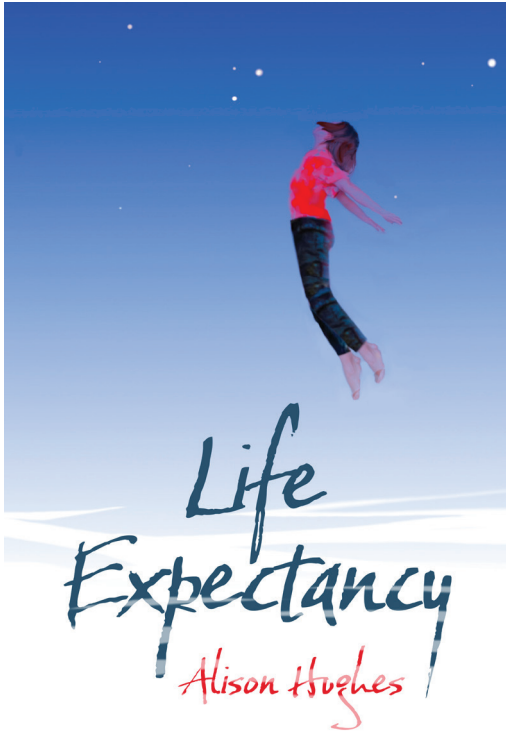


Excerpt from *Life Expectancy*

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After

The old clock on her bedside table read 2:25 a.m. Its ticking filled the room and bounced off the walls.

Chick, chick, chick ...

Sophie listened to it biting off the seconds like a metronome, her shallow breathing keeping time. Staring up into the darkness, watching the deeper shadows of trees dance on her ceiling, she felt another uprush of raw panic. She thrashed out of bed and lunged for the light. From his cat bed, Nickleby lifted his shaggy head and gave her a long, baleful, yellow-eyed stare.

“Sorry,” she said, sinking down, curling around him, stroking his thick black fur. He suffered it for a minute, then stalked away to clean off the affection.

This is why people get therapy dogs, she thought.

She sat on the floor with her back to the bed and stared at the wall, beyond the wall, beyond the house. The cold she felt had nothing to do with the temperature; she was numb-cold, bone-cold, dread-cold.

Chick, chick, chick ...

She roused herself, looked around blankly, then skimmed a shaky finger down the pile of novels by her bed. Not one of them was interesting, none of them even possibly diverting. For the first time in her life, books failed her. They’d always been a solace, an escape. Not now. Maybe not ever again.

Her eye fell on a book she didn’t recognize. *Good stuff, must read!* said her mother’s purple ink on a Post-it Note. It was that book of plays she taught her undergraduates, the one Sophie had said she wasn’t interested in. Sophie flipped the book open and stopped five words in at the stage directions for the first play.

A country road. A tree. How could the most benign, simple setting imaginable open up a sinkhole of dread?

A lonely house. A girl.

Sixteen years old and the curtain was already rising on the final act of her play. Nobody had prepared her for that. Nobody ever said, “Look out, Sophie, this play of yours might have a bitch of a twist! It might also be way, way shorter than you thought.” Sophie imagined herself tussling frantically with an unexpected curtain-fall.

If she had been asked, she probably would have imagined her life as a meandering path to a peaceful death at ninety; an unrecognizable Sophie, ancient and kindly and wise in a wooly shawl, soft, thinning white hair skimming a pink scalp, surrounded by loving children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. A perfect, old lady movie-death.

And yet here she was, alone, center stage, her script yanked away, forced to improvise because all the rules had changed.

What are the rules now? Where is her script?

She tossed the book of plays aside. She needed something short, light. She dug under her bed for a fashion magazine, grabbing randomly at the guilty stash. Officially, she despised the fashion industry. Flipping pages quickly, urgently, through a ton of ads, makeup tips, celebrity beauty secrets, flatter abs. All of it utterly meaningless. She felt old.

Chick, chick, chick ...

Her flipping slowed; her hands stilled.

She stared down at the random advertisement that was faceup. Pore cleanser, 4x the deep-cleaning action of soap, stop acne before it begins! A model with never-acned skin on one side, and on the other a simplistic diagram showing epidermis, pore cavity, and the sinister, sludgy oil deposits. All the bad stuff hidden under-

neath the surface ...

Just like me.

Stop it. Just stop ...

She hunted unsuccessfully for a nail left to bite, then gnawed on the skin by her stubby thumbnail. She tasted metallic blood; *her* bad stuff hidden beneath the surface. Shouldn't her blood taste different now that she knew what was in it?

2:40 a.m. Nickleby wasn't even finished his cat bath. She wondered how she was ever going to get through this night.

Almanacs! Why hadn't she thought of the almanacs? Even as a kid she'd found facts and figures weirdly soothing, and for the last few years, running through a mental map of world capitals had been her go-to anti-insomnia strategy.

She stumbled on stiff legs over to her bookshelf and pulled out the most recent *World Almanac and Book of Facts* from the row of almanacs dating back to 2008. Ordered, structured information, rows of numbers, columns of data blocked symmetrically. Any subject you could think of: State Maps, Flags of the World, International Time Zones, Country Music Singers, the Electoral College, U.S. Unemployment by Industry, Boxing Champions by Class, World History, Common Infectious Diseases, Selected Characteristics of the Sun and Planets. All the answers to everything in one thick paperback, a bargain at fifteen bucks.

She flipped past Veterans and National Parks, pausing briefly at Sexual Activity of U.S. High School Students (you couldn't trust that one; kids lie), then galloped through the book, flipping whole inches, a hundred pages at a time. Past Notable Islands, Student Loan Debt by State, Buildings, Bridges and Tunnels. She finally settled with relief on Nations of the World. Statistics, numbers, pure calming facts.

First up: Afghanistan. She skimmed down the country sum-

mary, past People, Geography, Government, Economy, Finance, Transport, and Communications. Her glance sharpened at Health. *Why is Health last? Pretty bloody important.* But it was the first subheading that had her sitting back.

Life expectancy: 49.9 male; 52.7 female.

Sophie stared down at the numbers.

Less than fifty years for men; that would be Dad. Fifty-two years for women; that's Mom. They'd be dead and gone tomorrow, tonight, like all the people their age in Afghanistan. That would be the end of their country road.

She couldn't get out of Afghanistan fast enough, crumpling the page as she flipped it. Longer lives in Albania (75.7 male, 81.2 female), but as she skittered through the A's, Angola plummeted: 54.8 male, 57.2 female.

She flipped obsessively, country to country, the standardized format drawing her eyes down to Health. To Life Expectancy.

Belize: 67.2 male, 70.4 female.

Botswana: 56.3 male, 52.6 female.

Burkina Faso: 53.4 male, 57.6 female.

Her phone rang at Cambodia. She snatched it up in relief, checking the number. Theo. She hesitated. It was always a long talk with Theo. Did she desperately want or desperately *not* want to talk to him? Could she actually pull off an even halfway normal conversation right now? She answered on the sixth ring.

"Oh good," he said, "you're up. Thought you were. I was walking home from Quinn's *lame* party, and I saw your light."

"Nice being a *guy* so you can walk at night," Sophie said. Did her voice sound okay? It didn't to her, but Theo didn't seem to notice. She'd considered wandering the neighborhood, walking the night away. The air, the movement would've felt good, but after that woman got attacked four blocks away a couple of weeks ago,

fear kept her in. Inside, a different fear kept her company.

“You didn’t miss anything. Totally dead. And *cold*. Look at my hands! Okay, you can’t see them because you hate FaceTime (see, I remembered!), but they’re *blue*. Bluish. So, can’t sleep? Or just reading all that shit you read?”

“Just ... reading. And I don’t read *shit*.” Flicker of guilt at the magazine stash under the bed.

“Only the very highest of highbrow literature for Miss Sophronia.” He butchered an English accent. “I know. Okay, back to me. I just did something stupid: texted that girl I told you about, the rude one? I know, I know, you’re thinking ‘Theo, you dumb *shit*,’ but she was at the party and *not* rude and here’s the thing ...”

Theo launched into his story. It was a familiar one; she couldn’t keep up with Theo’s crushes. Sophie’s eyes dropped to the almanac.

Cambodia: life expectancy 62 male, 67.1 female.

Chad: 49.0 male (*Oh dear God! 49! Under 50*), 51.5 female.

“... then she says all flirty (I *think*), ‘maybe give me a call.’ What’s that really *mean* though? That ‘maybe.’ It’s that *maybe* ...”

Congo (55.8 and 58.9), then a spate of higher life expectancies, then Guinea Bissau (48.6 and 52.7).

How is there such unfairness in the world? How did I not know?

“... which makes me think she might be into me. *Maybe*. Right? *Hey! Ronny!*” Theo raised his voice plaintively on her nickname. She was “Ronny” to Theo, “Sophie” to everyone else. “Sophronia,” her much-hated full name, was a grimly guarded secret only Theo knew. “Seriously baring my soul here, and I get nothing. You there?”

“Sorry. Here. Good.” She tried to focus. “I mean, it’s *good* that she’s texting ...”

“That’s what *I* thought! Because when it’s just, like, dead air even *I* understand that shit, right?”

“Right,” Sophie said, forcing a snort of a laugh. *Could I sound more fake?* “Dead air. Bad sign.”

“And it’s not like I’m high-maintenance. You know me: so low-maintenance I’m, like, barely even *there* ...

Riiight, Theo.

Theo’s voice receded as Sophie jumped country to country. Haiti (61.2 and 66.4), Kiribati (63.7 and 68.8), Mozambique (52.6 and 54.1), Zambia (50.8 and 54.1) and finally Zimbabwe (57.3 and 58.7).

She closed the almanac and smoothed a trembling hand over the embossed cover.

“Ronny!” She jumped. “You still there? Wait, are you, like, *reading* while I’m talking?” Theo sounded exasperated. “You are, aren’t you?”

“No, Theo, I’m not.” Which was not, right at this minute, a lie. “I’m ... just here. Listening.”

“Seriously? Why’re you sounding all ... robotic or something? Yes. No. Good. Fine. I mean, thanks for listening (if you are) but what’s *up* with you?” His voice sharpened. “You okay?”

Sophie felt tears blur her eyes at the question.

People in the world are dying so young, Theo. And Theo, I have something to tell you. Someday. Not now ...

“I’m good.” Sophie was leaning over, elbows on knees, head in hands. “Just tired. Sorry, not a ton of fun here. I better go.”

“You go, get some sleep. Recharge that battery, robo-girl. *Breep-breep*. Joke. I’ll let you know if I call ‘maybe’ girl.”

“You better.” Sophie tried to inject some emotion, *something* into her voice. “Absolutely. ‘Night Theo.”

“Later, Ronny.”

When he hung up, she wanted him back.

Theo, how have I lived sixteen years of my life thinking I’m owed

— *what?* — *ninety of them?* (She opened the almanac and flipped to the United States entry for Life Expectancy. 82.2 years for females). *82.2 years, Theo. More than in so many countries. I've assumed 82.2 years at least, a long story of a life, spun out leisurely, one chapter at a time, read slowly, pondered.*

Sophie's heart had started hammering again.

Life-ex-pec-tan-cy, life-ex-pec-tan-cy ...

She pressed her fingers hard against her mouth, stifling an inarticulate cry, a *mmm-mmm* of fear. Her breath felt hot and moist against her cold fingers. Through the skin, she felt teeth, bone, her grinning skull. The parts of her that would outlast the others.

My country: Sophie-land. Life Expectancy: radically altered.

She shut her eyes tight, took a deep, shaky breath in and held it.

Hold it, hold it, hold it.