to resent it, the way her mom was always

sending him away, sending her dad away, sending *everyone* away like she was radioactive, but today she's grateful. Today, she wants nothing more than for her brother to stop judging her.

Today, she wants nothing more than for her brother to stop reminding her of what she thought a month, a week, a *few days* ago.

Today, she wants nothing more than to stop thinking about how many people she might have given this to because she thought just like him.

"Can you get up?" her mother asks, softly, sweetly. She doesn't deserve that. She doesn't reject it, either.

"I'd need help," she admits.

"Okay," her mother says, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, helping her to her feet, stabilizing her as she stands.

"Why?"

"We can't fix this at home," her mother says. An admission in exchange for an admission. An eye for an eye. "It's time we got you to the hospital."

OPHELIA

Thank god she didn't have to go to the hospital.

The thing appears to have left her blessedly alone, for the most part; hasn't torn through her flesh like paper, hasn't eaten her eyesight or ruined her lungs or somehow gotten into her

brain, like every news outlet whispers, fearful, apprehensive. It seems to have only left Ophelia with something she'd describe as a 'pretty bad flu' — not *good*, per se, but recoverable. And that was the important thing.

That was all that mattered.

She pads downstairs with a glass of orange juice in hand, a blanket pulled tight around her shoulders; she might be on the upswing now, but she's still a little bit cold. Her father looks at her, smiles — there's clear relief in his eyes, and so much of her just wants to run from it. It stares back at her like a reminder that the disease could've killed her instead of toying with her; she's a mouse the cat just played with instead of catching. The outcome was never in her hands.

She still manages to smile back at him, though. It's strained, but she manages. *I lived. I lived. I lived. That's what's important.*

She settles down on the couch next to him, letting herself focus on whatever it is he's playing on the television. Some historical documentary, seems like — a pair of men dressed as medieval knights smack each other ineffectually with swords, while a narrator goes on and on about kings and successions. She used to always find these boring, to insist that they watch something different and drag herself back upstairs to listen to music instead when her dad refused; today, she smiles much more genuinely than she did a minute ago, and relaxes as she listens to the narrator talk about some ancient king she knows nothing about.

This is what her dad watched before the disease, before everything it brought, before the news took over his life and consumed his soul. *Like religion, like breathing.*

She asks him what this is about, anyway.

His face lights up at her finally taking an interest; he starts to explain something about medieval battles when —

When —

When he's interrupted by a sneeze. There is no religion in this room. Not even a breath.

It *could* be nothing. It could be nothing at all. But Ophelia abruptly realizes all the same that perhaps living wasn't the *only* important thing.

EMELIA

Her mother finishes carefully cutting the picture out of the newspaper, plucks a magnet on the fridge, and hangs it up proudly. Eme just shakes her head. “Mom, I'm not six.”

Emelia's mother turns back to her with a proud smile on her face, and ruffles her hair as she walks by, just the same way she did when Emelia *was* six. She scowls, but her expression clears quickly; she never quite knows whether the fact that she'll always be a little girl in her mother's eyes is annoying or comforting. Today, though — today, she's still too tired to put up too much of a fight, too tired to argue, too tired to do much at all except shuffle around the house watching reruns of Enchantress and taking too many naps.

Besides, it's not as if she's exactly opposed to having a newspaper article all about her, next to a picture of her smiling face, pinned to the fridge. If this is her fifteen minutes of fame, she'll hold onto it with all she's got.

Miraculous New Treatment Saves Girl, the article title declares in bold type. Front-page news. She'd been the first person in the area to get the newest treatment for the disease — a viral phage that kills off the disease and nothing but that, then dies away afterwards, stranded with nothing to infect. She'd heard about it on television, once; she remembers not paying all that much attention to the program, because her brother was once again going on and on about how this was all a government hoax, and she believed him because it was easier to believe him than accept that reality no longer felt like any reality she'd ever expected to live in.

Now she'd lived *through* it. She'd paid the price for her stupidity with days lost in a haze of fever, with blindingly white hospital rooms, with lungs that never got enough air, with the fear she'd never leave this place again, that she'd die between these sterile walls.

The thought flickers through her mind that others have paid with their lives.

She didn't, though. She didn't, she *lived* through it, she's out now. So doesn't that mean the rest of the world has to be on its way out, too? She's only the first in the area to be cured. That means there are more to come, more following right behind, more and more people living through it and less and less of the disease. It *has* to be diminishing. It has to.

She knows, on some level, that this is the same thought-trap she fell into before. That the world doesn't revolve around her the way she wants it to, and it never has. But today, she's too tired to put up too much of a fight.

Everything is going back to normal.

OPHELIA

The heart monitor beeps out a requiem. She listens to each beat as if it might be the last, as if they might slip away into silence without her noticing, as if she might lose him and not even realize it until he's already gone.

Ophelia's father reaches for her hand, holds it in his own weak grasp. "I'll be alright."

It is a lie. She knows that. She has gotten so good at lying to herself that she recognizes when someone else is doing the same. He is trying to convince himself things will be okay. Things will not be okay.

She knows because the doctor was just here; she knows because the doctor went through their options with her mother when they thought she was out of earshot, but she could hear. She knows because the doctor told her mother about a new, miraculous treatment, one that could save you, one that could bring you back from the brink. The one she'd heard about on television. The one she believed meant everything was going to be okay. The one her *mother* believed meant

everything was going to be okay. The one that could *make* everything okay, that could send them home whole, family together, tired, beleaguered, but all alive.

The one that put hope into her mother's voice. Hope that went out of it the moment the doctor told her the price.

They couldn't afford it. There's no way they can afford it. There's nothing they can do.

Ophelia smiles at her father, does her best to make her voice sound relaxed, unworried. "Yeah. You'll be alright, Dad." He beams at her, so much as he can — fights through the exhaustion to give her a smile, because that's how he is, because that's how he's always been, because that's exactly how he won't be soon. She sees that smile and can already feel its absence, can sense the hole that will be left in her, can understand how its removal will cut like a knife.

He won't be alright. There will be no going back to normal.

Nothing will ever be normal again.

EMELIA

She closes her eyes and tries to pretend this is a party.

It's something like a party, right? It's a gathering of people. That's a start, if nothing else. So she'll just close her eyes and listen to the muted chatter around her and pretend that she's at Brandon's place again, out in the backyards with that perfect cool breeze ruffling away through the leaves, waiting for someone to make a comment about how they'd better start planning the

Halloween party now, being thankful that Andy's *stupid goddamn band* isn't playing right now so she has a moment of peace —

Someone starts crying.

She sighs softly and opens her eyes. She can't pretend this away, and she won't keep trying to. She owes Ophelia that much, at least.

Even if Ophelia won't, *can't*, even look at her anymore. Even if that will probably never change. Even if she knows she deserves it (and more, and more, and more).

The perfect breeze was real. That wasn't one of her lives. It blows through the branches of the trees and it leaves her rueful, leaves her wishing she could smile sidelong at Ophelia and let off a quip about how her mom would have called this a night for mischief and make everything perfect again, just as perfect as that breeze.

But it blows through the trees around the graveyard, and the person this '*party*' is for cannot enjoy it and never will again, and the blame may be partly on Ophi but it's also partly on her, and there's nothing she can ever do to change that again, even if she has no idea how to learn to live with it.

Even if she suspects it's not something you can really learn to live with.

The coffin is lowered into the ground. She feels like she's being lowered with it.

OPHELIA

Ophelia is sitting in her room, sitting in her room again, the window feeling like danger beckons just outside, like a bear-trap that will catch her hand if she tries to open it, the door feeling like it's been sealed shut.

Like this is her entire world.

Maybe it is. *Her Fifty Sights to See Before You Die* poster stares down at her from the wall; the City of Lights still beckons to her, begs her to dream of running away into that glow.

She doesn't want to anymore.