The Dying

Between the blinds, Emily could see the university campus through the frosted window, how the science building sat at the top of a grassy hill that sloped down, crisscrossed by sidewalks for students to walk from building to building. The trees that dotted the campus were skeletal, barely grasping at the last of their red and yellow leaves, most of which had fallen in clumps around the base of their trunks. Emily watched a breeze blow off another leaf from a tree, and other than its whistling sound the school was completely silent. The only sign of life was the bare trees. It was a bright and cold morning, and beams of late autumn sunlight pierced through the cracks in the blinds and illuminated the dust floating through the air of the classroom.

“Emily,” she heard Ida whisper, just loud enough for her to hear, “close the blinds!”

Emily let it shut and turned, scanning the classroom. There were now five of them. Five: a decent number. You have five fingers on each hand, five toes on each foot. Five senses, five points of a star. Five was a comfort, something familiar. Emily wrote a crooked 5 on her arm with a black whiteboard marker and hugged her knees, gripping the marker in her fist.

She sat in the corner of the room by the whiteboard, where someone had written a formula containing more letters than numbers. At the end of the room was a closet door; Ida had investigated it when they’d first decided to hide out in the room. The classroom door across from her was barricaded with desks and chairs. Ida stood diligently next to the barricade with an ear to the wall, her clothing hanging in shreds down her long body. She was absent-mindedly picking at the dried blood under her fingernails.

The twins, Jenny and Joan, sat on the floor in the middle of the room and spoke in low voices, holding each other’s gray hands. Paul, next to Emily, sat with his legs crossed and a
textbook in his lap. The cover was decorated with DNA spirals and proclaimed the title to be *GENETICS* in big, glossy letters.

“I thought you were a history major,” she whispered, peering over his shoulder to see layers of text and diagrams she didn’t understand.

“History minor,” he whispered back, not looking up from the book, “English major.”

“You like books, then?”

“Usually, but I have no idea what this says.” He turned a page and squinted. “I don’t think I can even pronounce that word.”

Emily looked over to the twins, who were now wrapped around each other. Jenny shook with sobs in Joan’s arms. “They have another breakthrough?” Emily guessed.

Paul looked up from the textbook and shrugged. “Probably.”

The twins, though identical, looked different enough to be strangers. Jenny wore long skirts and dresses, no makeup, and her blonde hair was long. She rarely spoke up in class, and when she did, her voice was too soft to hear. Joan had dyed her blonde hair jet black, and she dressed to match. She didn’t actually go to their school; at the insistence of their parents, she’d decided to pay her sister a visit filled with strained pleasantries, which had included Joan sitting in on their philosophy class. However, now that they were all dying, the twins seemed to be attempting to reconcile their differences, which Emily could only guess were inward as well as outward.

Ida turned to the twins and put a finger over her lips. “Be quiet,” she hissed, baring red-stained teeth. “You’ll get the rest of us killed.”
“We’re dying anyway,” Paul muttered, smoothing over a dog-eared corner of the page with his thumb. His pointer and middle fingers were cut off at the knuckles, jagged stumps that hadn’t grown new skin yet.

“You learn that in your book?” Emily asked, but Paul didn’t laugh.

This time Ida shushed Emily and Paul, glaring at them. “Honestly, how hard is it to be quiet? Do you guys want to get out of this or not?”

Without warning, then, Ida’s long legs collapsed underneath her as she erupted into a fit of coughs. Emily heard Paul’s textbook fall to the floor with a thud and saw him and the twins dash past her to Ida, who lay on the floor in a heap. Emily stood up carefully and peered over their shoulders to see Ida twitching and foaming at the mouth. With each twitch Emily felt something jerk inside her hollow chest, and her head spun as the voices of her peers melded together. She blinked hard, shaking her head, and when she could concentrate, the world refocused and Ida had stopped twitching.

“That’s it,” Paul said. “She’s gone.”

Ida flipped through her philosophy textbook and scribbled down notes while the bus’s movements jostled her slightly in her seat. 3 major areas of study within ethics, she wrote, and bullet-pointed below that: meta ethics; normative ethics; applied ethics.

The bus stopped at the light and Ida glanced up, seeing her stop up ahead, and tugged on the cord. The bus halted and jostled her one last time, and she told the driver, “Thank you,” as she got off and hurried to the building where the Restore the Bay campaign headquarters was located, her textbook and notebook rustling around inside her backpack.
“Sometimes I feel like you split yourself up five different ways,” her mother had told her the other night when they’d Skyped. “I know you want to save the world, Ida, but is it worth it if it means having no time to yourself?”

Yes, Ida had thought, but not said. Because it’s the right thing to do.

The four of them had moved Ida over to the far corner of the room, and Paul and Joan had draped their tattered jackets over her. Emily had returned to her spot by the blinds and the frosted window, watching wisps of clouds float through the blue sky, not quite burned off by the afternoon sun. She sat with her back toward the corner where Ida lay, and she wrote a 4 next to the 5 on her arm. Four was a nice, even number. Four points on a cross. Four phases of the moon, four cardinal directions. Four limbs, four cavities of the heart, four blood groups. The world four was even spelled with four letters. It was a great number.

“Now what do we do?” Jenny asked in a small voice from the center of the room where she sat with her sister, staring at her hands in her lap. “Ida was kind of our leader. Who’s going to lead us now?”


Paul furrowed his eyebrows but gave Joan the genetics textbook. She flipped through it, and then looked at the index, narrowing her eyes at the words like she didn’t trust them.

“Joan, you’re taking art classes,” Jenny said, her soft voice muffling her condescension. “How are you going to figure something out from that book?”
“You don’t have to be a bio major to be able to read a goddamned textbook,” Joan said, flipping a page harshly. Jenny bit her lip, and Emily guessed that if they were in any other situation, she would’ve said something to that.

“I figure,” Joan said, more to herself than to anyone else as she kept flipping, “that Ida just died in the same way Professor Hunter did. Remember? He was twitching and foaming at the mouth, too.”

“If he died from a disease, you wouldn’t find anything out about that from a genetics textbook,” Jenny said quietly.

Joan slammed the textbook and the noise almost made Emily jump. “Fine, pre-med genius. Please explain how we can save our asses before the disease kills us, if the Feds outside don’t get to us first and land bullets in our heads.”

Emily rubbed the 4 on her arm with her thumb. “I guess at this point we could just pick which way to go is more preferable.”

Joan glared at her. “Really? You’re going to make jokes? Ida’s rotting over there in the corner and you’re making jokes?”

“Jenny’s right,” Emily said, unable to stop herself. “You’re kidding yourself if you think a genetics textbook is going to stop us from dying. Isn’t that right, Paul?” She turned to look at him, but Paul only shook his head at her. His face was ashen.

“This whole time, you’ve been moping and writing numbers on your arm like a freak,” Joan said, her bloodshot eyes burning. “Do you think that’s going to help anything? Do you think that’s any better than giving up?”

“I think it’s better than deluding yourself,” Emily said in a low voice. Paul was gaping at her. *Hypocrite*, she thought. *He feels the same way.*
Joan breathed sharply out her nose like a dragon. “Tell you what. I’m going to read this textbook and find an answer and ignore you. You like numbers so much? This book is full of numbers.” She held up the textbook and shook it at Emily. “How about you look at these numbers and help us figure out how we got to be cannibalistic freaks of nature?”

Then there was a crash, and the window behind Emily broke into pieces that rained over her head. Emily ducked, arms over her head, and her hollow chest reverberated with the sounds of gunshots. She looked up and blinked against the smoke, and through it she Joan and the blood streaming from her forehead, pierced by a bullet, and her falling with a thud to the ground. Paul pulled Emily up by her arm and her legs began to move as the floor rushed under her. They were heading to the closet, Emily saw now, and she heard Paul shout something and then run back toward the chaos, away from her.

She reached the closet door and opened it and shut it behind her, and for a moment she was alone in the dark. She took a step forward and felt her fingers touch the opposite wall. And that was it, just her and the little closet. One, she thought. Oh God. One is a horrible number.

The door opened behind her and in rushed Paul, who dragged Jenny inside. Joan wasn’t with them. Emily saw Jenny fall to her knees with her face in her hands just before the door shut, and then they were covered in darkness.

Table 9 wanted extra breadsticks. Everyone always wanted extra breadsticks. Joan’s Olive Garden apron swished back and forth as she brought the four-person family a basket of breadsticks. The mother and father gave Joan grateful smiles as their two daughters dived into the basket. Joan’s stomach grumbled but she smiled anyway and left, because the man at table 5 had wanted to look at the dessert menu.
How many smiles until she could move to New York? How many more art classes at the community college until she had enough credits to transfer? Logically speaking, she needed money in order to achieve her dreams. Logically speaking, she was qualified to be a waitress at Olive Garden, but not much else. Do the math. She had to remind herself of the logic sometimes when her stomach turned over itself as she carried plate after plate of steaming hot food.

According to her parents, logically speaking, it was a good idea to visit her sister next week. Joan grit her teeth thinking about it. At least Jenny was taking that philosophy class. Maybe she could sit in that class, and maybe she’d even learn something about all this goddamned logic she was so intent on following.

Emily thought she would hear Jenny cry, but the closet was silent. Outside, she heard more of them enter, their feet landing into the room with thumps.

“I’m starving,” Jenny said, her faint voice cracking the silence.

“There’s nothing left to eat,” Paul said. “We ate everything.”

Emily felt her head spin again, the darkness around her whirling. “I’m hungry too,” she said. She could barely recognize her own voice.

She reminded herself: three was a fantastic number. Three was everywhere. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The past, the present, and the future. Beginning, middle, and end. Third time’s the charm. Three-leaf clovers. Three was lucky, wasn’t it? She felt for her arm with the tip of the pen and tried to write a 3.

“Emily,” Paul began, his voice hesitant. “What Joan said…” He trailed off, and Emily heard him swallow. “Why do you write numbers on your arm?”
Emily capped the pen with a click, hesitating. “Just trying to keep track,” she said, keeping her voice light. “People are falling so fast it’s hard to remember who’s around and who’s not.” She heard Jenny whimper.

“Do you really have to say it like that?” Paul said quietly. “Emily, what’s wrong with you?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Emily said, even though she wasn’t. “I just… I mean, it’s obvious that we’re all going to die at this point, right? It’s no surprise or anything.”

“God,” Paul said, sighing. “Can you please shut up?” Jenny’s whimpering grew louder.

“I thought you were with me on this.” Emily’s own voice was harsh in her ears.

“I don’t know what you thought,” Paul said, “but you’re wrong. I’m not with you if it means making a joke out of the fact that Joan just died.” Emily heard Jenny choke with sobs.

“I’m not making a joke out of it. I just.” She huffed. “Is it really that unreasonable that I don’t see the point of going on?” She tried to ignore Jenny as she cried harder. “It’s like you said. We’re dying anyway.”

“I don’t see the point, either,” Paul said. “But that doesn’t mean I want to die. And I’m certainly not counting down each dead body like it’s fucking New Year’s Eve.”

“Shut up,” Jenny screamed, her voice cracking. “Can you both please just shut up? God, I am so hungry.”

Emily heard a scuffling of shoes and then the closet door swung open, and the late afternoon sun flooded the classroom in a blinding glow. Jenny ran out and the door stayed open just long enough for Emily to see her, sharp nails outstretched, leap onto a fed and scratch at his face. They fell to the ground and the room outside erupted into screams and gunshots and
Jenny was the first to know something was wrong with Professor Hunter. She knew long before the six of them, five students with their professor, freshly hungry, had gone out and devoured every living being on campus. She knew before her professor attacked all fifteen students in the class, leaving ten dead and five turned into the same kind of monster as he was with the same horrible hungers. She knew before her professor locked the door of the classroom, grabbed the back of a student’s shirt, and sunk his teeth into the back of the poor sophomore’s neck, tearing out a chunk of flesh. She knew before he started writing the definition of epistemology on the board (the theory of knowledge, Jenny had copied in her notes in a cursive script). She knew before the beginning of class when he announced blithely that he was starving and couldn’t wait until class ended so he could get lunch, so let’s get started shall we? She knew even before she volunteered at the hospital that morning when one of the nurses told her about a strange case they’d gotten in the middle of the night: a woman with a bite mark on her arm had dropped dead after devouring her husband’s shoulder.

No, she knew something was wrong when Joan called her the day before, asking tersely if she could sit in on her philosophy class. Because Jenny knew that every time she and Joan were together, something always went wrong.

Hours passed, and the two of them said nothing. Emily didn’t know how Paul felt, but she wasn’t sure if she could take anymore of the spinning, and so they sat there while the world outside fell into chaos. It was finally Paul who stood up and slowly opened the door. The room
stung with the yellow light of streetlights, strands falling through the blinds and into the dark classroom. Each strand lit up a spatter of blood on the floor, the lifeless face of a Fed, Jenny’s bloodstained dress. Emily could see where Jenny had been shot in the back of the head, a small pool of dark blood matting her blonde hair. There was no life in the room. Paul walked out gingerly, looking around, his face lit up by the streetlight. He squinted against it and turned to look at Emily, who still stood just inside the closet doorway. “Now what do we do?”

“Don’t know,” Emily murmured. To her left, she saw Ida, right where they’d left her, covered in clothing, and she edged further into the closet. Her hands balled into fists, but there was nothing in them, and she realized what she was missing. “My pen. Where’s my pen?” She looked around the closet, seeing nothing. “Shit, I think I dropped it in here.”

Paul stared at her and then shook his head. “Of all the things to worry about right now.”

Emily wanted to tell him that two was maybe the best number there was. It was full of opposites: true and false, Heaven and Hell, yin and yang, good and evil, life and death. The Old and the New Testament. The northern and southern hemispheres. You had two hands, two feet, two lungs, two eyes. Two was a balance. Two was perfection. She got down on her hands and knees and crawled blindly through the closet, looking for the pen.

“Can I tell you something?” she heard Paul ask.

Emily looked up at his grim face. “What?”

He stared at his hands, gently wiggling the stumps of his fingers. “I’ve read books in every single classroom we’ve hidden in,” he said. “Ever since this started, ever since we were in Professor Hunter’s class a week ago. I’ve been reading books. I just read today that mammals have a protein named after Sonic the Hedgehog. I read last night, when we were hiding in the history department, that Franz Ferdinand’s wife was also killed on the day he was assassinated,
and she died ten minutes before he did, and Franz’s last words were begging his wife not to die. And a few days before that, before the feds came to kill us and I was in the music building, surrounded by dead people that I didn’t remember killing, I read that Sergei Rachmaninoff’s hands were gigantic, and that pianists have gone insane trying to play some of his songs because their hands aren’t big enough to play his music.”

Emily blinked. “So?”

He sighed. “So you can’t exactly write any of that down on your arm, can you?”

Emily felt sick in her hollow chest. “You don’t get it,” she said, her head spinning. “I need the numbers, okay? I need them. I need them or else what’s the point? I mean there’s no point.” She shook her head. “There’s no point to any of this. We’re all going to die and that’s fine, that’s great actually. I don’t care. Okay? I don’t care. I don’t care if I die. But the day I have to write a 1 on my arm is the day that everything’s really gone to shit.”

“Emily.” Paul’s eyes softened.

“Just don’t die, okay? Please don’t die. I know we’re not great friends or anything but you’re the only one left who gets it so please don’t die, okay? I don’t want to write a 1.”

There was a thump from somewhere in the room, and Paul turned toward it, but the streetlight didn’t touch the patch of darkness from where the noise came.

“Paul,” Emily said, frozen. “Paul, come into the closet.”

He didn’t. “Who’s there?” he called.

“Paul, get in the fucking closet,” Emily said. “Get in the closet or I’m going out there with you.”

Before Emily could move, a bullet cut through the darkness and the streetlights and into Paul’s brain. He stumbled, arms flailing, and collapsed to his knees. Emily thought she could
see the moment his brain shut off forever, when his head lollled to the side and he fell in a pile on the floor. Why do they have to shoot us in the head to kill us? Emily thought. That was the best part of him. Did they have to kill that?

Emily sat in the closet, not bothering to close the door, and watched a shadowy figure walk through the classroom. She saw his helmet illuminated, and the barrel of his gun pointed right at her. She closed her eyes and waited.

Then his voice, gravelly: “You’re the last one. They told us not to kill the last one.”

Emily opened her eyes and the yellow light stung. “What?”

“Trust me sweetheart,” he said, lowering his gun. “As much as I’d like to, they want to keep you alive for testing.”

Paul wrote out a flashcard for aesthetics and one for metaphysics. He tapped on the table with fingers that Professor Hunter would eat later in the semester. Across from him, Emily sleepily scanned their philosophy textbook. They sat in a café just off campus where Paul liked to read, although Emily had never been to it; she didn’t really drink coffee.

“Okay, that’s all of them,” Paul said, shuffling the flashcards and holding them up for Emily, one after the other. She answered tiredly, fine with some of the definitions and struggling over the others.

“Metaphysics,” she said. “A branch of philosophy that has to do with... the fundamental nature of being and stuff.”

“Well-put,” he said, pulling out the next one.

“Aesthetics,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “Um. When you think everything is pretty? Or something?”
“A branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of art, beauty, and taste,” Paul told her, reading off the back of the card.

“Close enough,” Emily said, biting into her scone.

“You can’t write, ‘when you think everything is pretty’ on the test if aesthetics comes up,” Paul said.

Emily swallowed. “Whatever. It’s kind of a superficial branch of philosophy, anyway.”

“What’s superficial about beauty?” Paul asked.

“All you’re doing is analyzing why stuff is pretty,” Emily said. “Not, ‘Who are we?’ or, ‘What is reality,’ but, like, ‘Why do I think flowers are pretty?’”

“Not just flowers,” Paul said, leaning in toward her, suddenly feeling the beating of his heart. “It has to do with why you like to read certain books, or why you like to watch certain movies. What people find beautiful says a lot about society, and about who they are.” He smiled at her. “Why do you think flowers are pretty?”

Emily shrugged. “I don’t really care all that much about flowers.”

Emily is a medical fascination. The doctors thought she would die as soon as she got to the hospital. But she lives, and strangers prod and poke and drain and inspect her day after day. She lives long enough to find a pen in a doctor’s office and, when she has been there long enough that they don’t feel the need to strap her to the bed, she gets off the bed and writes a belated 2 and I on her arm. The 5, 4, and 3 are almost completely faded.

She is one. She is number one, first place. One soul, one body. One love, one heart, let’s get together and feel all right.
Emily lies back on the bed and curls into the fetal position. She is starving, exhausted, and alone. One is a horrible number. She wants to be zero.