Living Strange, a novel
By Allison Giese
Hyde Park, New York

A Thesis Presented to the Honors Program of the State University of New York, New Paltz in
Candidacy for Graduation with Honors

English: Creative Writing/Theatre Arts

April 18th, 2018

___________________________________________
Larry Carr

___________________________________________
Jan Zlotnik Schmidt
Abstract: *Living Strange* is about a young webcomic artist, Aaron Bateson, as he survives a suicide attempt and must begin the arduous process of recovery. However, a muddled and strained family situation, along with the fact that he’s begun to see his dead ex-boyfriend’s ghost, is making it even harder. *Living Strange* is a story about healing and reclamation. Structurally speaking, it’s a coming-of-age story, filled with phantoms of the past. Mental illness, specifically chronic depression and anxiety, feature prominently in the story and how they color the voice of the protagonist. Additionally, *persona* narration and free indirect style are used to show how Aaron’s mental illnesses affect his consciousness and how he tells his story. Parallels are drawn between the protagonist and the late Dmitri through specific and controlled encounters, as Dmitri was never able to seek help for his depression. At its heart, this novel is a character study about how we heal when things go wrong, and when we’re at our rawest and most vulnerable.

Keywords: English, creative writing, young adult, depression, anxiety, LGBT, magical realism, ghosts, artists, art
PROLOGUE

July

It’s hot. The AC at Dmitri’s house is broken. He paces, back and forth, over the well-worn carpet. It’s dark. The blackout curtains are drawn. He can’t hear it, but he can tell there’s yelling going on in the house—he saw it when he peeked down the stairs at his parents in the kitchen.

Time’s run out. He knew it would, eventually. He’d just hoped that he’d have a little more warning. He locks the bedroom door and is tempted to pull his dresser in front of it. Would his mother escalate to actual violence? If the vein throbbing in her forehead is anything to go by, he can’t be sure.

He picks up his worn black backpack. At the corner of his closet, where the walls meet, he peels back the carpet, jimneys the floorboard to the side, and finds his stash of cash. It’s not much. It’d barely afford a bus ticket out of the state and a room in a cheap motel. But it’s what he has. He shunts the money into his pocket, and while he’s at it, the pills he used to sell. A change or two of clothes. He wishes he’d thought to grab his toothbrush, but that would mean leaving the room. He rolls his tongue over his teeth. This would have to do for now.

His laptop, the charger, his leather-bound journal and a few pens. His passport. He didn’t know where he would be going, but it would be best to leave his options open. Dmitri knew he should probably grab a jacket, but again, he’d have to leave the room.

There’s a photo on his desk. This morning it was dug out of his bag by his unwitting mother, who meant to wash it. She discovered that it depicted two boys kissing, and one of the boys was her son. And that was that.

Dmitri touches the photo, touches the other boy’s face. He knows where to go.
It’s not a long walk, from his house to Aaron’s, not on paper. By car it took five minutes. Aaron’s dad took him that way a lot. But it’s all surface roads with no shoulder, and he has to find an alternate. By the time he gets there he’s winded, he’s sweated through his old Genesis shirt, and it’s past dark. All the lights in the house are off, aside from one or two bedrooms. Dmitri finds the key in its hiding place in the gutter (bunch of amateurs) and unlocks the garage door. Theoretically, there’s a security system, but he knows from experience that nobody ever thinks to arm it.

He climbs the stairs slowly, so as not to wake up Aaron’s father, the only hearing person in the house. It smells like it always does—dishwasher detergent, stale tea, and remnants of whatever weird dish Aaron decided to cook for dinner. It’s hot in here too. There must have been a brownout, because normally Aaron has the house feeling hermetically sealed.

He pushes his hand through the crack in the door. Flickers the light. “You shouldn’t have left that spare key lying around,” he signed.

Aaron looks startled. He’s perched over by his drawing desk, kneading some clay. “Did you walk all the way here?”

“Left an hour ago.”

Aaron’s wide gray eyes take in his bedraggled appearance. “…For the night?”

“I did what you wanted. I came out.” He doesn’t have to know that’s not precisely true. “I was already done with them anyway.”

He presses a hand against his brow. “So they kicked you out?”

Why is this so hard for him to understand? “I didn’t stick around long enough to find out.” How would there be any other solution?

Aaron turns even paler. He wipes his hands on a towel. “You have to go back.”
Of course he said that. “No back to go to.”

“Dmitri, you can’t—”


His brows scrunch together in the way they do when he’s anxious, which Dmitri knows is all the time. “Where will you go?”

Suddenly it makes sense to him. “Out west,” he signed. “I have a cousin in New Mexico. They’re the only other family I have. I can’t stay with Ann. Everyone else said no. My own friends won’t give me a place to stay.” He’s asked them all before, in the past. It’s not the first time he’s come close; just the first time he’s followed through.

For a long, torturous moment, Aaron doesn’t say anything. He shakes his head. Dmitri sees his shoulders moving, how fast he’s breathing.

He needs to keep talking. “Come with me, Aaron. We can go together. Start over. Drive across the country, do what we want.” It would be so nice to be free together. They never had the chance.

A thin patch of color stains his face. “You’re still only seventeen,” he points out.

The irritation thickens. “So?”

“We have no money.”

He’s trying to keep himself restrained. “Your point?”

“I can’t leave my sister.” His hands, long fingered and graceful, seem small as he makes the signs.
Hopelessness begins to blot out the anger. “So leave for a few weeks and come back. I don’t want to go alone.”

It takes Aaron a while to talk. “I can’t. I just can’t.”

“This is because of what Cora said, isn’t it?” He crossed his arms. “She didn’t mean it. You know that.”

Aaron’s eyes turn sharp. “Then why did you agree?”

How is he not getting this? That argument was so stupid—Cora thought she was helping Dmitri by chewing Aaron out, but she made a bigger mess. She wanted to help him stay closeted until he went off to school, but then, of course, he failed out and it all fell apart—“Because I love you and I don’t want you getting hurt. People like us—we don’t get to be safe. The last thing you need is for the people in your community to turn against you.”

“I can’t believe that. Maybe I’m not who you thought I was.”

For fuck’s sake. A bubble of hysterical laughter leaves him. “Maybe not, Aaron. But who are you, then?”

More silence. He bites his lip.

“Come with me,” he signed again. “Please.”

Aaron covers his mouth. He looks pained.

Dmitri’s heart sinks. “I’m going, Aaron,” he signed.

“There’s nothing else you can do?”

“You’re my only option.” It takes a lot of air to admit that.

“I can’t rip another hole in my family.”

“Right.” He knows this. Maybe he always knew it. Aaron would never be able to choose him. “So that’s it, then?”

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 5
He looks up at Dmitri fully for the first time. “Will you text me? Tell me you’re safe?”

He thought about the irony of this statement. “Maybe. Maybe not, who knows. I have to start new.”

“Dmitri—”

He kisses Aaron. He always feels and smells so familiar, so warm. It hurt to leave but staying hurts even more. “Goodbye.”

By the time the cop arrives traffic on I-87 is already being rerouted. A truck with a huge white trailer sits perched crookedly on the road, its hazards blinking dazedly. Traffic whizzes by at a conservative fifty-five miles an hour. There’s an ambulance, but the lights are off. There’s something on the side of the road covered by a white sheet. The cop sighs. Her hair keeps coming out of her bun and she brushes it out of her eyes.

She approaches the ambulance. A middle-aged man sits trembling under a shock blanket. “Hello sir,” the cop says. “Are you the driver of this truck?”

The man nods. He’s shaking.

The cop’s too tired for this. She hasn’t gotten a good night’s sleep in weeks, not since they moved her off of the night shift. Her body doesn’t do well with days. “Would you be able to tell me what happened?”

The man’s lip trembles. “I saw him walking along the shoulder,” he says. “I wanted to shift into the next lane, but there was too much traffic. I saw him look up at me, then all of a sudden he—” His voice breaks. “I couldn’t stop in time.”

The cop believes him. People, especially the long-distance truckers, fly by at eighty, ninety miles an hour, perhaps more. A rig that heavy can’t exactly stop on a dime. It’s
unfortunate, but it happens—though usually with passenger cars, not with hitchhikers. “We might have to take you to the precinct for some questions, but this feels open and shut to me,” she says.

The man nods. “That poor boy’s family,” he says. “I… I had no idea—”

“There’s nothing you could have done,” she says in a voice that she hopes is soothing. “You try and get some rest. I just need to sort out a few more things.”

She approaches the EMT kneeling next to the body. The sheet has blood on it and she tries not to look. He offers her a wallet made out of tie-dye duct tape and a battered, half-torn passport. “He was carrying plenty of ID,” the EMT says. “The family will get some closure, at least.”

She opens the wallet. A high school ID from New York School for the Deaf. A learner’s permit, giving the boy’s name, stabby and Russian. Inside the wallet is a photo, folded up. The cop unfolds it, sees the two boys kissing. Things start to make sense to her. She sighs. Open and shut after all.

July

So I’m having this dream. In this dream time isn’t working, it’s going too fast. Dmitri’s kissing me, kissing me gently like I’m something being worshipped. He takes off my clothes. I’m wearing a shirt that’s not even mine, it was his, he left it behind one day. The album cover from Selling England by the Pound. I could never figure out where his obsession with that band came from. Every time I asked he’d just shrug, saying there needs to be some mystery left in things.

Living Strange by Allison Giese 7
He makes love to me. It’s good, maybe the best we’ve ever had. I don’t feel stuck in my head like I sometimes get during sex, I feel like I’m in my body, and that this body is worth having.

I get close, so dangerously close, to finishing. His weight on me is warm and reassuring. I look up, wanting to see his face. But it’s not his face. Vines are spilling from his mouth, twisting all over me, weighing me down, and everything smells like blood.

I wake up covered in sweat, the space between my legs uncomfortably sticky, like I’m fourteen all over again. My heart is racing. I can still feel the blood on my skin. My breaths hurt my chest and these weird rough uneven sobs fall out of me.

I thought if I slept more I would escape him, and escape the truth of him being gone. But here it is again. The pain laces through me slowly, twining though my nerves, draining me dry. Makes itself comfortable. It’s going to be here for some time.

Part 1—HIATUS

1.

December

Monday

I’m at work. My boss Helen and I pull books off the shelves in her tiny store for the weekly markdowns. It’s an absent sort of work, the kind that uses our hands, so we don’t get to talk much. She manages somehow. She asks me why I work so much. She doesn’t mind, so she says, because it means she can spend more time focusing on her infant daughter. I don’t have a good way to articulate that if I keep moving, if I keep busy, and if I keep out of the house, it keeps the
house of cards that is my anxiety from collapsing in on itself. I need to keep my mind from spinning. So, I work.

Today’s panic attack is after lunch in the backroom. It lasts 3 minutes and 43 seconds.

**Tuesday**

I have class at SUNY Purchase, where I elected to go when my teachers wouldn’t stop hounding me about applying to Gallaudet. Intelligence, yadda yadda. Potential, blah blah. This was the compromise. I’m “getting my feet wet.” End of semester one the only friend I’ve made is my school-provided interpreter, a grad student named Louise doing her interpreting fieldwork hours. She comes with me to American lit, where the professor yammers on about the upcoming papers we’re supposed to do about a poet each of us as been assigned. I got William Carlos Williams. Dmitri used to read me those poems. I haven’t gotten one word written. The paper is due in ten days.

Today’s panic attack is in the men’s room. It lasts 4 minutes and 15 seconds.

**Wednesday**

Dad leaves his debit card on the kitchen table so I can buy groceries. I’ve bought all our food since I learned that I like to cook. I learned I like to cook because my father sank into a catatonic depression three years ago and if I didn’t learn fast my sister and I wouldn’t eat. He got better but the habit remains the same. It’s easier, he says, because I can buy the things I like. Plus he always ends up working late at his law firm in the city, trying to help struggling undocumented immigrants as the government chews them up and projectile vomits them back out.

I shop. The order and the churn of the store sets my teeth on edge. I buy pork loin and try to breathe.
Today’s attack is about fifty seconds long when I’m putting the groceries into the trunk of my car.

Thursday

I help Jenna with her English homework. Like a lot of kids born Deaf, she struggles with writing, even though she can read with a speed that dazzles me. The ideas, she says, keep jumbling in her head when she tries to write her middle school essays. There’s just too much to choose from.

I have my own thoughts to choose from, gnawing gently and carbonating in my stomach. The whispers have started quietly six months ago and I can feel them, steadily, crawling up into my spine. Mostly images of blackness scrawling all over me, inside me, like I’m one of my own drawings gone wrong. A mistake.

Today’s attack happens when I’m in the shower and lasts 10 minutes.

Friday

Fridays were always my comic update days. I’ve written some of these comics for years, at first just taking pictures of drawn pages but now I own Photoshop and a drawing tablet and I do everything myself, online. The amount of time I put into lining, coloring, sketching, polishing, and shading used to seem impressive, but now it just seems pathetic. If I’m really that good, shouldn’t it be quick? Easy? Not involve so much blood and sweat that it makes me so stressed my hair’s been starting to fall out?

My thoughts begin to choke me and I have to lie down. I can’t bring myself to post a page, even though it’s done. It’s the first Friday I’ve missed in 83 weeks.

My attack is a slow burn today and lasts several hours.

Saturday

Living Strange by Allison Giese 10
My best friend Charlie has a day off work. We walk around downtown. He takes pictures of the Christmas displays in shop windows with his phone. We go back to his place, the one he shares with another childhood friend of ours. We make out for several hours, just like we have since the summer ended, but I can’t seem to get it up and I go home before he can show he’s obviously disappointed. It’s been a while since I’ve wanted sex, even from a personal maintenance standpoint. The inside of my body feels hollow and dead and the thoughts writhe up again all over me. The whispering becomes cohesive and the thoughts tightened around my neck.

I don’t have an attack so much as an infinity of anxiety.

*Sunday*

Dad has off Sundays. Well, his law partners do, and if they didn’t shut the office and send home the secretary on Sundays, he’d never leave. But ICE doesn’t stop on weekends and often he’s on the phone, trying to console his clients, sometimes speaking Spanish in that funny Scottish accent of his.

He could have been an injury lawyer who sued on behalf of clients’ bullshit claims of damages and malpractice. It would make it easier to hate him for all these long hours, the ones that leave him too drained to take care of my sister and me, much less himself. He is still mopping up the hurricane of grief that my mother’s divorce left him.

But this Sunday we end up having breakfast together. He talks about the soccer game that our team had been in, how upset he is that they lost. I nod and pretend that I watched the game, even though I don’t care anymore. He asks me about school and work. I say it’s fine. Finals piling up, breathing down my back, tightening the thread of thoughts. As for me, how am I doing? Oh, I’m fine.
I try to work on a watercolor painting I started a few weeks ago to give Charlie for Christmas, but my paintbrush feels like lead in my hands and the drawing desk stabs my elbows and everything seems a little blurry. For no particular reason, I sob like a baby.

2.

Monday

Work. Then I do laundry because I have no underwear to wear. There are clothes and other shit everywhere. At the beginning of the semester my room was precise, brilliant, clean. I used to vacuum twice a week. Now it takes all my strength to leave a clean path to my bed. I need to clean the house, another thing I used to do weekly. Mom and I did it together. Cleaning, she said, is like therapy. And I bought it, for the longest time felt the same. But now I can’t seem to get around to it. I lay in bed and scroll through nothingness on my phone, not even looking at the art blogs I used to worship. I forget to make dinner, fall into a light sleep, and then am woken up by Jenna when she asks me to order a pizza.

We eat. I manage to spill my way through a halfway reasonable conversation. She talks about the newest book in her favorite series; the author just pre-released the first chapter today and it seems like it’s going to be amazing. She’s dropping hints about what she wants for Christmas but I don’t mind. Even when I’m at my worst I always have time to listen to Jenna. I remember when I used to braid her hair.

That night I dream about braids strangling me and the panic attack wakes me up. It lasts as long as the darkness of night does. When the morning breaks that same intrusion busts through my mind and shovels itself into my consciousness. Kill yourself.

Tuesday

_Living Strange_ by Allison Giese 12
Each of my classes bleeds into the next. The rooms in the building are frigid and I shake in my sweater. I’m supposed to meet my friend Saima for coffee after. We went to the same high school, one of the state schools for the Deaf, and now we go to the same college. She was always easy to talk to.

I park at our favorite café. I can see her, sitting in the window, waiting for me. I could tell her. I could try to verbalize everything I’ve been feeling, let it spill from my wrists. She would give me advice and help and resources. She would tell me I could get through this, I did it before after all, it would all be fine dandy and we could get back into the tap dance of our daily routine.

But telling her would be exhausting and I can barely keep my head up. I text her and tell her my sister needs me to pick her up from basketball practice and that we need to reschedule. And then I go home and stare at the walls for a few hours.

After that, I stop responding to all messages altogether.

Wednesday

My mind feels like it’s on fire. It boils. I try to ignore the boiling and set myself on autopilot. Aaron, this is what you do. On Wednesdays you do the grocery shopping, remember to bring the coupons, pick up everything in the store section by second, starting with produce, ending with frozens. All of the packaging of these products used to fascinate me, the colors, the textures. Now it barely reaches my nerve endings.

At home I make pasta with store bought sauce from the jar, something that used to make me viscerally angry. As I watch the water boil everything in me shrieks and I have to put my head in my hands for a long time. Jenna finds me like this. I tell her it’s just a migraine—a real side effect of the condition that is making me lose my hearing—and she buys it. For that reason neither she nor my father complain when the pasta is too al dente and when the sauce is burnt.
Thursday

I can’t sleep. Everything looks blurry. The shrieking that started the night before isn’t stopping. I’ve never known this, didn’t know it could go this deep. I know that I should want help, or at least acknowledge that I need it.

None of that matters because I will always be this way. Things will always unravel and reknit and unravel again. There won’t ever be an end.

Unless I do it myself.

Friday

Update day. I’ve missed again. I’m not too popular of an artist online and I only have a few consistent followers. Nobody seems to have noticed that I’ve skipped twice. I didn’t exactly leave the story on a compelling cliffhanger. That story, a love story between a witch in captivity and a mortal, seems so fucking stupid now. I can’t do this anymore, any of this. The intrusions have crescendoed in volume and leave me sore and aching.

Saturday

I buy Jenna the book she’s been wanting and wrap it in a beautiful lilac print. We didn’t put up our Christmas tree this year so I leave it on the coffee table. There are some things I need to do.

3.

So I’m driving down the highway going to pick up the free Christmas ham from ShopRite and I see him standing there in the middle of the road. Blood red hair, choppy, boxy, the same God damn Genesis shirt. He always said that there were only two socially acceptable occasions to listen to Genesis—when you’re on a road trip or when you’re intoxicated—and I begin to hear it, in my memory or maybe for real, who knows, at that time I wasn’t exactly right in the head.
“Dancing with the Moonlight Knight.” I never knew how he could grasp the subtleties of Peter Gabriel when he was fully Deaf, but he always got super into it, hands pressed against the speakers of his old stereo, about three shots of vodka in. He told me, well, you’re hard of hearing too, the experience, it’s kind of like that. You feel it. You really do. Hand on my knee, sometimes higher.

So I see him in the street and I panic and smash the brakes, almost causing the Subaru behind to rear end me. It can’t be him. It can’t. He’s dead. And it isn’t him, it’s nothing. The Subaru flashes its lights at me. So I go to God damn ShopRite.

I grab the ham. It being the weekend, it’s packed to the seams, because it’s going to storm this weekend and everyone will starve to death if they’re trapped in their house for a day. I just need the ham. That’s it. I still wait in line at least twenty minutes. The meat cold and hard against my body, everything else a sea of people in their different colored coats. Navy. Pink. Mostly black, wool and vinyl, a million different textures. The woman in front of me is covered in white cat hair. Her human hair is tucked under a cerulean beanie and she wears this Christmas tree pin on her lapel. She hands the cashier an EBT card. It declines. The cashier apologizes and makes hand motions. The lady begins to yell, shrieking into my hearing aids, that she knew she had enough. I shift the ham in my grip. The cashier apologizes again, says that the EBT card didn’t cover the rest of her purchases, just the food. The lady takes out another benefit card. I place my ham on the conveyor belt and rub my hands to warm them.

The room pitches and jerks. My heart feels slippery and it sneaks up on me, all of a sudden, like a tsunami, vertigo like I haven’t felt since they diagnosed me with Meniere’s disease some four years ago. Did I miss my medication? I grip the side of the conveyor belt and the man behind me gives me a weird look through the corner of his eye. The lights seem to flicker and I
have to hope that I don’t pass out in God damn ShopRite because I don’t want them to call 911, I don’t want to be That Guy, and then nobody will be able to get in home in time for dinner because there will be a fucking ambulance in the way. I didn’t want to make a big deal of this.

The woman in the cat hair jacket is still going on. The manager gets called. I’m so glad that I haven’t eaten because I’m sure I would have thrown it up by now. I reach in my pocket for my keys—my little pill jar I keep on my keys—but of course I didn’t refill it since last time. I take a deep breath. It tastes like salt and bodies and my heart is beating in my chest and sweat beads under my hat which was black as anybody else’s.

The guy behind me nudges me and I struggle to read his lips through a room spinning like a carousel. He tells me to hurry the fuck up. I hand the cashier my ham voucher numbly, and she gives me another side eye, probably thinking I’m a tweaker because there are a lot of those around here. She wraps the ham in two plastic bags. It’s so heavy. It must weigh at least fifteen pounds and it’s dragging my whole body down. I wait in line to leave, head spinning, heart spinning, feet trussed to try and stay standing. My car seems a million miles away. Dad told me to get handicap plates once I started driving in case this same exact situation happened, but I never put any stock in it. I’m parked in the back. It’s snowing. I can see Dmitri in my mind’s eye, Genesis shirt, and I dry heave. Nothing comes up. I sit in my car, ham on the passenger seat. Dad’s at my sister Jenna’s middle school basketball game, he’d never hear his phone going off. They’re probably winning. I told her I would make her favorite for dinner, penne ala vodka, because she always gets so hungry after the games.

I don’t remember getting home. One instant, ShopRite, the next, my driveway, like someone edited out a good fifteen minutes of my life. Panic sticks in my veins, the same panic that’s been badgering me for the past month and a half. I take the ham inside and put it in the
freezer. I didn’t mean for it to be now but now was as good a time as any. I reach for my pills in
the cabinet next to the sink and knock it over. Little round white pills everywhere, in the sink, all
over the floor. I go to pick them up and slip, knocking my head against the granite countertop. I
grab one of the pills and swallow it dry, feeling the bitterness crawl all down my throat.

Then I go upstairs one slow agonizing step at a time, the whole house swirling against
me, like I’m Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* in her tornado, and I finally make it to my bed under
the window. I’m still in my jacket and I struggle to get it off my body. I find the second bottle,
the one Dmitri sold to me, wrapped in some socks in my bedside drawer. He said they were for
an emergency but if this isn’t an emergency I don’t know what is. I sit on the floor because it’s
firmer there and swallow a different little white pill. I chase it with stale water on my drawing
board, almost drinking the paint water by accident. I wait for the pill to work some ten minutes
and press my face into my knees. Nothing happens. They’re probably expired by now, potency
waning. I take a second pill. Panic swallows my lungs. He said if you chewed them they worked
faster, and I think about it and take a third one, crushing it with my teeth, and I wait. I’m weird
and weak with vertigo. The pills aren’t working. I look at the bottle, wondering if I took the
wrong ones, but no, there’s the label and his name, Dmitri Almanov, there’s the medicine, the
Xanax, the one the doctor would never give me.

I should have just taken my Klonopin like a good kid but I’m shaking. It’s so cold in
here. I forgot to turn up the heat when I got home. Everything was supposed to be okay but it’s
all dissolving now into nothing, into dust, and I can’t do this anymore, I can’t fucking do this.
Every day it’s just too much. I take another pill, take two, then a whole handful, and I sit and I
wait and nothing happens. I feel weird. I hug my knees. The room is unsteady. I’m worried that
my art supplies will topple over. I’m so thirsty. I reach for the glass of water and knock over the

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 17
jar of brown paint water by mistake. Spilling it all over the beige carpet. I can’t move. My hands feel strange and numb and I know I’m down the rabbit hole. I know I’m down there and I don’t care.

The next thing I’m conscious of is my father, standing over me in the dim light. He’s yelling at me, shaking me, I can hear it, though as usual I have no idea what he’s saying. He crams a tobacco-flavored finger down my throat. All I can smell is the cigarettes, the Marlboro Lights he always smokes. He does it again and I throw up the pills, all of them. I see Jenna, standing there in my bedroom doorway, pink-faced in her white-and-blue uniform. He signs something rapidly at her. She nods and runs downstairs, eyes streaming, white mesh uniform shimmering.

And that’s about when everything collapses.

[A post on an art website by user hey-bae-nton. A doodle on a thin brown napkin—a prescription bottle with pills spilling out. Some text below it: “All comics are going on hiatus indefinitely. Sorry guys. Love Aaron xox.”]

4.

I wouldn’t remember much of the ambulance ride to the hospital. Consciousness came in fits and starts. I got injections of this, of that. I felt like I couldn’t breathe despite oxygen clamped over my face. I wanted to tell them to stop working, to just let me fucking go, but I couldn’t move or speak. Everything was dark. I saw my father’s silhouette, his clammy hand holding one of mine like a vice.

The ER. The drama of it was embarrassing. Doctors and nurses flying everywhere, sterile colors bursting against the walls. They were all rushing for me. My stomach got pumped, I was
stripped and thrust into an itchy gown, I was given more medicine to chase off the Xanax. The doctors left me to rest and work this crap through my body.

Then I was just staring at the ugly ceiling, my mind buzzing at about ten percent but slowly floating back into reality. It was night outside the window. When had that happened? A cannula poked at my nose and my right hand was full of slick tubes.

I turned my head, erupting the world into dizziness. A hospital, a bed, a gaudy curtain pulled closed to block off the rest of the planet. Humiliation bled through me like ink into water.

Dad was in the chair next to me. His whole body was slumped forward, his elbows on his knees, his hands over his ears like he was trying to block out a horrible noise. I couldn’t see his face. His normally rigid hair was limp, pointing towards the floor. He jumped and looked up at me. His brown eyes bore into mine.

There was no way to verbalize how badly I’d fucked up. I bit my lip but there was no pain. My whole body was numb.

“You’re all right now,” he signed gruffly. “Your body’s stable. Your vitals look good.” I saw his lawyer mask starting to slip into place, blotting out the veiny eyes and washed-out pallor. “You’re not a minor, so they can’t commit you without your consent. But I am prepared to tell the doctors you’re unfit and that it would be in your best interest to go through with treatment. I can draw up the papers if necessary.”

This was all so surreal. “Are you fucking kidding me?” My throat was tight and it was hard to speak.

The mask cracked. “Is this a game to you?” he asked. A vein on his forehead bulged. “I found you unconscious, half dead and blue in the face. What did you think would happen? You
are going to sign that form.” He stood up. “I have to make a phone call. Your sister’s with a friend of hers. I said I would check in.”

Some time passed. It got light outside, then the sky started to darken again. My mouth tasted like antiseptic and charcoal. My stomach ached still from the pumping. Everything was bitter pure white. The bed in this room was hard and I wanted my clothes back.

Dad read the news on his phone. His chalky black case was worn and he picked at a bit of plastic sticking out of the side. Neither of us breathed much, or at all, really.

“That any good?” he asked me, signing one-handed and clumsily. He didn’t look up. He could barely look me in the eye since his outburst and I couldn’t blame him.

He meant the book that he’d brought me. William Carlos William’s *Paterson*. “It’s okay.” The words blurred on the page and I could barely see. “Anything interesting happen?”

“You don’t want to know.”

I hummed vaguely. We had been waiting for close to an hour for the doctor to come back. To decide my fate.

“Mrs. Hendersen said she would let Jenna stay the night,” he signed. “You know your sister, she said she would take a taxi. I don’t want her home alone. She’s only twelve.”

“You’re right.” I slipped into one of the long essay sections. The words rolled together into a long strand of black on the page. I needed to pee but knew the second I went into the bathroom the doctor would come.

The wall clock ticked steadily. There was no way seconds could be this long. I had been here maybe my entire life. The door caught on the jamb when it opened. The ward doctor, Dr. Hopkins, was an older woman who was unfortunately balding. Her Cat-Eye glasses hung on a
thin blue beaded chain which was missing some links. Her lipstick, cracked around the edges, curved upwards in a practiced smile.

“Hello, Aaron,” she said. “And why are we here today?” As if I was small, a child, a mouse. “Mousy” was a good way to define it.

Dad began to talk to her, sans signing, which wasn’t fair. From this angle I couldn’t read his lips well and was too exhausted to try harder. I already knew my litany of misdeeds. She nodded, her expression serious, mouth pursed just so.

“How long has this been going on for?” She asked me. I looked back and forth between Dad and the doctor.

I didn’t even need to open my mouth. “A month or so,” Dad signed.

“I didn’t ask you,” she said to him.

“I don’t know,” I said. It was true. Time was irrelevant. Thick as honey or slippery as ice.

“Can you guess?”

I shrugged and tried to think. “I dunno… October, maybe.” I opened the app on my phone and looked at all the little scarlet marks I’d made on the calendar to denote the panic attacks. She looked over my shoulder.

“Is this accurate?” she asked me.

“Taking notes used to help.” I really did need to pee. I looked past her at the slim crack of light visible through the door. It was a laminate woodgrain, peeling at the edges, erupting like a sore.

“When did the attacks start to worsen?” She tapped a few notes onto her tablet with a thin metallic stylus.

The pain in my chest sharpened. “Around then.”
“October? Have you been under an unusual amount of stress?”

Heat built behind my eyes bubbling like a kettle. “Not really.”

“He’s just started university,” Dad told her, “And a new job. Helen—his boss, you see—has him working all sorts of hours.”

Dr. Hopkins thought about this. “Is this true?”

I shrugged. The air in the room was so stiff and dry I didn’t know how either of them breathed.

“Could I have a moment alone with him?” she asked Dad.

He hesitated and left us in sky blue stillness.

The doctor picked up the sheet that I’d filled out. The diagnostic questionnaire. In pen. They gave it to all behavioral cases. Cases. I felt like a box, boxed in. The pain in my chest tightened and started to strangle. “Were you honest on this?”

“Too tired to be anything but.” I wanted to fall through the floor, the cheap linoleum with little turquoise flecks, a dense, industrial flavor.

She turned slightly, so I could see her mouth better. “Can we talk about why you took the pills?”

“I don’t know why you ask all this stuff when you already know what happened,” I said.

“I want to make the best plan of treatment for you,” she said. She took off her glasses.

“I didn’t do it on purpose. I’m too tired. I was panicking. I just wanted it to stop.” The lie tasted like tin.

“Stop? Stop forever, maybe?”

I clutched at the rough white sheets and looked at the bag Jenna had packed me, the small cobalt vinyl one I take whenever I go anywhere overnight. It was sad and deflated.
She frowned. “You’re down fifteen pounds from your last checkup in June, according to the records from your primary care. Outwardly—and according to this—you’re depressed.”

Water is wet, I thought. “I don’t know,” I said. “I mean, do I have an active plan? No. But like. Like. It would be so easy. We have like eighty bottles of aspirin because Dad has arthritis and there’s the cough syrup I always keep plenty of in case Jenna gets sick and I still have some of my meds. Theoretically. And the kitchen knives and the razors I use to shave with. It would take like, eight seconds, tops. That doesn’t require much premeditation.”

So I ended up in the nuthouse until Christmas.

Psych wards were fascinating. There was a bureaucratic process that needed to be followed. Dr. Hopkins told Dad that I’d signed off on being committed. At first he nodded, very logically, but then he started crying, which only made me more exhausted.

They gave me my clothes back. After that we went through a long and rather tedious questioning and were shuffled into a cubicle with a thin stretcher bed to wait for a social worker. I still had the bracelet, the IV. It looked very official, tethered there, as if I might forget who “Bateson, Aaron J” was. Or forget more.

Because they were transferring me they didn’t feed us. Dad went down to the cafeteria and brought back two wilted sandwiches. He ate his and half of mine in thirty seconds.

The social worker came just as it was getting dark again. She asked most of the same questions Dr. Hopkins had. She sent Dad away and a nameless, faceless interpreter came to join us. She didn’t ask directly but I told her that Dad didn’t hurt me. It was the truth, and I was almost offended they had asked, even though it must have just been policy.
I hoped the nurses would come and give me a sedative, or a tranquilizer, or some sort of drug. I wasn’t that lucky. Instead when I had an inevitable panic attack all they gave me was a cup of ice cubes and a paper bag.

At 8:07 they finally admitted me. Dad filled out a lot of paperwork. His hands were taking a lot of abuse today, signing, writing, wringing. I wondered if it had aggravated his carpal tunnel. He hugged me goodbye, pressing me smotheringly into his chest from the bed, and promised to visit tomorrow. I knew he wouldn’t. He had too much work to get done before Christmas. Between Christmas and New Year’s the government pretty much shut down and all paperwork had to be in beforehand.

They took my phone and my belt and led me, clutching my jeans to keep them up, into the depths of the ward.

Some of the psych hospitals my friends sometimes got sent to were kind of like therapeutic hotels—looking at the pictures on the Internet, everything was very beautiful and spacey and the rooms were nice. There were gourmet meals. Lounges with video games.

I shared half of a room with someone who burrowed deeply beneath the covers every time I came into the room. It was like every dorm room I’d ever seen in a college tour but smaller and darker—careless furniture, steely gray walls. We were allowed to have some personal affects, but my roommate didn’t. I saw their face a total of three times the whole time I stayed. All I knew about them was that their name was Alex.

These nurses did give me a sleeping pill. I was shocked but grateful, because without it I would never have been able to sleep in such a tight, dim space. It had no smell, which was the most terrifying thing. The air had been thoroughly bleached before they let it through the vents.
The next morning a faceless, nameless interpreter showed up to shadow me through my day. I was taken to a psychiatrist to be prescribed my new round of meds. I had made it to a personal best; six months without medication aside from the emergency Klonopin. Now I was given a new regimen, one designed to “bring my mind back into balance.”

[A series of pill jars on cards, stylized like 1950s ads.]

- **Meclizine**, commonly known by its brand name Dramamine. Prescribed in 2012 for vertigo, first a 12.5 mg little blue oval, then a white 25 mg tablet, three times a day.
  - Side effects include: drowsiness, dry mouth, fatigue, restlessness, confusion, irregular heartbeat, shaking, difficulty urinating, and in extreme cases, seizures.

- **Fluoxetine**, commonly known by its brand name Prozac. Prescribed for depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation. Green and orange cartoon capsule in 40 mg. Once a day with food.
  - Side effects include: nausea, drowsiness, dizziness, anxiety, trouble sleeping, loss of appetite, fatigue, sweating, decreased interest in sex. In extreme cases, can cause fainting, seizures, bloody stool, and vision changes, among others.

- **Escitalopram**, commonly known as Lexapro, a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor. Prescribed for depression and anxiety, 10 mg, little white ovular pill. Once a day with food.
Side effects include: nausea, headaches, dry mouth, trouble sleeping, constipation, fatigue, drowsiness, fainting, seizures, sweating.

- Clonazepam, or Klonopin, prescribed for intense panic attacks, taken as needed, little blue tablets with a K punched through that look like acid tabs, 1 mg.
  - Side effects include suicidal thoughts, loss of coordination, drowsiness, increased salivation. Oh, and hallucinations.

- Zolpidem, or Ambien. Prescribed for sleep. Side effects include sleepiness and dizziness. Serious side effects include memory loss, mood/behavior changes, or sleepwalking.
  - Six pills and you get the seventh free!

Even though I was only eighteen I was in the adult ward. Some of the other patients were young like me, others middle aged or even elderly and in various states of together-ness. There were to be scheduled showers, scheduled meals, two group sessions a day, an hour of rec time, and time with a psychologist or psychiatrist. The nurses explained everything quickly.

The food was exactly as it had been at my high school; cheap, poorly prepared, largely flavorless. I could barely stomach breakfast and when I tried to throw it away, one of the nurses hounded me into finishing. Everything was gray. I was gray.

I had my second visit with the psychiatrist. Only then did I begin to take in her face, her neat sheet of chestnut hair. My interpreter introduced her as Hana. She had a smile like toothpaste commercials. She asked me about side effects even though I’d literally been on the medications about two hours. Her questions poured and poured like rain but didn’t really address anything important. Family history (yes), personal history (yes, and she intended on getting my
records), deterioration. In an hour she did not ask me once how I was feeling. Which, I suppose, was good, because I did not have an answer.

I tried to get out of group therapy but a nurse with a patient smile goaded me into it. There were maybe about twelve of us in stiff blue chairs in a circle. Even with my interpreter the conversation was uninteresting, like the worst episodes of Jerry Springer. I did not need to know about these people’s lives. Hearing about other’s misfortunes did not help me. A lot of the time, it made me worse, because I knew there was nothing I could do.

I think the other patients found some novelty in my situation. After the first day or so people tried to talk to me. “So he’s like really deaf?” a young woman in her early twenties asked the interpreter.

“No, these hearing aids are just accessories,” I said automatically.

“You talk,” she said.

“Yes, we know how to do that,” I said.

“So do you know what music sounds like?”

“I know you sound annoying.”

She left me alone after that.

During rec time I sat and read a book I was supposed to have finished for class, Borges’s Labyrinths. Its bizarre surrealism made more sense to me than what I was going through.

There were payphones in the hallway which were almost always taken by patients. Somebody was supposed to get clearance for me to use a cell phone so I could text my loved ones as well but I’d never hear back about it the whole time I was there.

Morning. A grubby old shower. A male nurse watched me shave. Wait in line for my daily meds with the rest of the patients, all of us groggy from our sleeping pills. Some of them dipped in and out of programs when their illnesses got too intense, electing to stay in bed. I would have done so myself if the thought of being in that room another minute was bearable but it wasn’t.

Breakfast. This time, it was scrambled eggs made from that dry yellow stuff in a carton and soggy toast. The coffee was very weak and burnt. The cafeteria felt a bit like high school, with people knit together in cliques, though it was impossible to tell how the cliques were formed. My interpreter wasn’t on the clock yet and I was too tired to read lips, so I elected to sit alone. I wondered if this would give me some sort of negative remark on my record.

The interpreter showed up. We muddled through some small talk. Group, AM session. More bullshit. A few people cried. I studied the clothes they wore. Cotton sundresses better suited for summer. A translucent lavender blouse a middle-aged mom wore, unironed because there were no such facilities here. A lot of sweatpants. Mostly sweatpants, in various states of wear, sickly green, washed-out black, navy with polyester pills in the knees. My own clothing was what I always wore in winter. Knit sweater, slacks, laced shoes. Jenna hadn’t quite packed the clothing I liked. She had to have gone through my underwear drawer, I realized, and I fixated on that embarrassment for the remainder of the hour.

Lunch. Microwaved burgers and canned corn. Soggy beige fries. I wasn’t really hungry. Today I was nauseous, one of the many side effects I couldn’t keep straight in my brain. It wasn’t the type of nausea that demanded immediate action, but a low, simmering, non-threatening kind that made me swallow too much.

I didn’t see my psychiatrist today. There were too many of us to have a whole hour each day, which begged the question—why was I even here? Apparently there were usually two of
them but one was on vacation. In lieu, I could join an activity. I could have an extra hour of rec
time, or I could join arts and crafts. I didn’t realize that I would be able to do something halfway
enjoyable here and chose the latter.

Arts and crafts were sort of a free-for-all. There was an instructor who could help you
make something, or you could just do what you want. I noticed the wire and the tub of beads and
I spent an hour with my mind mercifully clean stringing patterns onto the coil.

Group PM session. Boredom. I was starting to feel lonely too. I was missing Jenna. More
than that I wanted to apologize to her for having to see me like that. I was her big brother. I was
supposed to keep my shit together. I had been so close to getting away with it.

Dinner. Tough pot roast and mealy sweet potatoes. Dinner ebbed into visiting hours.
Everyone’s faces changed immediately when they saw their friends and loved ones. Softening,
opening, blooming. Occasionally, crumpling with anger or grief at being caught in their misery.

Dad showed up ten minutes into visiting. His face was pink with cold from outside.
“Sorry, parking was a nightmare.” Despite how angry I was with him, the tension in me eased
when I saw a familiar person signing. I even let him hug me. He reeked like cigarettes.

“Jenna’s not coming?”

“She wanted to, but she couldn’t get out of basketball practice.” He shook his head. We
sat on some of the stiff old chairs in the visiting room. “I said I would give her some sort of note,
but she wouldn’t take it.”

He didn’t have to explain why. She didn’t want to let everyone know I was a nut. In a
way, she was protecting my privacy, and I admired her for it.
“So how are you adjusting?” he asked. His expression was soft enough to invite confidence but I saw how calculated it was. This was hard for him too, almost impossible. I could see how much effort it took to maintain eye contact with me.

I exhaled. I could be funny, make jokes about the food, poke fun at my interpreter. Or I could be sad, lament why I was here, try to verbalize how humiliated I felt and how spectacularly bored I was. I didn’t really know how I felt. The med fog was starting to creep in. “It’s very… disciplined,” I signed. “They keep us moving.”

“That’s good. That’ll help get you motivated.”

A young girl passed us and grabbed a board game from a shelf on the far wall.

“No, they play those all day,” I signed. “I’d rather just talk.” But what was there to say? So much, and yet, I couldn’t find anything at all.

For a moment he drummed his hands together. “There is one thing I should tell you up front,” he signed. “Your mother knows.”

“What?”

“They have her in the hospital records. She’s still got the same phone number. The social worker called her the morning after they admitted you.” A fine sheen of sweat covered him, despite the fact that it was freezing in here.

“You’re shitting me.”

He exhaled. “I told her not to come—”

“Like she would come anyway.”
“She is very concerned about you. She wanted me to tell you… well… she said she loves you.” This all felt, surreal and a little blurry, like I was looking through panes of very old glass, the kind you see at antique shops, all melty at the bottom.

“This is serious, Aaron,” Dad continued. “As… strained as things are, it’s horrifying to find out that one of your children wants to end their own life. And sobering.” He tugged a strand of hair out of his face. “She says… it’s given her a new perspective. She wants to get to know you kids again.”

“She gave up that right when she left.” My mind was speeding too much to take anything in.

“I told her that I couldn’t make the decision for you.”

“Frankly, tell her I don’t give a damn. Did she talk about the fucking cat again?”

He shook his head. “For about ten minutes. Apparently, it’s getting quite fat. Makes me never want to see one again.”

“Right? Poor thing.”

For a moment I looked around the room at all the chatter. My heart was beating fast in an unpleasant way. I remembered my mother kissing me, on the forehead, right before she left. She didn’t say why or where she was going. Wasn’t interested in any semblance of custody. She was just gone, taking our old Subaru with her. That was three years ago. Wasn’t trying to kill myself another form of abandonment? I shook my head.

“What’s wrong?” Dad asked.


“Yes, well, she did always have a soft spot for animals,” he signed.

“What about work? Did Helen call?”
“Yes, and I tried to explain as much as I could,” he signed. “She said it’s fine, to come back when you’re ready. She’ll hold the job for you.”

I’d almost rather be fired. Of course he had to tell her something and she was smart. She would have figured it out by now. Soon the whole world would know what I’d done and I’d have it hanging over my head forever. I was that kind of person.

“Aaron, why is it you work so much?” he asked. “Your college fund pays for your school, and you do so much housework I’m more than happy to give you an allowance. If it does this much to you, then by all means, take a break. I never got the impression you liked working with people all that much.”

I shook my head when I processed the words. “I could ask you the same,” I signed.

He considered this. “This isn’t the sort of work I can drop. My clients… well, I promised I would help them.”

“So Jenna and I are… what, exactly?” I wasn’t angry, just tired and groggy and achy. The bullshit was all clattering around my ears.

His British sensibilities and years of courtroom etiquette were keeping his face smooth but the tips of his ears had turned red. “I realize I have not exactly been… present. I am going to try and be better from here on out.”

“One of these days, it might be too late. I’m just saying.”

The mask slipped and I saw real hurt but I couldn’t bring myself to feel bad about it. “I don’t want to fight,” he signed.

“No, I agree,” I signed crisply. “I’ll go back to being a good kid. Alright?”

“…Tell me about your parents,” Hana said in our second session.
I’d been through enough therapy to know this diagnostic tool inside and out. Parents were always the ultimate source of fuck-upperty in a person’s life. Didn’t matter if the patient was chemically depressed or if they’d gone through other shit. It always boiled back to the spawners.

“…My dad’s an immigration lawyer and my mom’s a trucker.” I saw school forms in my head, the neat box where you had to fill in occupations.

“Do you have a good relationship with them?”

The interpreter, a young blonde woman, had eyes that were sharp and observant, as they needed to be in her profession, and I wondered how much of this would boil over to cocktail conversation. Hey, guys, I’ve been interpreting for this seriously annoying kid lately... I swallowed. “Well, they’re divorced, so I don’t hear from Mom much.” Aside from her piles and piles of unanswered letters. “Dad… works a lot.”

“I see,” she said. She didn’t have enough time to really go into it. The next patient would be in in fifteen minutes. We had a lot more to process. “Any other family?”

“My sister, Jenna. She’s twelve. Thirteen in March. She’s so smart.” Thinking of seeing my sister again was keeping me together.

“I take it you two have a good relationship, then?”

The same damn phrase she’d used for my parents. “Yes, it was.”

“Was? Is she—”

“She’s alive,” I said. My heart prickled. “Oh, God, no. She’s fine.”

“Do you have at least one friend you can trust?” The psychiatrist’s expression was simulated warmth and I couldn’t buy it.

“Yes. Charlie and Saima. We met in high school.” Partial honesty was key. Tell them enough to keep them happy, enough to get them to move you through treatment.

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 33
“So tell me a little bit about what you’ve been feeling,” she said. She crossed her legs, a smooth, systematic motion.

She didn’t mean what I had been going through. “Well I’ve been depressed on and off since I was fourteen,” I said. “I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder and chronic anxiety when I was fifteen. It was managed with medication and cognitive behavioral therapy until about six months ago.”

Something resembling real emotion flickered across her face and I saw her scribble something down on a canary-yellow legal pad. I wondered if I’d been too clinical. “Why’d you stop?”

“I wasn’t happy with my therapist. I meant to find another, but time got away from me. Then my scripts ran out, and I could never seem to get to the doctor to get new ones. I figured I’d just see how it’d go.” That much was true. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. I’d read somewhere that the end of puberty could shake juvenile depression. It was probably bullshit, of course.

“Then it’s good we’re getting your mind back in balance,” she said. “The medications… well, sometimes depression really does start out chemical. Once your chemistry is back up to scratch, you can begin to really work on these issues.”

Balance. Balance, to me, was trying to spin too many plates at once. It was impossible to maintain for long. But I made my mouth smile pleasantly. “You’re right,” I said. “That helps me feel better.”
The minimum period of commitment in a psych ward was five days. I was pretty sure that the form I had signed told me how long my sentence would be but I couldn’t remember clearly. If I performed well, took all my meds, and told Hana more half-truths, I could be out in no time.

Jenna came to visit me the third day after I was first hospitalized. I didn’t know how to gauge her reaction. She might even be mad. But when she saw me she hugged me for a long time. I breathed in the sickly candy smell of her shampoo and felt for the first time relieved that I had survived. “What the hell,” she signed roughly. “What were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry,” I told her. I had been toeing honesty the past few days but now it gushed through me. “Jenna, I’m so sorry that you had to see—”

She held up a hand and shushed me. “Don’t you dare leave me too.”

“I won’t,” I told her.

“I need you to promise me.” Her brown eyes glimmered and she blinked quickly. “You promise, you can’t break it.”

I couldn’t lie to Jenna. I wanted to tell her how unsure I was that I could do this. I couldn’t lie to her but she was still a kid and I didn’t want to hurt her any more than I already had. “I promise.”

Her face broke into a pained smile. “Dad said you were bored so I brought these.” She handed me a small plastic knapsack. I opened the drawstring and found four battered paperback books. I recognized the spines as the first books in her favorite series. “Now you have no choice but to finally read them.”

These books meant so much to her. It was her way of showing she cared. “I’ve got nothing but time,” I signed airily. “It better not be shite.”
I did end up caving and reading them. Jenna left me a note tucked in between the publication and title pages.

Big bro,

I can’t believe you’ve worked for months in a bookstore but you haven’t TOUCHED The Waybringer. I wish I were you and I could read it all again for the first time.

I love you so much and I can’t wait to have you home again. Dad’s an awful cook.

--Jenna

It was exactly the sort of fantasy series I used to read as a kid. The plot revolved around a pair of suspiciously young teenagers responsible for the fate of humanity—as though there were any other plots for a young adult fantasy story. The prose was clumsy and I could see the plot points coming miles ahead but there was a certain charm and consistency to the world of the book that I found myself enjoying. It wasn’t exactly scintillating or groundbreaking but there was decent enough commentary on the lack of agency in kids, especially because the kids were usually abandoned by their parents when they showed signs of magic. I understood Jenna’s deep obsession with this series probably more than I wanted to.

The next day in the psych ward ground on. There was something in the routine that first comforted me, then began to irritate me. Wakeupshowerbreakfastgrouplunchartrecvisitingbed. The meds were beginning to slither through my bloodstream. Still, I worried. If I wanted to get out by this Friday I had a lot to push through.

I was starting to miss the sun. More than that I missed privacy. I’d never had to share a room before. Even though my roommate didn’t talk to me and did little more than lie in bed with covers over his head, his presence was unshakeable. I was never alone in this place, even in the college-style showers. Someone was always watching, listening in, their consciousness crushing
mine. It wasn’t limited to the other patients but also the nurses, and most importantly my interpreter.

I’d never really been in a situation that required extensive interpreting. Even college had felt different than this, more impersonal, Louise more of a helpful friend than anything. In the real world I was usually able to get along well enough with lip reading and talking. My boss was Deaf. My friends were Deaf and hard of hearing. Jenna was Deaf and Dad signed. I hadn’t felt so isolated and yet so scrutinized at the same time.

6.

“I heard you’ve been belligerent towards the other patients,” Hana said the next time I saw her.

“Did she complain about that?” I asked. I hated this room, the calculated way it had been designed. The ugly old mahogany desk. The stupid psych textbooks on a bookshelf. The industrial gray carpeting that ran through this place. The chair that hurt my butt. They didn’t take the patients outside in winter and I was feeling cooped up. It had been so long since I’d breathed fresh air. The bleached stuff in here barely qualified as real. “She was asking ignorant questions about me being Deaf. Most of the time… I’ve been keeping to myself.”

“Why is that?” she asked in that maddeningly slow way of hers.

“It’s just easier,” I said. “I really don’t want to stay here that long anyway.”

“It’s not supposed to be a race to the finish,” Hana said. The interpreter’s eyes bore into mine but somehow didn’t make contact. “This is about getting well.”

“Getting well,” I repeated. I could feel something hot like nausea rising in me. “How long have you worked here?”

“Ten years,” she said.
“So, then, you’ve spent quite a lot of time here, in this ward, with that window.” I looked outside at the gray parking lot far below. “But at the end of the day you still get to clock out, get in your car, and go home to your spouse or your kids or your pets. You get to take a break. Watch TV. Go for a walk. Maybe you go to the bar with friends. Who knows.”

She waited for me to keep talking.

“I don’t know how you do it. I’ve been here three days and already I’ve had enough.”

“Why is that?” she asked.

I tasted metal. “I mean, it would be enough if I were a normal patient,” I said. “The shitty food. Group therapy, my God. Every day being so numbingly the same. These awful lights. But it’s like. I am never alone.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Wouldn’t it bother you? To not even be able to take a shit without another human being less than ten feet away from you?” My hands were trembling. I didn’t know how to stop this torrent of nonsense. “I can just feel the stress leaking off of everyone. It’s like… poison gas. I’m supposed to talk about all that with you. How I feel. Why I did what I did. I don’t have an answer for you, and I don’t think you really care. You have too many people on your plate. Even so, how could I tell you when there’s always someone right there hearing everything I say? And yeah, she’s sworn to be confidential, but I don’t like admitting these things to myself, much less two perfect strangers.”

“Do you have thoughts like these often?” Hana asked. “What is it like to be you, Aaron? What is it like to be inside your head?”

The question was meant to de-escalate but this anger could only go up. “I can’t do this with you people all staring at me.” I was jittery and cold.
“We’re only trying to help you, Aaron.”

“How can I believe that?”

She leaned forward slightly. “I can see how anxious you are,” she said. “Why don’t you take a deep breath? Check in with yourself?”

But inside of me is knotted up so painfully and unraveling all at the same time. Whatever instinct had kept me upright since I’d gotten in had failed me, leaving me the stripped raw kid who’d eaten all those pills.

“Surviving a suicide attempt can be traumatic,” she said. “Plus the new environment, the new medications, along with a language barrier… you must be so overwhelmed right now. And it’s okay to be. You don’t have to have it together, Aaron.”

I left the session without another word and went back to my room. I got into bed. And even though I knew my roommate could hear me cry I couldn’t stop myself. I knew why he stayed in bed all day. It was just so much easier.

I cried myself to sleep and woke up disoriented. The room wasn’t quite dark and the door wasn’t quite closed. A figure was sitting at my desk. There was a night light in here, harsh LEDs, as if the darkness might make our dreams scarier.

Red hair. Genesis shirt. Dmitri blinked at me, startled. My heart leapt into my throat. Sleep weighed heavily in me, making it hard to move. I shook my head, blinked, trying to make him budge.

“You’re here,” he signed. “It’s really you.”

I lay back down and drew the covers over my head. Stayed like that until I needed more air. When I looked back up, I saw my roommate for the first time, sitting at the lone desk in the room, staring away from me into space. He turned on the lamp on the desk.
“You talk in your sleep,” he said. He had braces and they changed the shape of his lips.

I shook my head. I wasn’t entirely sure we were actually speaking.

“Some pretty weird stuff,” the boy continued.

“I didn’t know,” I said.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t.” The boy turned in the chair, making it swing back and forth. “I don’t sleep normally anyway, so it doesn’t keep me up. Don’t worry.” He looked a little like Dmitri. I could see it in the shape of his jaw. He was maybe a year or two older than me. “I think you were looking for someone in your dream. You kept asking where they’d gone.”

I bit my lip.

“Pretending you’re above it all isn’t going to get you out of here,” the boy said. “Trust me, I know.”

“I’m not in denial,” I said automatically. “I mean, I know what kind of shit I’m in.”


I exhaled. “I’m going back to bed,” I said. “Can you shut the light?”

I wasn’t released on day five, or on days six through nine.

Every day I could swear I felt the meds taking hold of me bit by bit. I was feeling numb, sleepy. In the art sessions I was finding it harder and harder to make cohesive patterns of things. I tried to keep telling myself that they were going to help, that they would make it easier, that my
real self was too much for my brain to handle. That truth in itself was a lot to unpack, especially because all of me was shattered.

Because only family and spouses were allowed to visit, Charlie and Saima sent me letters. Their tone was optimistic but the tension was woven into the paper. I was going to be getting a fucking earful from the both of them. They had to be so disappointed in me, mostly, I knew, because I had kept all the thoughts and the nonsense and the chaos to myself. How was I supposed to tell them? Charlie worked a full-time shitty job doing manual labor, and he was depressed himself. How could I burden him with something else? And Saima? Whiz kid, overachiever, part-time volunteer at her mosque? She barely had time to sleep, much less talk me through my shit. Life was so much easier when they thought I was okay.

And I wanted so badly to be okay, at least in the sense that it would solve my problems. But being okay wasn’t easy. It would be a lot easier to be dead.

Hana took to sending the interpreter away during our sessions. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to make this simpler for you,” she said. “I can write, or type, if that helps.”

I shook my head.

“How often do you feel in your body?” she asked me.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when you look in a mirror, do you think, “that’s me”? Can you really feel yourself moving as you go through your day?”

“I prefer not to,” I said.

“Why not?”

“It’s way too exhausting.” This honesty was grating. “Everything is. It—it just is.” My body wanted to sag towards the floor. My back ached.

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 41
“What would make things better for you?”

I shook my head. “I've tried to think but I can't seem to come up with anything. My mind is so… muddy.”

“It can happen when you’re depressed.”

“I know. I know that.”

“Can you rely on the people in your life, Aaron?” she asked. These questions all skewed in opposite directions. She needed a picture of me, of my mind. How she would get that when I didn’t myself know was insane. “Does someone ever take care of you?”

“Well, I’m eighteen.”

“That’s not what I said. Doesn’t matter how old you are, everyone needs someone to take care of you sometime.”

So many of these cliché lines. So much of it unmeant.

“Do you ever feel loved?”

The puppet strings inside my body twisted and cracked. “It’s hard to really feel anything.”

“Yes. That makes sense.”

Every session came to be like this. What I felt was apparently all normal for what I was going through, like I didn’t fucking know that. I was going to be normal. I was going to be safe. Whatever.

That next week the ward started putting up Christmas decorations, cheap dollar store mutations. The nurses dragged out a dusty old artificial tree and let anybody who wanted to decorate it. The activity was supposed to help us feel better but instead made me feel hyperaware of the fact that time was pissing away in here. And yet every day was the same.
On the tenth day the doctors above deigned that I was fit to release. It wasn’t average practice, they told me, but they needed the bed. Someone, apparently, was worse.

I was relieved.

“I’ve put in a referral with a colleague of mine,” Hana explained. “Normally he doesn’t work with juveniles, but he does practice in ASL. I think you’ll find comfort in that. He’s agreed to see you day after tomorrow for intake.” She handed me the referral form. “I really wish you the best of luck.”

I was given back my belt and phone. I packed my bag. And then I turned my back on that place.

This is what I know about medicine.

You go to a doctor because you’re sick and you don’t feel well and you want to get better. The doctors ask you some questions. You tell them the truth. They ask you some more questions and do some tests. The tests all come out normal. They send you home. You don’t feel any better. Start to feel worse. You Google cancer symptoms, freak when you realize some things correlate. So you go back to the doctor. The doctor asks you some more questions, does some more tests. If you can afford the tests. Everything is normal. They recommend you to a specialist. The specialist runs more tests (insurance bills pouring money down the drain). The specialist says everything came back normal. Sends you to another specialist. The people around you think you’re pretending, that you’re making it up. The next specialist is impossible to get a hold of. Then you’re on a wait list. Then you sit for hours in the waiting room to see them. They see you for fifteen minutes. Prescribe more tests. But they get it, get something, and the relief you feel is painful because you know you didn’t just make this up.
Then the doctor gives you pills, pills of every color, the-this, the-that, to take away the vertigo, anti-inflammatories. The doctors tells you that you should brush up on your sign language. Things will start getting quiet soon.

Throw in depression and a good long swallow of anxiety. Your body starts to feel too crowded with you and everything in it. It’s easier to let things fade, to take the pills, body-meds and the psych-meds that make the world soft and slippery, and to do as little as possible.

The agreement in writing was technically conditional. To be freed, I had to see the personal therapist twice a week, go to a group therapy once a week, and keep up with my meds. If I didn’t, and if the personal therapist deemed I was struggling, I would come right back. I wanted to know where they expected me to find time to do these things, especially with work and the new semester would start in three weeks. I was already behind in all my classes and needed to find a way to make up those finals. That meant I’d have to overload myself in the spring in order to catch up, especially if I wanted to be able to transfer in time for the fall. Gallaudet, the Deaf university, the standard the high school teachers had been up our butts about achieving. Going to class felt very perfunctory like. That too was unreal.

Dad drove me home. We got stuck in traffic on the highway and sat in a freezing rain, which left the world looking shiny and slightly warped like an old record. I couldn’t wait to get in the shower and get the hospital grossness off of me. Industrial showers could only make you so clean. I had the feeling that we were supposed to talk about something and I didn’t want to.

“…I’ll say it once,” he signed finally. “Why didn’t you ask for help?”

I hesitated. “Who was there to ask?”

“Well—me.”
I shook my head. “Look, it’s not a big deal.”

“I don’t know how you can think that, Aaron. This isn’t just a visit to the psychologist, you tried to—”

I looked out the window. “I panicked,” I said. “I didn’t want to bother anyone. It happens all the time anyway.” I didn’t watch his response.

When we finally got home a full half hour later than I’d thought, everything looked a little different. The neighbors’ Christmas lights wilted in the rain—some glinted weakly, red and green and white, smooth rounded edges in the sharp downpour. Our own house was dark. It was too much effort this year, we’d decided. Dad and I were too busy to get everything down and put it up. Besides, it was better for the environment that way, or so we told ourselves. Still. It looked lonely and barren next to the other monolithic homes on our street.

Dad slipped off his coat and hung it on the rack by the door. “It’s been difficult for us, without you,” he signed. “Take off your wet things, you’re dripping everywhere.”

“Where’s Jenna?”

“Playoffs began tonight,” he signed. “She’s point guard. She was distraught that she missed you coming home. She should be back in a few hours.”

The house seemed cavernous. The pale linen blue paint on the walls was dim and musty, the stairs slipped upwards, hardwood creaky, structure blunt and impersonal. An old epithet hung on the wall near the door, partially obscured by coats: “Live laugh love.” I wished Dad would just let us remodel the place, get some new furniture, anything to ease the bleakness.

I shambled over to the kitchen table. The air was stale and a little dusty. The scent of tea lingered. Dad put up the kettle and made eggs for both of us.
“Must feel nice to be home,” he signed. “I’m no first rate chef, but at least I’m better than what you had there.” The kitchen lighting seemed yellow and blinding. I looked at the chipped woodgrain of the tabletop. This space was so big for three people. We didn’t entertain. There was no need for the double oven or the island which crowded the center of the kitchen. My father looked small standing there at the stovetop and the cherry cabinets seemed tacky.

It all tasted a little off. Burnt. The medicine made me ravenous. New pills, little ones, I was up to five now. I needed to start keeping a punch card. Six pills and you get the seventh one free!

“I know this isn’t your fault,” he signed. “But… the thought of losing you… is almost too much. Especially for Jenna. She looks up to you.”

I felt weak. I leaned against my palms.

“I want her to see a counselor as well,” he signed. “It might do us all a little good.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Aaron.”

I sighed. “It’s true. I messed up. I didn’t want to get anyone involved.” I could barely feel myself speaking. I ran my finger over the rim of the thin blue plate.

“You’ve done nothing wrong. You got help when you needed it.”

Made me wonder what would have happened if he hadn’t found me when he had, if the drugs had trickled a little more into my body. I shook my head.

“Why don’t you have a cup of tea with me while we wait for her to come home?”

He always forgot that I hated tea. “I’ve got to go clean my room.”

“Don’t worry about it. I took care of it a while ago.”
He made the tea. I took some pills. We sat in the dusty living room. It was freezing in here. I picked up the chenille blanket from the ottoman and tucked it around my body.

“Shall we watch some TV?” he asked. “Is there anything you’ve been missing?”

“No. You can pick.”

He chose a Discovery Channel documentary about the deep ocean and we watched in silence for a long time. Admittedly, it was nice to turn my brain to something and not have to focus. Made me wonder why the ward hadn’t had more TVs.

The last time I’d been to the ocean I was tiny. Mom and Dad were still together and Mom was pregnant with Jenna, though her belly wasn’t yet visible. It was Jones’ Beach down on Long Island, packed with tourists. Mom played with me in the shallow water. The salty waved washed over both of us, tugged at the straps of my Spongebob lifejacket.

Little waterbug, Mom called me. We even got Dad to join us for a while, tearing him away from his book in the shade of the parasol. They dipped me in and out of the waves and each time I asked to go again.

We haven’t gone anywhere since.

“Before I forget,” Dad signed. “There’s a letter for you.”

He didn’t need to tell me who from.

“You should probably answer this one,” he signed gently. “At least let her know you’ve pulled through.”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t think so.”

“. . . All right. I suppose.” He pressed his hands together for a moment. “Someone’s at the door. That must be Jenna.”
He’d barely had time to say that before she was bounding in and running over to me. She squeezed me tight in her arms. She smelled like outside and winter and sweat and that powdery-smelling deodorant marketed towards teen girls. “I can’t believe you’re home,” she signed. “Did you read the books?”

“I did,” I signed.

She smiled. “Will you make me penne ala vodka? I’ve missed your cooking.”

“Missed my cooking more than you missed me,” I signed.

She stuck her tongue out. “Please?”

“Jenna, leave your brother alone,” Dad signed.

“I don’t mind,” I signed. I actually didn’t. Seeing Jenna had made it all a little more bearable somehow. She sat with me in the kitchen as I put up the pasta, shelled the shrimp, fried the garlic and cooked down the spinach. She chatted all about the past two weeks, drama with her friends, what was going on in school.

“Oh, we won the game,” she signed shyly. “We’re gonna go to regionals.”

“That’s amazing,” I signed. “I’m really proud of you.”

“You too,” she signed.

She was proud of me for not killing myself. The little bit of peace her presence had brought me dissolved.

She frowned. “The pasta’s boiling over.”

My medicated sleep was heavy. My bed under the little window was softer than I remembered and smelled like wool and dirty laundry. So did the rest of the space. The beginnings of dust covered everything, especially the art supplies, which were thrown all over the floor in a way...
that made me feel itchy. I hadn’t meant to make such a mess, it had happened in the chaos. The light shining through the room above my head was dull with a weary rain. I turned on my phone for the first time in over a week.

There was a hailstorm of messages from my boss and a few friends. Saima and Charlie, my best friends from the time before Dmitri, had both panicked. Their texts made me anxious; all caps, emphatic, worried. Even Helen, my boss, had become concerned after the first few days when I hadn’t showed up. People on Facebook had been looking for me, until everything—mysteriously—quieted. Saima and Charlie’s pointed reassurances meant that Dad had told them.

Mortification swept through me, intense and bitter like I was about to throw up. They hadn’t had to worry. I really wasn’t worth it.

I messaged the group chat. Back from the dead. Merry Christmas. What year is it?

LISTEN, MISTER, WE HAVE TO TALK, Saima typed. CAN YOU COME OVER?? I NEED TO SEE U. ASAP.

We were so worried, Charlie wrote. You disappeared, dude. Couldn’t you, like, shoot someone a text?

Charles, Saima wrote.

What? I’m right. At least we would have known you were alive.

Sorry, I wrote. It all happened so fast.

You better be. A winky emoji. Glad you’re okay. I want to hear about it, though, if that’s okay. Did they at least give you good drugs? Charlie asked.

No. Unfortunate.

Damn.

I know, right?
Well if you don’t come over, I’m coming over THERE, Saima wrote. So help me God.

Is I good or is it good. I don’t care if you look like shit.

Bitch got work, Charlie wrote.

I didn’t ask YOU, sir.

I wasn’t in jail anymore. Sure. Come whenever.

You know I will, Charlie wrote, with another winky emoji.

What the fuck is wrong with you, Saima wrote. Bye, losers.

I went downstairs and tried to have some breakfast. The milk in the fridge was expired gloppy white and we’d eaten all of the eggs last night. I made myself some instant oatmeal.

I sat on the couch as I tried to stomach my breakfast and tried to find something to do. Hardly anybody came in here anymore. Much like my bedroom, it was thick with dust, and I sneezed. I leave the house for a week and it all falls apart. Shelves of books, most unread, some there just for show—cookbooks, gardening books, coffee table books with lists and lists of interesting anecdotes and facts. Others, at the bottom, half-hidden by the leg of the heavy black leather couch, were more well-loved. An ancient dictionary whose cover flopped off when I picked it up. A set of encyclopedias which had been given to Dad for his secondary school graduation.

The books didn’t provide much diversion. I turned to the TV, only to find that there was nothing on. My usual go-to, the Food Network, was playing a show with a host I hated. I struggled to connect the old Wii so I could at least watch Netflix but there were so many cobwebs back behind the massive entertainment unit that I couldn’t help but imagine them twining farther and farther up my arms and dragging me under. I gave up and went on my phone instead.
Much like always, Saima showed up forty-five minutes early. From the window I watched her bolt up the front steps. Her quilted bag all swung over one shoulder. I had barely cracked the door before she squeezed me tight in her arms. She smelled like laundry and ginger and coffee and I hadn’t realized just how much I’d missed her.

“For the record,” she signed when she let go of me, “When I said that it didn’t matter how you looked, I was hoping you’d at least brush your hair.” She was of course immaculately put together, blouse ironed, headscarf clean, not even a smudge on her heavy black glasses. She picked at my hair—in its natural indecisive curly state—to look at the damage.

“It’s been an odd week,” I signed.

She reached into her purse and pulled out a Tupperware container. “My mom and I made jalebis. You know, that cookie you liked the last time you came over. I figured your pantry was pretty well raided.”

“You’re too good to me.”

She stuck her nose in the air. “I know.”

We sat in the living room and ate some of the cookies she’d brought. They were so light as to dissolve on the tongue, like lace, and I felt tears in my eyes. It’d been a while since I’d tasted something so good.

“I’m sorry,” she signed. “But what happened?”

“I’m surprised you were that patient, to be honest.” I sighed. “I… I felt it coming for a while,” I signed. “I think. But it seemed to happen all of a sudden, you know, the jaws clamping down on me. I was having attacks every day for a while, sometimes two or three… and with work and class and everything… I guess I freaked.”

Her brown eyes were very wide behind her heavy glasses. “Freaked how?”

Living Strange by Allison Giese 51
I didn’t speak. I ate another cookie.

“What did you do?” She pressed.

“I took too many pills.”

She was silent and still. A girl made into a statue.

Guilt gnawed at my stomach and suddenly the cookies didn’t taste too good. “I still feel weird. Not like me. It’s the medicine, I think.”

She dabbed at her lips with a napkin. A thin print of plum-colored lipstick stained the paper. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I… I don’t know. I honestly don’t know. We were all so busy… It was easier not to. But it… it just kept growing. These are really good. You’re going to have to give me the recipe.”

She rolled her eyes. “Aaron, listen. This sort of thing, it’s… it’s a big deal. You weren’t okay then, you’re not okay now. We’re best friends. Why don’t you feel like you can come to me? Pretending isn’t going to make it go away.”

“I don’t know,” I told her. “I tried to, but…” Everything was always fine fine fine. The inside of my head was burnt, charred, seared. I wished I could toss my brain into the garbage.

She sighed. “No, you didn’t. I know you. Anything icky happens and you put on your white person smile and you lie.” She squeezed my hand. “I care about you, Aaron. I wish you could tell yourself the truth.”

The words sneaked out of me. “Me too,” I signed. “But I don’t know how.” I took a deep breath. “It was… really weird in there. Not like Four Winds. Four Winds is nice. It was very gray. The strangest thing was that nothing smelled. Not the food. Not even the bathrooms. I’m not convinced it happened, really.” It was true. Time had stretched itself thin in there, had become light as air.
She crossed her legs. “I almost had a heart attack.”

“I… I know. I feel like shit.”

She touched my shoulder. “It’s all right,” she signed. “As long as you get better. Because if you don’t, I’m sending you right back there.”

I flinched. “Death would be more merciful.”

“Just eat your pity cookies.”

“So they are pity cookies.”

She winked.

7.

Saima left soon after dark. She had to go to mosque. Soon after Charlie texted me. I was fairly sure neither of them wanted me to be alone and that made me feel a little more solid.

*Just got out of work. Want to come over? Ann’s at their girlfriend’s.*

I didn’t feel like driving all the way over there. But I’d missed him too. I told Dad as he left to get Jenna from practice.

“You’re going out?” he asked.

“Charlie wants to see me,” I signed. “You know he can’t drive.”

He bit his lip and buttoned his jacket. “All right. I guess I’ll take you over there. Though you can’t stay too long.”

“I can take myself.”

“I’m not sure I want you out on your own.”

My face burned. “I’m not going to go off and hurt myself, Dad.”

“I can’t be sure of that.” He shook his head. “It’s too soon. I’d be much more comfortable if you were here.”
It was more dangerous here than it would ever be at Charlie’s. “I’ll be fine. I promise. Besides. You’ve got so much work.”

His eyes were the color of a coffee stain. “Text me when you get there.”

My car, a shitty, old gold Buick, felt heavier than usual when I turned onto the main road. It had no heat and I shivered in my coat. The roads were phlegmy with rain. The seat had slid farther back than ever on its broken track and the seat belt tightened around my throat. My breath fogged the windshield. I wiped away the condensation.

Charlie lived in a not-so-nice neighborhood at the edge of town with an old friend of ours, Ann, in an aging Victorian, split into a duplex. The porch was rotting. Paint flicked off in chips from the graying siding and lay sadly on top of the snow. One of the windows was broken and a black garbage bag covered it. A moldy armchair sat on the neighbor’s side of the porch. On their side, Ann’s bike was chained up. It was a rusty, dark green affair and stuffing flecked off of the seat. A water-spotted light glared into my eyes, blinding me.

Charlie came to the door before I could text him. “Oh, thank God,” he signed. “Get your ass in here.”

The apartment was the same as it always was. The remnants of Ann’s weed hung heavily in the air. A few lights attempted to break the gloom but the house was not built for light. A musty brown shag carpet covered the staircase up to the bedrooms and looked like it had never been vacuumed since it had been installed. I could see the stale blue kitchenette and the dishes piled in the sink. Coats and sweaters overflowed from the hooks on the wall. Tacky, swollen linoleum filled the bottom floor of the apartment and it creaked under my feet.

“Look at you,” Charlie signed. He touched my face like Saima had. I was a ghost now. A relic. I felt about as transparent. “Are you hungry? I can order us some food.”
“I don’t need to eat,” I signed. “Let’s just… hang out.”

We went up to his bedroom. It was the smaller of the two, as it had been a walk-in closet to Ann’s room many years ago. The tiny twin bed was unmade and its balding navy blue blanket matched the dark, slick paint on the wall. A dresser and chair were crammed into the rest of the space, and most of Charlie’s clothes hung in a small alcove next to his bed. I touched the wall next to me. The funny popcorn texture was reassuring and I rubbed it absently.

Charlie turned on the small lamp. I slipped off my shoes and sat on the hard bed.

“Want a drink? I still have some Mikes Hard Lemonade up here. They’re practically chilled still anyway.” He flicked on a tiny space heater and the lamp’s cast flickered. “You really do look awful.”

“So nice of you to notice. I lost weight, they said. I don’t know how.” It was true. My body felt different, sharper, less efficient. I could see pale blue rivers of veins in my hands. I’d forgotten to take off the hospital bracelet.

“You lost it, I found it.” He patted his belly. “Are you cold? You’re shivering.” He pulled a blanket from next to the bed and wrapped it around my shoulders. I buried my face in it. It smelled like shampoo and dust, the weave rough against my face.

“That was pretty intense, huh?”

“I was careless.”

“Yeah. You were.” He leaned back into the wall. “What was it like?”

I could have told him. The words crowded my tongue and flooded my wrists and I felt them struggling to get out. My hands were shaking. Instead, I signed, “Can we… can we sleep together?”
He hesitated. “Are you… are you feeling okay enough?” I slid my hand through his hair. It was still wet from his shower but it was grounding to know that this was another human being. He continued. “I thought… I thought something was off by the way you were talking last time. I should have known.”

“It’s okay. I barely knew myself.”

He closed his eyes and leaned into my touch. “How can I say no to you?” He said out loud. He kissed me. His lips were dry but soft and full. I needed this to clear my head. It was true, I hadn’t even felt the need to masturbate in weeks, if not longer. But this was the way things had been before.

“We don’t have to rush,” he said. “Stop… whenever you feel uncomfortable.”

He slipped off my shirt. The cold was brutal and we huddled under the blanket. I helped him out of his jeans. This was okay. This was almost normal, I almost felt like me. I just couldn’t seem to—

Charlie was warm and strong and I clung to him shamelessly, even if I couldn’t seem to think of him. He lay me down. My heart beat fast. I unbuttoned my jeans. White noise filled my head, drowning everything else out.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Do you want to stop?”

“I’m not—I can’t—”

“Oh…” I could barely see the color in his face. “We’ll take it slow, then. Don’t think so much.”

“I’m trying not to.”
He eased out of his own pants. He kissed me, gently, along the neck. I was numb and cold. I looked over his shoulder, at the thick paint on the wall, the empty glass bottles, some filled with colored sand.

His skin was becoming tacky with sweat. “What do you want?” he signed.

“Touch me,” I said. Even in the poor light I felt exposed. I tried to focus on my body and his gentle hands as they slid my underwear all the way off. This was supposed to be easy, the way it had always been these past few months. I tried to drag myself out of my head and focused on a freckle on his right shoulder.

He drew my hair away from my face. His hand slipped between my legs and stroked softly and I dragged his mouth against mine.

It took a lot longer than normal. When I finished it seemed almost like a surprise. He kissed me once and grabbed the box of tissues.

For about fifteen seconds I was fine. I lay there and the heaviness of my body and my endorphin-soaked mind were quiet and still.

Then it was over.

Charlie cleaned my stomach when I didn’t move. “Now I have to do laundry,” he signed.

I tried to speak. Both my mouth and my hands had become someone else’s. The white noise pressed against me even harder and I held my breath and tried not to move and hoped to God the acid in my blood would disappear.

“Aaron,” he signed a bit more firmly. “Are you okay?”

He’d been so kind and so worried and I’d used him to try and get back to myself. And now I was naked and sticky and cold and I couldn’t breathe and thick hoarse noise stuck in my

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 57
throat. I’d used him. They’d thought I was dead. I still couldn’t get over that, it seemed fake, it felt fake. I was one of those people.

He pulled me close and held me tight. He didn’t shush or rock or try to talk. This had happened before.

When my breath returned to me I pulled away. I picked up my pants and underwear and started getting dressed even though my clothing had become a puzzle.

“Aaron,” he signed.

“I’m sorry,” I signed. “I’m sorry. I thought I would feel better. I don’t.”

“Let me take you home,” he signed.

“I’m fine. I’m totally fine, really.” I needed to wash my hands.

“You’re obviously not.” He yanked on his underwear. “Please—slow down a second.”

“I’ve got… I’ve got to see Jenna… and I have to clean, everything’s a mess…” My hands trembled. I could barely lace my shoes.

He grabbed my shoulder. “Aaron. Stop.”

“I’m sorry…” Heat dripped down my face. “I’m so sorry, Charlie.”

His jaw softened. “It’s alright.”

“No. It’s not. Nothing feels good. Nothing feels right. I don’t… I don’t think I’m me…” I pressed my face into my hands.

He handed me a clean tissue. “You are you,” he signed. “Here. What does this say?” He handed me a book.

I pushed it away.

“Then describe the poster to me. That one there, on the wall?” He draped the blanket over both of us and wrapped his arm around my waist.
“It’s, um. Beige, I guess, the lighting is really bad. It’s… it’s Fleetwood Mac… the cover for *Rumors*.”

“Tell me about them.” He smelled like sweat and sex.

“Fleetwood Mac? I don’t know all that much. I haven’t listened to them in years. They’re pretty hipstery now, I guess. Pretty basic.”

“Do you like them?”

“I don’t know.” My throat was dry. “I liked CSNY… Crosby Stills—”

“Nash and Young,” he signed. “Their live album is my favorite.”

“I guess I miss listening to them the most. I can’t hear it clearly anymore. It’s nice…

coasting music. I’ve actually been thinking about Genesis a lot. I dream about it. It won’t leave me alone.”

“Yeah. Genesis is alright. Reminds me too much of him, though. Dmitri.” He kissed my forehead.

Dmitri. I remembered him again, standing there in the street, and I blanched.

Charlie grabbed his shirt, a tangerine thing with geometric diamonds all over it. “Shit, that’s always terrifying to see. You stress me out. You know that?”

It seemed like that warranted a laugh but I couldn’t do it. “I try my best.”

“You should stay the night. You seem exhausted.”

“My dad would kill me. He didn’t want me coming out here. I can’t blame him.”

“You weren’t gonna go off yourself somewhere.”

“No, but… he doesn’t know that. “The circle of trust has been broken” and all that.”

“Seems like heady stuff.”

“Thanks for dealing with me,” I signed. I leaned into him. He was right. I was exhausted.
“You’re goddamn right. Special snowflake.” But he smiled. “We wouldn’t keep you around if we didn’t like you at least a little.” He tapped my nose. “We haven’t all gotten together in forever. We should make it more of a priority. You could still use a model for your drawing, right?” He posed, sucking in his cheeks.

“I miss it,” I signed. “I’ve been… so busy… and then that all happened… Saima made me pity cookies.” I hadn’t drawn one of the comics in a long time. The hiatus stretched out in front of me endlessly. I couldn’t imagine working that schedule again; hours upon hours spent in front of a screen, a tablet, sketching, coloring, lining, erasing, always having to finish, never being done to my satisfaction. All in time for the weekly updates that nobody read.

“Of course she did. And I bet they were delicious.”

“They were,” I grumbled. “It’s not fair.”

“…You know what else is delicious?”

“You’re fucking awful. You know that?”

When I got home, it was nearly midnight. I couldn’t wait to shower. It was probably pretty obvious where I’d been and I tried to smooth down my hair.

I popped my head into Dad’s office. Like Charlie’s room, it was dim in here. The walls were a burnt shade of sienna, and the bleak-colored books made the small space even smaller. This was never meant to be an office. It had been half of the garage before Dad had some guy build it out. Poorly insulated, it was cold in here, and reeked like cigarettes. His desk was a sea of paper and I could barely see him. My palms itched.

“I’m home,” I said.
He jumped. “You startled me. I was falling asleep reading this paperwork.” He turned his desk lamp towards me. “How’s Charlie?”

“He’s good.”

“What did you two do?”

“Just… talked.” He knew I wasn’t straight but didn’t need to know the details.

“Good. I’m glad you have those two.”

“I don’t deserve them.”

His head snapped up. “Of course you do.”

“Dad, it was… it was a joke.” I frowned.

“Oh. Right.” He turned back to his computer.

I hovered in the doorway and stroked the molding. “I didn’t realize you’d started smoking again. I smelled it the other day.”

Dad shut his laptop. The leatherette case was scratched. He slid it into a shiny black satchel and started vacillating slightly in his office chair. “...Yes. Well.” I saw the pack sitting, guiltily, just behind the computer, crinkly soft pack. “There’s takeout, in the fridge, if you want it.” He drummed his fingers on the bare desk, then reached back for the laptop.

“You should take a break,” I said. “Can’t it wait?”

He smiled. His leg started trembling again. “I’ve got a lot to do. I’ve been… distracted lately.”


I did have to eat.

I poured out too much lo mein and rice. It was from the place near the pharmacy, which was pretty shitty. It came too hot by accident and the salt and heat burnt my tongue. I swallowed
the pills, two of them, Meclizine and Ambien. I felt like I was made of sand. Sand, in one of
Charlie’s bottles, looking out at the world.

Jenna was still awake when I passed her doorway. I poked my head in. “What are you
doing still awake, little bug? Don’t you have school tomorrow?”

Inside was a hodge-podge of two different people. Jenna’s room was stuck between
childhood and adulthood. Her walls were candy-pink and posters from The Waybringer series
adorned one wall. She still had sheets with teddy-bears. Makeup was starting to crowd her
vanity. Powdery cosmetic brushes sat on the little white jewelry box with its dancing ballerina.

She sat on her bed, laptop in hand. “Can’t sleep,” she signed.

“Why not?”

“Well, I was all wound up from studying, and then I tried reading for a while, but when I
lied back down my brain wouldn’t turn off.” She shut the laptop. The top part was covered with
multicolored stickers, some aged and peeling.

“I know the feeling.” She was burning a bright pink candle that smelled like strawberries
and too much sugar. It hurt my nose. “What’s on your mind?” She shook her head but I knew she
was lying. I perched at the edge of her bed. “You can tell me.”

“I’ve been having these… nightmares,” she began hesitantly. “In them I’m in my room,
and it’s dark, and I’m trying to sleep. There are these ghosts, and they keep ripping away my
blankets, and screaming, and throwing around the candles. Sometimes… it catches fire.”

“It’s not real,” I told her.

“I know that,” she signed. “But the thing is, Aaron. One of the ghosts looks like you.”

“Jenna, I’m so—”
“I’m not mad at you,” she signed. Her stringy hair trailed into her pale face. “But I just… I don’t want you to leave too. Not like Mom.”

I tried to keep my expression neutral. “Jenna, I’m not going anywhere,” I signed.

“I know,” she signed. “Or at least, I want to believe it.”

“I promised you,” I signed. “You know me. I don’t lie.”

She nodded. “Will you watch a movie with me?” she asked. “At least for a little while?”

“Of course, bug.”

She put on some bright flashy animated film on her computer and we lay back against her headboard. She leaned against me. Eventually, her heart rate slowed and she fell asleep. I didn’t mean to, either, but the meds gripped hold of me, and I slept until her alarm woke us both up.

8.

Without Jenna or Dad, the house was huge and dark and it pressed down against me. I was supposed to meet the new therapist at noon. I swallowed down my pills and a pathetic breakfast of instant oatmeal. I snipped off the bracelet. I thought about keeping it. I saw my name in the ugly bland print and dropped it into the trash, on top of some old tea bags.

The therapist was half an hour outside of town, along windy cracked back roads pitted with pot holes. Naked, barren trees lined the pavement. For a while I thought I was lost but the GPS said I was in the right place. The practice was a small two-story house with nothing but a tiny painted sign to direct patients where to go. This had to be a personal residence. A late-aughts Beemer sat in the driveway. In front of the house were rose bushes covered in rough burlap, with stone steps leading up to the bright yellow door.

I took a deep breath, got out of the car, and went inside.
The place reeked like incense. A young woman in a thick cabled sweater sat behind an old-fashioned roll-top desk. “Good morning,” she signed. “You must be Aaron.”

“Yes, that’s me,” I signed.

“There’s just a little paperwork for you to do. And then you’ll be able to go right in.” She gestured me into a small parlor with a bunch of mismatched chairs. Vintage band posters hung on the walls, advertising Mountain Jams of years past. I began filling out the tedious forms. I could do it in my sleep by now. My memory was shit now but still I remembered my insurance number, all the family history. And then I waited.

A tall, tweedy middle-aged man in yoga pants and a green “Life is Good” shirt came into the doorway. His long brown hair was streaked with gray. “Hi, Aaron. I’m Hans Fitzl. Nice to meet you.” Stabby, German name. He smiled, revealing yellowed teeth. “Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?” He gestured to the outdated Keurig machine sitting on a small end table. Several handmade mugs were cloistered around it. “Ethel’s hobby is ceramics.”

“…Ethel?”

“My secretary,” he explained. “She checked you in. She’s too young to be an Ethel, I agree. Shall we?”

He led me through a narrow hallway into a small, bright room. Two padded chairs and planters full of devil’s ivy crowded the place. “It sounds like you’ve had quite the week,” he signed. He sat down and gestured to the other chair. “Why don’t you take off your coat and get comfortable?”

I sat. The chair was old and had already been broken in by many butts of the past. A small wood-burning stove glowed in the corner, filling the room with the smell of a campfire. It

---

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 64
made me think of the few unsuccessful camping trips my own family had tried before we gave up.

“So I’ve got some icky protocol stuff to get through,” he signed. “I think it’s a waste of time. I’ve got all your records right here, and I trust the doctors you’ve been working with. Still, with something this important, you can’t be too thorough.”

“Right,” I signed.

We went through the usual pas-du-deux of the evaluation. That used a good chunk of the hour. “I’m sure you know this. Depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation. None of that comes as a surprise, right?”

“I would hope not,” I signed. “Or else somebody would have some explaining to do.”

Fitzl smiled. “Tell me what’s going on,” he signed. “How you’re feeling, what you’ve gone through. It must be pretty overwhelming, I would imagine.”


“Psych wards are so depersonalizing,” he signed.

“I didn’t want anybody to know,” I signed. “Then I’m getting rushed to the ER, going through crash protocol, having everyone and their mother poking around in my head…”

“It’s a lot to deal with even if you haven’t just gone through something traumatic.” He leaned back in the chair and took a swig out of a mug shaped like an owl. “Tell me about yourself.”

“Well, I’ve been depressed on and off since I was fourteen—”

“And the rest of you?”

I didn’t understand. My illnesses were so woven into me that I couldn’t differentiate me from them. “What do you mean?”
“What do you do? Do you work? Go to school? What are some things you enjoy? Do you have any friends?”

I didn’t want to relax. This was all just building up to another diagnostic, a stealthy, clever one. He was trying to frame himself as my friend but he was just a person who wanted his insurance dollars. “…I’m an artist,” I signed.

“I love the arts,” he signed. “What medium do you work in?”

I couldn’t let myself trust him. This man could send me back there, back to the bleached halls of windowless rooms, back to the wasting away time. “Digital, mostly. I do webcomics.”

“I think that’s amazing. Art, especially that kind of art, takes a lot of perseverance. I think that says a lot about you.”

I was starting to feel that side-effect nausea again.

“I’m so sorry, but our time’s up for today.” He shook his head. He picked up a business card and handed it to me. “My emergency line. Feel free to give me a text if you need someone before our next appointment, okay?”

I looked down at the card. It was sage green with a thin spray of leaves, obviously picked from a list of templates on some kind of website.

I made another appointment and headed back towards my car. A draft of wind snatched the card from my hand and pulled it towards the rose bushes where it landed in some frozen mud. I knelt, only to see someone kneeling in front of me. I saw knees, knees in grass-stained torn jeans. No jacket.

Dmitri. His eyes held mine, wide, desperate. The wind sucked all of the air out of my lungs. He wasn’t real. This had to be my mind spinning off the rails still. Wasn’t this one of the side effects? “Aaron, help me,” he signed. “Are you there? Can you see me? Say something.”
My mouth was wired shut.

“I’m stuck,” he signed. “I can’t get out. You have to do something.”

The rose bushes seemed to rise around us and writhe. I clutched the business card.

“Please,” he signed.

I stood up. Vertigo threatened to pull me apart. I turned and walked back to my car.

I spent the night in a Klonopin-induced haze. The drugs were prescribed for intense panic attacks, quick acting, fierce, a soldier with a sharp sword. I used to find the quick crawly sensation it gave me pleasant, or at least relieving, but it reminded me too much of when I OD’d and I worried that I was going to die until it kicked in.

I lay on the couch. Dad came home first with Thai food. “How’s the new therapist?”

I couldn’t speak intelligibly or really comprehend signs on the drug. “Okay,” I signed.

“You hungry?”

“No.”

“You should eat.” He spooned out a couple of plates and brought one over to me.

“You’re sweating like crazy. Should I lower the heat?”

“Not cold.”

He pressed a hand to my forehead to feel my temperature. If the Klonopin wasn’t weighing me down I would have flinched. “You feel warm, actually. I bet the hospital was a germ vacuum. And then Jenna bringing home everything…”

“Just meds.”

He took his hand back. “Was therapy that bad? I can find someone else—”

Another signing practitioner open to new patients at this time of the year? “It’s fine.”
He ate a few bites. His brow was scrunched in thought. “How about you stop lying to me when you’re not fine,” he signed finally. But his eyes were big like he was a deer in headlights.

I should just agree. But agreeing would in itself be a lie. Truth be told he probably wouldn’t be able to take the weight of my depression either.

“I want to help you,” he signed. “But you have to tell me how. Aaron—”

That was the thing. How could I tell people how to help me if I didn’t know myself?

He sighed. His shoulders slumped. “We’ll talk about this when you’re not high,” he signed. “Please try to eat a little, okay?”

He took his plate into the office and shut the door.

Group met in a definitely-sketchy low-ceilinged basement of a church. Louise met me fifteen minutes early. She didn’t mind picking up the extra hours. Her hair was brutally short and spiked and framed her wide green eyes. She should have been in an ad for candy or soda, something fun, a theme park, maybe.

The lobby of the church was half-darkened and a custodian’s cart hovered unattended nearby. A table near the door with a bouquet of dusty silk flowers advertised church events, and a thin paper sign pointed downstairs towards the group. This church—like many—was crammed in a hidden corner of town between a derelict gas station and a pawn shop. From the outside, all that distinguished it was the reasonably-sized cross near the front door. “Thanks for coming, Louise. I know you’re busy.”

“Not a problem,” she signed briskly. Her lipstick was bright berry pink, a color you could eat. “I’m behind on hours anyway. I was lazy last semester.”

“You don’t mind working during the break?”
She smiled. “My family drives me up a tree, anyway,” she signed.

A beat. We both pretended to be interested in the other teenager who shambled in from outside. They looked at us with wide eyes and then darted down the stairs. Louise pursed her lips and I could tell she wanted to ask. I would have gotten someone else but she was the only interpreter I knew who was free during this time, and who would work for nothing, too.

“It’s your business, and you don’t need to tell me,” Louise continued. “But—it’s depression, isn’t it? It’s why you went missing? I saw on Facebook that nobody knew where you went.”

“I didn’t go anywhere,” I signed. “I just… didn’t want to talk to anybody.”

Louise nodded. “Well. We should follow that kid. It’s getting late.”

The smell of paste lingered in the air, like a dozen kindergarteners had just finished their projects. An unsteady greenish light flickered above us. Sodium lamps. A circle of about two-dozen chairs had been set up—against one wall was a snack table, armed with store-brand punch and cookies. Piles of chairs and racks and tables were flattened against another wall. Thick, deep-green velvet stage curtains were rolled up against the third. Smeary brown walls pressed against the popcorn ceiling. A sign on a poster board gave the name of the group and requested I sign in and take a nametag.

“I guess I should,” Louise signed. She took the ballpoint pen and signed her name without another thought.

An older woman with gray locs and cranberry-colored corduroys approached us before I had to make a move. Her nose was high, and proud, and thin glasses framed pale brown eyes. “I think you have the wrong night,” she said, over enunciating. Louise raised an eyebrow. “This is a support group for depression in teens.”
“That’s what we’re here for,” I said to her.

“Oh,” she said. “Well. Come, get some refreshments, and sit down.” Her eyes flicked back and forth between Louise’s moving hands and mine.

I took a deep breath. The ceiling was so shallow I thought it might crush me. Louise looked at me nervously. There were already a few other people here and most of them were on their phones. Two chatted. My throat had gone dry. “I’m going to get some juice,” I told her.

“You want anything?”

“I’ll come with you,” she signed.

“It’s fine, really. You sit.” I just needed ten seconds to catch my breath. Or run.

A thin, green plastic tablecloth covered the folding table. The giant jugs of punch, in teeth-staining red, were mostly unopened and the flimsy Dixie cups in a line waited for some soul to take one. So I did. The juice—so sweet it hurt my jaw—tasted like first grade. Combined with the ambient smell of glue, I was sure for a second at least that I had become a child again. It was a sticky sensation.

I took a few sad cookies from the platter because I wondered if they tasted the same way.

I reached for a napkin and elbowed a stranger pouring juice. We watched, paralyzed in that way, as the jug flopped onto the ground and oozed red onto the chipped linoleum. Some of it spattered violently on her peach dress but she didn’t flinch.

“I’m so sorry,” I said to her. She grabbed the napkins and knelt to clean it up. “I really shouldn’t be allowed out of the house.” I grabbed some more napkins. The liquid spread quickly on the slick waxed floor.

My victim blotted at her dress. Her name—Amanda—was written in red, and dripping with juice. I offered her the clean napkins. “Bloody Mary,” she said. “And not even a cocktail.”
Wasn’t she the one who was so fair you could see the wine go down her throat when she drank? Or was that Elizabeth I?”

“I don’t follow,” I said. I could only approximate what she was saying. Her lips, in this poor light, were hard to read, and she spoke in little rushes.

“Don’t worry about it, unraveled sweater,” she said.

I nodded and pretended to understand.

“You’ve got no nametag,” she said. “What else am I supposed to call you?”

“You could ask,” I said.

Louise trotted over. “What happened?”

“I spilled some juice.”

“Nothing worth crying over,” the girl said. “No, wait, that’s milk.” She took her cookies and went to sit down.

“They do want to get started,” Louise signed.

“Thanks for telling me. Really,” I signed.

We got in the circle. There were more faces now but not enough to fill all of the chairs. Some of them were well-put-together. Still others wore stained or torn clothing. I looked down and tried not to make eye contact. My hands were sticky from the juice and I wanted to wash them. I had no idea where a bathroom was.

A clinical psychologist with a Kool Understanding of Teenz led the group. She was the woman in the linty corduroy pants and she insisted we all call her by her first name, Cheyenne, even though she had “Dr. Wood” written on her nametag. The edge of a BandAid was visible at the top of her heel. “Thank you all for coming,” she said. “I know I see some new faces.” She was
trying not to watch Louise’s hands. One kid seemed fascinated. “Why don’t we all go around the room, say something about ourselves, and give a fun fact?”

When they got to me I was over it. “I’m Aaron, and you’d never know it, but I can’t hear.” A few laughed at that. The girl in the punch-stained dress closed her eyes, as if sleepy. We were sitting right across from one another and she was in my line of sight almost unavoidably. I still simmered with embarrassment.

Group was about the same as in the hospital. Issues were more-or-less avoided with plenty of focus on Self-Care, Meditation, and Remembering You Are Not Alone. The same tired old techniques I was supposed to fall back on in “moments of duress”, the ones that had never actually worked. She had us play an improv game, involving throwing around imaginary lightning, and around then I excused myself to find the bathroom and hide in it until that was over.

When I came back the group had been disbanded. The fascinated kid, in a sweatshirt much too large for him, said something to me in passing with a smile that Louise missed.

“I’m sorry, but I really have to go,” she signed. “My ride’s here.”

“Go ahead,” I signed. “See you soon. Thanks again.”

“You got it.” She nodded and pulled up her coat collar. “Home safe.”

I walked back out through the dismal lobby and saw the juice girl. More mortification swept through me. I had hoped that she had gone home like everyone else. We made awkward eye contact as she looked up from her phone. “Listen,” I said. “I’m… I’m so sorry about your dress. I can… I can pay for dry cleaning, or whatever—”

The girl studied me carefully. “I was thinking of dyeing it red anyway,” she said.

“Oh.” A beat. I noticed it was raining again. “Isn’t that hard?”
“Not really. You just throw the dye in some water, and there you go.” Her thick black hair was pulled into a bun and she pulled at some strands at the side of her face. She was rather pretty. I noticed this uncomfortably.

The group leader reemerged from the basement and started to lock up. “Do you make a lot of your clothes?” I asked.

“Sometimes. I do ballet, so it’s cheaper to make the costumes than to buy them. I dunno. It’s nice to have a sustaining hobby. An anxiety hobby. Don’t you think?”

“…I guess.” Art could barely be called a hobby; it was more like suffering. And cooking was more a necessity than anything.

Dr. Wood nodded at us, smiled falsely, and pulled out her cell phone.

“Well. It seems like they want us out of here. I’ll see you next week,” Amanda said. “And don’t worry, I’ll make sure to wear red, in case that happens again.” She smiled. The effect, with her regal bone structure and almond-shapes eyes, was quite striking, and I was disarmed. I was so unprepared I couldn’t even say anything in response.

By the time I got home I had an awful headache—one of the lovely side effects of the medication. In the dim porchlight, I saw Dad smoking. Long, viscous tendrils were weighed down by the rain. I forced myself out of the car.

“How was it?” he asked me.

“Kind of bad,” I signed. “I spilled juice on someone.”

He took another drag. “Louise was able to interpret after all?”

“Yes. She’s an angel.”

“I always did like her.”
I shrugged. For a second, he went to move towards me, and I half expected him to offer me a smoke. He ground out the butt in an ash tray. “…Your mother called,” he signed.

“Again?”

“She really wants to talk to you.” He reached for the pack in his pocket but then shook his head. “I said I’d at least ask you to try.”

“Now?” The headache sharpened. “I’ve had a long day—”

“For five minutes, Aaron. I’m not convinced she won’t come into town.”

“It’s never five minutes with her. Did she even want to talk to Jenna?”

He took out another cigarette and lit it. “I didn’t tell Jenna. I don’t know if I should.”

“Not now. Not yet. There’s enough going on.” My eyes had grown hot and I looked up at the sky. “I wish this were snow.” There were so many colors in snow, blues and purples and even yellows. Snow was so hard to paint but I hadn’t painted in months. Snow was easier to draw—a single sheet of blank paper—if I submitted it, modern art. I imagined it in some random gallery somewhere. My name on a placard, the title “blank snow,” 2016, print. I couldn’t get away with that much.

“It would be less dreary, at least. Means I’d have to shovel, though.”

“I can’t stand the rain anymore.” Tears pricked sharply and inexplicably. “Goodnight.”

I sat on the floor of my bedroom, watching Charlie and Saima bicker on the group chat. The carpet itched against my face. My head still throbbed and a few tears leaked out on accident.

I should be working on the next page of my comic, *Unfathomable Distance*, the one about the witch and the mortal. I had it all outlined, even sketched. All I had to do was put in some colors. I liked coloring, I tried to remind myself. Shading. Finding all the dimension in the work. I reached for my laptop. It was a brick in my hands and took a long time to boot up.
I picked up a sketchbook, one sitting amongst the piles of supplies that had fallen the day I had gotten admitted. I opened it up but found that many of the pages had been torn out. Barely moving, I squinted at the corner of my room where pages and crumpled pages lie, many torn. Dad had cleaned up the vomit but not much else. I wondered if any of it was salvageable or if I should just toss the lot and start anew. Or if starting new would even be worth it.

I sat very still. I mopped at my eyes. Maybe if I rubbed hard enough I would be able to see.

9.

Dad left Mom’s letter in front of the coffee pot so that I had no choice but to read it. A crude but effective measure.

This letter was postmarked Wisconsin, a few days after I’d been admitted. The paper felt thin and a little greasy and the loose-leaf inside had a coffee ring on it.

Dear Aaron,

I want you to know that I love you dearly. I can only imagine the amazing young person you’ve grown into. I hope that you can keep growing, and keep learning.

I’m sorry that you felt like you had no other options. Your family and friends love you very much, and we’re here for you. I’ve been thinking about you and your sister nonstop these past few months. Every time the holidays draw near, I miss you a little more.

Please write me to let me know how you’re doing. I may not be there, but I still worry about you, and I want to know everything.

Love always,

Mom (and Gigi)
Honestly, how could she even see these letters as worth the fifty-one cents postage? Occasionally I couldn’t help but wonder about the shiny delusional world my mother made for herself. Dad had to have told her that I was fine by now. I didn’t owe her anything. I tossed the letter into recycling.

Today was Sunday. Jenna was sleeping over at a friend’s. There was almost no food in the house so I decided to go to the store even though it wasn’t Wednesday. Meaning I needed money. I steeled myself for the conversation with my father.

He was in his office, parked at his laptop, even though he wasn’t supposed to be working today. His hair flopped in his face. He rather desperately needed a haircut.

He jerked and then turned in his chair like he’d been broken out of a trance. “Oh, good morning. I’m surprised you’re up.”

“It’s almost noon.”

He looked sideways at the cheap digital clock on his desk. “So it is. I’ve gotten lost in these files again.”

“I’m going grocery shopping. The pantry is pretty barren.”

“Yes. Right. I meant to go the other day, but, well, you know how these things go.” He took out his wallet and hesitated. “Perhaps you’d like some company?”

The last few times we’d attempted a family shopping it had been a nightmare. He kept micromanaging my list and getting sidetracked, suggesting this and that and talking to the workers in the store. Jenna wanted all the junk food she could get her hands on. “No, I won’t be long.”

“Alright. Did you see the—”
“Letter? Yes.” I sighed. “I’m not going to talk to her. I hope you know that. I’m sure you already told her everything.”

“Only what I knew myself at the time. Don’t you think she deserves a second chance?”

I wanted to sink through the floor. “No. I mean, don’t you remember everything she put us through? How it made you feel? Why go through that again? Obviously she doesn’t give a shit.”

He brushed some hair out of his eyes but it fell right back over them. “These things are… complicated, Aaron.”

“I mean, not really.”

“You need all the support you can get.”

“You think I’d get support from her?”

His expression became pained and I could tell he didn’t want to have this conversation. “I should probably go before it’s too late,” I signed. “I think the weather’s supposed to turn.”

He handed me the card. The words he wanted to say hovered in the air, gaseous and noxious. He didn’t say any of it. “Can you get me some cigarettes?”

I ended up going to ShopRite again which was a mistake. The whole place felt jumbled and bizarre to me now like everything had been moved around. I couldn’t find what I needed. I stopped in the meat department to get skirt steak for dinner. I saw the person next to me in the corner of my eye—bleached punch red hair—and I froze up. My heart beat faster. The whole room looked a little unhinged, like my vision was a piece of film slipping off of a projector. I saw him in every department I visited. I guess I started to look a little strange because people
stared at me. My head was spinning. I was sick, dizzy. I dropped my keys in the frozen section when reaching for edamame (which I didn’t actually like, though my family did, they were such a fresh shade of green) and the redhead knelt beside me. I saw him through the open door of the freezer. The room dropped another twelve degrees. He made eye contact. Calmly.

“Why didn’t you do anything?” he asked.

I slammed the door so hard it nearly shattered.

Dmitri left handprints all over my life like a kid scribbling on the walls. We met in the fall of tenth grade. I was the new kid. Neither of us were straight. Qué será será. These things have a habit of complicating themselves. I was out but he wasn’t. The typical Christian homophobic parents, flavor: Russian Orthodox. His fear and his anxiety and his own pain went from something I could soothe to something that slowly started to drown me as well. The strings that connected us used to keep me upright but then they began to strangle.

Somehow, I made it home in one piece. Thick, scrawling shadows covered everything in the dying light. How much of this was a creation caused by unbalanced brain chemistry? Not enough sleep? Too much sleep?

My father’s side of the family believed in ghosts. It was the Scottish blood in them, the old Pagan traditions that would never quite die, but would rather wreath themselves in Christianity. I’d never subscribed to it before. You lived, you died, your energy went back into the great Somewhere but you didn’t really keep on going yourself.

Truthfully, Dmitri had haunted me even when he was alive. But I’d seen his body in that awful box, in the powdery yellowish mortician’s makeup. His parents had originally thought that

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 78
they wouldn’t be able to put him back together enough after the truck accident for an open casket. And it was true, his face had looked deflated and empty, and not just from being dead.

My body was caught in the past. I remembered the smell of the funeral parlor, like lilies and lemon Pledge and musty air conditioning. The feel of my old black suit, the one slightly too small, scratchy against my throat. The stiff folding chairs in the room of the wake. Saima gripping my hand so hard it was numb on one side and Charlie sweating on the other. We hid at the back and let the masses of relatives push us away.

That could’ve been my body, my crowd, my box.

My car keys were cold in my hand and my breath was coming in sharp silvery wisps.

I brought the groceries into the house and brought the shadows with me.

Most of my professors agreed to let me retake their finals or to turn in papers late. Only one was enough of a dick to make me retake the class. Thankfully I’d done some of the work before I went into the hospital so after about a week of struggling and studying and cramming and testing I was only three credits behind, even if my grades weren’t great. I’d be able to rearrange my schedule in early January.

“Maybe you should take the semester off,” Saima suggested the next time I saw her. “Get back on your feet first.”

“If I don’t work and I don’t go to school I’m just going to get worse,” I told her. “I have to get out of the house sometime.”

“Well, then maybe you could go part time. Take GEs, something easy, you know.”

“I’d be behind.” The café we were sitting in reeked of peppermint lattes and tired undergrads. A side-effect headache poked at the back of my skull.
“What about a class for fun? We’re freshmen. We’ve got a little leeway. You could take an art class. I thought you wanted to pick up an art minor anyway.” Her normally immaculate nails were chipped.

I tried to smile but it was tough work. Art wasn’t exactly fun, at least, not right now. “I’ll think about it.”

“Well, if you do decide to go, it’ll be nice to hang out,” she signed. “I’ve missed you, Aaron. I feel like all we do now is catch up.”

“We’re both busy. Or, well. You still are.”

She smiled tentatively.

There wasn’t much left to talk about. Half of my coffee was still left in the ceramic cup. Saima took a moment too long checking her phone. “So. What have you been up to?” I asked.

She went on for a few minutes about extracurriculars and mosque events and TV shows she was watching with her younger sister, Amani. My brain was fuzzy and staticky. Christmas would be coming soon, another table of crow I’d have to eat. Gifts to buy. Food to make. A day of pretending to be happy and thankful and seeing people those relatives who could never bother to lift a phone.

Yeah. I was tired.

After another half hour of this tepid nonsense I told Saima I had to see my shrink. This was not strictly speaking true but she bought it. For an hour or so I drove up and down the SMRP bored out of my mind. The only reason I stopped driving was because I needed gas.

The station attendant had red hair. Before I could begin panicking I realized that he was not Dmitri and, in fact, he was not even a he. She rang me out for a plastic Bic lighter and Marlboro Lights. I told myself that they were for my father but I found myself cracking open the

Living Strange by Allison Giese 80
pack and lighting one up like I’d done this a million times. And I had smoked stuff before but not heavily and certainly not tobacco. The flavor crawled all down my mouth and into my lungs, sending a rush through my skull.

Saima thought smoking was pointless and stupid. Charlie only did if it were recreational. Dmitri often purloined his mother’s teal blue Newports mostly to get her to confront him about it but she never did.

Only one of Dmitri’s friends was actually a dealer and I only ever met him once, at a party, when I was too young to really understand drugs, much less want to use them myself. There was weed and LSD and pretty prescription pills that were hard to come by. The kid was trying to convince me to sell off my Klonopin to him for an amount that was staggering at fifteen but now seemed like a ripoff. When Dmitri finally was able to get on medication, he told me in hushed signs about the money he was making on the side, selling the extras off to the kid. It wasn’t right, yes, but it would get him out sooner, get us away…

I stubbed out the cigarette in an old coffee cup. I couldn’t tell if the nausea I felt was from the tobacco or from the meds. And then I got back on the road.

“Aunt Kate’s invited us for Christmas,” Dad signed over dinner that night. The chicken I’d made had come out dry and disappointing. Jenna twirled her fork in the noodles, spraying parmesan cheese onto the table. Aunt Kate, like my grandmother and uncle, was Deaf, and she signed with a funny southern dialect because she’d lived in Florida after grad school.

“She always does,” Jenna signed.

“Yes, well. Large crowd. I didn’t give her an answer right away.”

My water glass was slippery. “Why wouldn’t we go?”

_Living Strange_ by Allison Giese 81
“It would be better if we had a quiet Christmas at home.” He tried to say this casually but I could see him gauging my reaction.

“I’m not too crazy to see my family,” I signed.

“That’s not what I meant. I was just wondering if you might not be feeling up to it—”

“Tell her we’ll go,” I signed. I felt like I was falling. “I mean, it doesn’t matter. It’s not like they know.”

He took a sip of green tea and wouldn’t meet my eyes.

I exhaled. “You told them.”

“It was as though I could avoid it—”

“Why not?”

“You were in critical condition when they brought you into the hospital. What was I to tell them if something happened?”

Jenna went very pale. “I’m going to get the dishes,” she signed and started clearing the table.

“How am I supposed to face them now?” I asked.

“It’s not as though this doesn’t run in our family,” he signed. “You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Says you,” I signed. “I’m tired. I’m going to go to bed.”

“Aaron—”

I ignored him and went upstairs.

My room was freezing. It seemed no matter what I did to the thermostat I was shivering.
I sat down at my drawing desk. Really the thing was no more than a large thick board bolstered at angle, stained with years of paint and marker and pencil and God knows what else. I pinned a piece of watercolor paper to the board.

Art used to be easy and effortless. So many ideas would crackle and run inside of my head and I wouldn’t be able to keep up with them. Now it eerie and quiet.

The pencil was heavy and clumsy in my hands. I started work on Jenna’s Christmas present. I was going to draw her favorite character from that book series. I knew exactly how to start, too. The book was overwritten in terms of description which should have made my work easy for me. Curly blonde hair. A heart-shaped face, small nose. I could see how it would look in my head. I couldn’t seem to get my hand to move. A circle. I just had to draw a circle.

The lightbulb in the lamp clipped to the drawing desk blew, sending the room into partial darkness. I swore and went to get a spare from the linen closet. The moon spilled through the small window above the bed, refracting shadows everywhere.

The person sitting on the bed did not give a shadow.

“How long are you going to keep ignoring me?” Dmitri asked. “I know you can see me. I can tell by the way you tense up.”

I sat back down at the desk. Took out the old bulb, plugged in the new one. I just had to draw a circle.

He came over to lean on the desk near me. “Remember that comic we used to do together? What did you do with it? Do you still have it?” He stroked the surface of my drawing tablet. “It was… nice. To make stuff together.”

The circle came out thick and lopsided. I scrubbed it out with an eraser.

“This isn’t going to go away, you know,” Dmitri signed. “Not until you deal with it.”
I turned out the lamp, plunging myself into darkness.

I didn’t fall asleep until well after three in the morning. When I finally woke up I had a pounding headache and my mouth tasted like dust and copper. Something was pinned to my drawing board. It was drawn in a red pencil in a style that was definitely not mine.

Characters from our superhero comic. Elena, the main character, the telekinetic. Her girlfriend, Shauna, a tech whiz. Shauna’s face was scribbled out. I crumpled up the picture and threw it into the trash.

I was exhausted. I could barely get my body out of bed. The holidays were railroading right for me. I had gifts to make, things to do. I would not spend another day on the couch feeling sorry for myself. I would not.

So I made myself go to the mall. Even on a quiet weekday, it was bustling with moms and dads and grandmas getting stuff for their spouses and kids. All the neon and products and people were making me woozy. I bought some art supplies. More watercolor paper. A white notebook for Saima I intended to paint. By then the crowds were weighing heavily on me. How had I done this every day?

Later on that afternoon I had therapy. I drove through the traffic on the highway to the house with the rose bushes. Before I got out of the car, I made sure Dmitri wasn’t waiting there.

The secretary greeted me pleasantly. I sat in the waiting room, shaking, trying to tell myself it was because I was cold. I made myself a cup of coffee with the Keurig but it just made me more anxious.

Fitzl, in the doorway, waved to get my attention. “Hello, Aaron,” he signed. “Shall we get started?”
I followed him into the backroom again. He was burning a candle. The label said it was supposed to smell like rain but it smelled like must. The shaking in me worsened.

“Getting pretty cold out there,” Fitzl signed. He sat down and tucked his legs under him.

“I try to keep it warm in here, but the furnace is ancient and starting to go.”

I shut my eyes and breathed in the steam of the coffee.

“It seems like you’ve got something on your mind,” he continued. “Would you like to share?”

I put the cup down. I had to clasp my hands together for a moment to get it together. “I don’t feel well,” I signed.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. That’s the thing.” Something was opening in me, either tears or panic, and I couldn’t quite tell. “That’s what’s so different about this time. Before I would be sad but I would have a reason. Now, it’s just like…”

When I didn’t respond, he prompted me. “When you were depressed earlier in your life, you mean?” he asked.

I nodded. “Everything just seems to be too much,” I signed. I hadn’t meant to split open like this to him but if I didn’t do something the words were going to tear me apart. “And I don’t know why. That’s the thing.”

“The uncertainty makes it worse, doesn’t it?” he asked. “We can explain reasonable things, but depression doesn’t like to be reasoned with. I’m sure you know that.”

I nodded.

“I want you to be able to trust me,” Fitzl signed. “I want to help you, Aaron.”

Every therapist I’d had said this. It didn’t mean they necessarily cared.

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 85
“Have you ever practiced mindfulness?” he asked me.

I looked at him. It made sense that he’d be into holistic nonsense.

“I take it by your expression that the answer is no.” He smiled. “I know. “What does the old hippie want me to do” and all that. But humor me. It can be vital to getting anxiety under control. And obviously you’re anxious. Is there ever a moment when you’re not anxious, Aaron?”

I was feeling weak now. I shook my head. “Not unless I take Klonopin. Even then. On the meds… they…” I didn’t know how to explain it. “I can tell the anxiety’s still there. Even if I can’t necessarily feel it. I just want it to stop.”

“Yes,” he signed. “I would imagine.”

I could feel my eyes watering.

“I think, if we could get you out of your head,” he signed, “You would feel much better. Which is why I want you to learn some mindfulness exercises. Bring you back to your body, to the real.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“It won’t help. Then I’d just… think about the dizziness and the side effects and how tired I am.”

“What if you didn’t think? What if you were just present, if for a moment?”

Bullshit.

“I’m sensing some resistance to this idea,” he signed. “Why don’t you let it sit with you for a few days?”
After all that I didn’t go home. Not immediately. I smoked another cigarette. I felt rat dirty as I did it and it didn’t soothe me but it felt nice in my hand, gave me something to hold onto.

“I don’t think I can do Christmas this year,” I told Dad when I got home.

“No, I didn’t think so. That’s quite alright.” He smiled but it felt insincere. “I’m sure we can do something lovely at home. You could invite your friends over. I know Saima doesn’t celebrate, but she might like to have something to do. And Charlie and Ann don’t usually have anywhere to go this year, do they?”

“Not unless Ann’s girlfriend’s family lets them come.”

“So we’ll do that. I’m sure everyone will understand.”

“Right,” I signed. Guilt still gnawed inside of me. “I’m going to go take a bath. You and Jenna can have leftovers.”

10.

I had once found the stark white-on-white color scheme of the upstairs bathroom frighteningly sterile. It was still almost too much like the hospital. I sat watching the hot water run into the tub. The grout in the tile had turned murky brown and, no matter how many times I had scrubbed it with bleach, never went back to white.

I lie in the warm water and up at the ceiling vents where condensation gathered. Through the veil of the water, my limbs seemed alien, like someone else’s. I generally tried not to be too aware of my body because then I would think too hard about whether my dizziness or headaches or whatnot were real or just made up. How many things were just made up? I didn’t see how

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 87
Fitzl thought this would make me feel better because to me it seemed like that would make me worse.

On its towel on the toilet tank, I saw my phone go off, but was too lazy to reach for it. It was probably just the group chat. Saima and Charlie had both graciously accepted my invitation for Christmas. Charlie was just glad he didn’t have to sit through another evening with Ann and Phoebe, their girlfriend, because they were revoltingly in love. Apparently, Phoebe’s parents were shit cooks.

The phone kept vibrating. I watched as the phone slowly moved, hair by hair, towards the edge of the tank. “Jesus Christ,” I said. I dried my hands and grabbed it before it could fall to the floor.

Group chat messages. A generic update email from the site I hosted my comics on. And three calls from a Skype username I couldn’t recognize.

The same person called again and I almost dropped the phone in the tub.

A friend request this time. Maybe it was just one of those spam bots who targeted anybody, or worse, one of those porn bots. Just my luck.

They left a message. Hey honey!! Dad gave me your Skype! Give me a call! Xoxo mom.

He was downstairs smoking in his office. “Oh, Jesus, she wouldn’t leave me alone,” he signed when I approached him about it. He tapped out the butt. “Why don’t you just talk to her? If not to get her to go away?”

She called again. I let it ring in front of his eyes, a relic. My battery was almost dead. “I don’t know what she wants so badly. She left us.”

“Yes. I know.” He looked exhausted—his eyes were puffy and swollen. “Just talk to her. It looks like she’s not going to stop until she hears from you.”
I knew he was right. My legs were heavy as I climbed the stairs. My bedroom seemed to have shrunk and become claustrophobic. I sat, trembling, on the bed. I hadn’t talked to her in years. The tone of the letters she sent had always been unapologetically happy. *Drove through the Yukon! Beautiful, truly beautiful. If it weren’t so cold up here I would stay forever. And Baja California! Now this is where it’s at! I almost lost myself in the bay. And always, Gigi sends her love.* Gigi, the cat. I imagined it was a little dirt brown scrawny thing.

Always missing me. She never balked when a question went unanswered. *You must be in your senior year now, and applying to schools. I’m so proud of you. You were always a bright student.* I stared at the letters now. I usually opened them, because sometimes she sent money, which I gave to Dad to add to our college funds. I tried not to read them but sometimes it happened anyway. She missed me. But not enough to stay.

The phone rang. I reached for it, to shut it, to block her, and answered by accident.

Mom looked old. Her auburn hair had gone mostly gray, and the fine lines crackled around her eyes. She wore horn-rimmed glasses, smeary with facial grease. For a second she was almost too stunned to speak.

“You picked up,” she signed. Her hands were barely in the frame. This must have been the infamous truck. The wall behind her was plastered with postcards and pictures of people I did not know. “I didn’t think you would.” A fat black cat slept on her lap and she petted it. “Oh, my baby. You look so grown up. Just like your father.”

Another ghost. This one was living.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” she continued. “I’ve been so worried about you, Aaron. I had half a mind to hop the first flight to New York. But… I was on a delivery. Work. It’s been pretty
killer, what with the holidays. We’ve all been working crazy overtime. It’s why I’ve been trying to get in touch.”

I put a hand to my chest. The world had gone slightly sideways again.

“I didn’t realize how bad it was,” she signed. “You were always such a happy kid… neurotic, but no smart kid isn’t. I didn’t think—”

“I can’t do this,” I said and hung up. I kicked the phone far away from me and pressed my face against my knees. The phone bumped against the wall and spun across the carpet lazily.

My bedroom door opened a few seconds later. “I heard something,” Dad signed. “I thought—”

I looked, unable to move, at the blurry sketchbooks, pages crinkled. My blood had turned halfway to acid.

He left and came back with the familiar white pill, small and round. I forced it down my throat.

“Jesus Christ,” I said.

He smiled. “I don’t appreciate blasphemy in my household.”

I couldn’t stop shaking. “How am I supposed to do anything difficult if I can’t even get through a conversation with my mother? Jesus.”

Dad sat, gingerly, on the bed. He was still in his work clothes.

“I just don’t know what happened. I really don’t. I was fine. I was doing fine.” I hated when the panic made me talk because I said things I shouldn’t. Deep, navy blue embarrassing things.

He handed me a tissue and I mopped at my eyes. “It happens. It’s all right.”

“It’s not. Everyone’s still mad at me. I’m still mad at me.”
He said nothing. He had put on his lawyer mask, calm and composed.

“And they say it’s chemical. So there’s a chance I could always be like this. Forever.”

“That’s not true,” he signed.

“How do you know that?” I was starting to hiccup.

“Because I’ve seen you come through the other end of this before.” He reached towards me, as if to touch me, but didn’t.

Remember to breathe. My head hurt. The medicine was starting to kick in, gagging and numbing my panic. I felt any amount of trite, cliché, pathetic phrases stuck sloshing around my mouth. I kept most of them in.

“You’re doing just fine,” he signed at last. “You have nothing to worry about. You put so much on yourself, you know.”

I didn’t think that was true. I had to live somehow, do some things for myself, or nobody else would. The ceiling seemed so far above me. “I feel so old.”

He laughed. “Give it twenty years and then we’ll talk.”

Christmas dinner took some planning. There would be just the five of us. I started out dreading the process but once I actually got rolling looking at recipes and making lists I found it wasn’t too bad. There was the free ham—easy enough—and then mashed potatoes, string beans with slivered almonds, a small halal beef roast for Saima, who didn’t eat pork. This is why I had really started learning to cook in the first place. There was an artistry, a science, to it that was objective. If you read the recipe right and are careful everything should come out just fine. If only digital art were so easy.
Jenna, fresh on winter break, helped me prepare everything the night before, peeling potatoes and shelling the beans and even making a salad which didn’t look too bad. We spent the afternoon baking cupcakes and mince pies and drinking hot chocolate, and while I wasn’t feeling right, it was the best day I’d had in a while.

Christmas used to be a huge family affair when I was little. Most of Dad’s side of the family still lived in Scotland but Mom’s were all here. Her sister Kate, her brother Zach, plus grandmas, in laws, cousins, et al. A huge Danish family. There was enough deafness going around that almost everyone knew some level of sign. Aunt Kate had been the one to begin teaching me how to cook, even if some of the cousins goaded it as a “feminine” hobby. She always gave me good pointers.

Things changed when Mom left.

We weren’t the only ones she abandoned. She stopped talking to her siblings all together, and her parents were so outraged they stopped calling her too. I only knew this because she wrote about it in her letters. She said she was lonely.

After that, we still kept getting invited, but things became stunted and awkward. There was always an elephant in the room, a tension. We became “poor Adam and the kids.”

So Dad was right, in a way. I couldn’t deal with it this year.

Christmas mornings usually weren’t too big a deal in our house. Jenna got up early because she was still a kid and these things were still exciting to her. I usually ended up humoring her as well. That morning in particular it was hard to get myself out of bed. I’d done the drawing for her last minute and it seemed amateurish but at this point it would have to do. I put on a robe and went downstairs.
The house seemed particularly dark that morning and cold. I turned up the thermostat and tried to rub the warmth into my arms. Jenna was already on the couch, watching an early-morning Christmas special and drinking a juice.

“Merry Christmas,” she signed.

I repeated it back to her somewhat numbly and put up a pot of coffee. “What do you want for breakfast?”

“Let’s have waffles,” she signed. “We almost never have that.”

Easy enough. Box mix. Egg, oil, water. We had a waffle iron. All I had to do was wait. My challenge for myself was to keep it together. For fuck’s sake. Keep it together for one day.

Dad came downstairs as I was frying bacon. “Happy Christmas,” he signed sleepily.

“Oh, is that today?” I asked.

He put up some tea. I could already feel this would be a long day and not just in the literal sense. The holiday hadn’t really been a big deal in our house for years and this year it seemed especially slapdash. I wished we could skip over the holidays and just start the new year already. It honestly seemed so much easier.

We ate. The waffles tasted like sawdust to me though neither of them seemed to complain. Honestly I just wanted to go to bed and sleep for the next week or so. Or longer.

“Presents?” Jenna asked.

I could remember a time when that sort of thing excited me. It was only a few years ago after all. But now it made me nervous. Then again everything did.

Mom used to decorate the house. It was something for her to do, she said. Popcorn garlands, paper snowflakes. The ornaments on our tree used to be handmade, made by swirling
paint in clear baubles. There was a different color every year. Teal, purple, one year garish pink. Then every New Year’s she would throw all of those baubles in the trash.

“I didn’t get down the stockings in time,” Dad signed. “But, well. I tried my best to improvise.”

He’d left things in little piles on the old mahogany coffee table. I was surprised he’d done so at all to be honest. He did the same thing more or less every year. Scratch off tickets. Some of our favorite candies. For me he got some gourmet coffee in a small burlap bag. Jenna got some fruit teas.

There were some other gifts, some practical, some meant to be thoughtful but falling a little flat. Jenna got some paperbacks which seemed to be her style—if it weren’t for the fact that she’d already read some of them.

“It’s okay,” she insisted. “I borrowed them from the library. It’ll be nice to actually own them.”

A gift card from the art supply store. Some money for some desperately needed clothes. Good bets, safe bets. I tried to make myself smile but it was tough work. Wasn’t this ungrateful? At least he was still here, still trying in his own way.

Jenna smiled when I gave her my drawing. Dad was happy with his sweater because he’d needed something for casual wear.

And I was so cold.

After that there was the cooking to tend to, so there wasn’t a whole lot more need for fake sentiment. I put the ham in the top oven, the beef roast in the lower. This was easy. I could definitely do this. Eleven o’clock—a little more than twelve hours to go and this day would be behind me.

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 94
Shower. Shave. Breathe. I sat on my bed in my bathrobe for a long time, working my hands through my wet curly hair. I got dressed. Took my pills. Cooked the green beans. Checked the meat. Jenna actually had to dust the dining room table, we used it so rarely. She set it herself, carefully, with our mostly-unused china.

“It just looks so much prettier,” she signed. “Hardly anyone ever comes over.”

Dad hovered over my shoulder in the kitchen. “You’re sure there’s nothing I can do?”

“I promise,” I signed. One thirty. Everyone would be over soon. Everyone as in my two friends.

Saima was early. She brought dessert, a thin pastry she called “patisa”. She had Charlie with her. He brought his appetite.

“Smells good,” he signed. “Merry whatever.”

Saima gave him a look. “Thanks for inviting me. I was just going to sit on the couch all day.”

“Well, we weren’t going anywhere,” I signed.

A beat of silence.

“Thanks for the pastry,” I signed. “It looks really good.”

They sat. Made small talk with my sister and each other. I pulled the meats, carved them. Breathe in. Then out. My anxiety was starting to make crackly stars behind my eyes.

Dad popped open a bottle of wine and let Charlie and I drink some. Saima refused, instead opting for seltzer. “Happy Holidays, anyway,” Dad signed. “It’s good to have some company.”

“Good to be here,” Charlie signed. “Avoiding another day of watching Ann and Phoebe mack on each other, anyway.”
Saima nudged him. “Be appropriate.”

For a few minutes we ate in silence. This had to be some kind of side effect. I’d made ham this same exact way before and it was fine but now it tasted dry and salty. My stomach started churning.


Charlie nodded, chewing furiously.

“Well, we’re happy to send you home with leftovers,” Dad signed.

I stared down at my plate. I could barely bring myself to eat. The wine, though it was a sweet white, was bitter to me.

“You okay?” Saima asked.

“Fine,” I lied. “I just think the wine’s not agreeing with my meds. That’s all.”

“Sucks,” Charlie signed. “If my parents would let me drink and I couldn’t, I’d be pissed.”

I tried to make myself smile. “Excuse me.”

I went into the downstairs bathroom and sat on the closed toilet for as long as I dared, doing the stupid breathing exercise which was supposed to switch off the panic in my mind but rarely actually worked.

I would not break down. I would not. There was no reason to. I was here with my family and my best friends and we were eating a good meal and we were going to hang out. It was all going to be fine fine fine.

I left the bathroom. Dad and Jenna cleared the table and did the dishes for me, which I normally didn’t like because they put everything in the wrong spots, but for now I let them. Made coffee and tea. Charlie and Saima and I sat on the couch. It was only three in the afternoon.
“You sure you’re okay?” Saima asked, her signs small and close to her body. “You look kind of pale.”

“And you’re pretty white, so that’s an accomplishment,” Charlie signed.

“Yeah, my stomach’s just kind of off,” I signed.

They both looked at each other.

I sighed. “All right. Fine. I’m really struggling today. I don’t know why.”

“Holidays suck,” Charlie signed.

“I know how much visiting your family means to you,” Saima signed. She squeezed my elbow. “You’ll see them soon.”

My eyes were starting to burn. The sympathy was almost worse. If I relaxed at all I was going to lose it.

“You’re doing great,” Saima signed. “Really. It’s been, what, two weeks you’ve been out? It’s going to take some time.”

“I wish it never happened,” I signed. “Now things are weird and kind of fucked up and I hate it.”

“I know,” Charlie signed. “To be fair, it’s been that way for a while though.”

Saima nudged him again.

“No, he’s right,” I signed. “Since this summer.”

Summer. July, hot sparks thrown into the air. I hadn’t known about what happened to Dmitri. I had been at home, sleeping in, it was a summer Sunday and I had had nowhere to be. They’d called my house. Dad had taken me out into the yard. I saw it happening to me, a disembodied version on me. I couldn’t remember what he’d looked like, probably in a suit.
“What?” I’d asked. Sometimes when these things happen you just know, you feel it before you know, inside your gut. The grass needed to be mowed. It was one of the jobs I’d set myself for that day, anything to ease the anxiety of Dmitri being missing, he’d been missing two days.

“There’s something I have to tell you.” Yes, he’d said something like that. He was wearing his lawyer mask, maybe he really had come home from work, a half day, a summer half day. But it was Sunday, he couldn’t have been working. “Are you listening to me?”

“Like what?” His excessive eye contact was throwing me off.

Dad put his hands on my shoulders. “They found Dmitri.”

“Oh thank God.” The relief was bright but there was a stab of pain in it because I could feel the next thing coming, the “but”, there was a reason he wasn’t just telling me this casually over tea inside the house.

I remember him hesitating. Looking exhausted. Tripping over words. Then finally, “Aaron, they didn’t find him alive.”

I don’t think I did anything dramatic like faint or puke. I don’t think I reacted at all because he added,

“Aaron, do you understand?”

And then the shaking started, inside of me, not outside, strange and sort of surreal.

“What?” Had I made something up? He wasn’t signing, I could never lipread his accent well, maybe I had misunderstood.

“He’s… love, I’m so sorry. He’s passed away.” Still staring at me, gauging the reaction.

“How,” I signed, from a million miles inside my body.

“You don’t need to know now.”
“No, tell me now.” Cracking, starting to break. These things get inside you slowly, bleed from the inside out. My hands trembled.

He exhaled. “There was an accident on I-87,” he signed slowly, rather clinically. “They think he was hitchhiking. A truck driver hit him. He stopped when he saw it happen, but by the time the ambulance arrived he was already gone. It was probably instant, the doctor said. He wasn’t in any pain.”

I touched my mouth. I remember that, my shaking hand against my lips.

“I’m so sorry. I know you loved him.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to do now.”

He didn’t have an answer. He never did, not when there was real pain in things.

I remember the strength leaving my body, kneeling on the grass, the sharpness of it biting my knees. I know Dad didn’t leave me but I don’t remember anything of what he said next, I don’t remember anything, I just remember pain twisting around and around until everything else was numb.

Where had he been going? I-87 ran north to south, not east to west. He’d always said he would go west if he ever ran away. Was it really an accident? Or had this been something he’d tried to open in himself?

Was that why I was seeing him now?

11.

“…Aaron?” Saima was trying to get my attention. “Are you okay?”
I shook my head. “I just… need a few minutes,” I signed. I pulled away from them and dragged my body up the stairs. I felt numb, my skin all crawly, stomach sick. Up into my room. Close the door. Dig under the bed, find the brown milk crate full of notebooks and papers.

*Unfathomable Distance.* A stupid, irrelevant, pretentious title. I dug through the pile, all the way towards the bottom, the very first drawings we’d made together, when it was just ideas. My first character designs. The way he’d goaded my style, molded it, made it something blocky and unlike me.

The way that, during some of these brainstorming sessions, his lips would brush against mine, and we would forget about drawing anything at all—

The door opened, spilling bright light from the hallway into my room. Charlie.

“I’m sorry,” I signed.

“No. It’s fine,” he signed. He came and knelt next to me. He gently pried the notebooks and papers from my hands and put it back into the crate. “I’ve been thinking about him too. Since you last came over. It’s only been a few months.”

I shook my head. Had Dmitri killed himself? I couldn’t get the image out of my head, him there on the highway, watching all those massive Mack trucks and cars speeding by at seventy, eighty, ninety miles an hour. A body stepping into the fast lane, then nothing. It was not an easy way to die.

Charlie drew me into his arms and held me until I stopped trembling.

I met Dmitri my first week at the school for the Deaf. Up until sophomore year my hearing was good enough to get along at a mainstream school but once it really shot the bed I had to transfer. I met Dmitri because he was one of Charlie’s friends. I met Charlie because he found me having
a panic attack in the bathroom and asked me if I were okay. He invited me to sit with him and his
friends at lunch. And that was that.

I wasn’t instantly attracted to Dmitri. He grew on me slowly, like a tide coming in.

“…You’re an artist?” he asked that first day we hung out alone at my house.

“Sort of,” I signed. I shook my mouse to wake my computer and pulled up a drawing I’d
done, one I was proud of at that time. It was a quick sketch of a fox in the snow.

Dmitri touched the screen. “You’re really good,” he signed.

“Thanks.”

“No, I mean it.” He turned to me, eyes sharp and serious in the way they were when he
really meant something. “You have real talent. Do you have anything else?”

I bit my lip. I was still embarrassed at sharing my art at that point. I opened my file of
drawings I considered semi-okay and let him pore through it.

“How long have you been drawing?” he asked.

“Since I could hold a marker,” I signed.

He clicked and clicked through image after image. Hardly anybody gave my drawings
this much scrutiny, not even my art teachers of the past. I bit my lip.

“It’s stupid,” I signed after a while. “Really, you don’t have to look at them.”

“I want to,” he signed. “You should share these. Put them on the internet. A lot of people
do webcomics.”

I shrugged. “I don’t have many ideas.”

He gave me a look. “There are so many ideas here,” he signed. “You’re brilliant.”

“You just met me,” I signed. “I’m actually a dumbass.”
“No, I know what I’m talking about.” He poked the screen. “This? It’s gonna get you far. And I want to be there when it happens.”

After Christmas, the days started to roll into one another. The meds made me foggy, the meds made me sleepy, the meds made it hard to sleep. 

The med’s weren’t the right word but it was as though all of my feelings had been bound and gagged, pulled out of focus. On one of these undays my psychiatrist, Dr. Vu, was finally able to pencil me in to see if the meds needed adjusting from the hospital. I waited for her to summon me. It seemed I was always waiting for something.

Dr. Vu had an office that was a perfectly polished mahogany box. Maybe it wasn’t all mahogany, other than those massive dark bookcases, crammed with medical texts in bland colors, maybe some of it was stained maple, or oak. Dmitri had showed me the difference once. He’d taken woodworking in high school, hand on the small of my back, wood samples spread on the table. I’d touched them. The subtleties in color, texture, the whorls of the grain. He’d wanted to be a carpenter if art didn’t work out. Build houses from the ground up. I kept looking for him still. Any ginger was suspect under my eye. He was dead. I was just crazy. That was that. Like everything else it would go away with time. Or so they said.

She took me into the office. We had a requisite talk about my stay in the hospital. Deterioration. I should have never gone off the meds and all that. She looked at the list that I was on now which was actually double-sided. “Yes, I think this is a good start. You responded well to Prozac in the past. I’m a bit concerned about you still having a quick-acting anxiety med in your possession, but as long as it’s controlled, there’s probably more benefit to you than risk.” She didn’t sign but she was always conscientious in the way she spoke to me—clear, direct, and

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 102
upfront, mouth visible, room lighting good. It was a shame she was a psychiatrist, not a
psychologist. “Have you been experiencing any side effects?”

Dr. Vu’s lavender blouse was perfectly pressed in sharp creases and she crossed her legs
at regular intervals. Her pencils were lined up neatly on her desk, by size and color. Her office
always made me feel more at peace than Fitzl’s—that, and it always smelled like floor polish and
Lysol. “Headaches, mostly.” I think about telling her about the dissociation, seeing Dmitri, the
fact that I thought I might see him still. She wouldn’t think I was seeing ghosts, she’d think I was
hallucinating, and as I had no history of hallucination it would be a whole huge thing. More
medications. Maybe another stint in the hospital. MRIs, presumably, they’d looked at my brain
before, to see the serotonin, the dopamine. It had been for some kind of clinical study we’d
entered, some kind of new antidepressant I’d tried and quit soon after when it inevitably didn’t
work. I didn’t want to think about it, really. I wasn’t sure I believed in ghosts either but if he
wasn’t a ghost, then what was he? Maybe it was hallucinations. I couldn’t be sure.

“Yes, that’s normal. They might improve once your body gets used to the Lexapro. And
how has your anxiety been? More manageable?”

Panic laid a hand on my shoulder. And waited. Calmly.

I should tell her. I should tell her about the fact that, even though the Lexapro I was on as
well or maybe despite it, every time I ducked out of numbness and into something resembling
reality, it would latch onto me. Or that I still couldn’t have sex without freaking out afterwards.
But I had never told anybody about that. Only Charlie knew. And, well. Dmitri. “Yes. It’s been a
lot better.”

She smiled. “Well, then I’ll see you in a few weeks.”
Woozily, I left. My hands on the steering wheel of the car barely were mine. They were stiff and mannequin in unyielding black wool.

Maybe I was really having some sort of aneurysm and I would up and die right there on the Saw Mill River Parkway. Or maybe some alien was trying to slip into my brain, and this was how they were making their presence known. Or maybe—

I pulled over and put my head in my hands. After a long moment, I texted Charlie.

“Holy shit,” he signed. We were in a diner on the outskirts of town. It was near dinner and bustling. A waitress in a candy-blue dress poured us both coffees. It reeked like fried heaviness and wax in our small booth. The table surface was tacky to the touch. “So… like… you’re going to go to the hospital, right?”

“I don’t know.”

“Dude. If you don’t I’m hijacking your car and taking you,” he signed. He looked at the menu. “Are their pancakes any good?”

“I have no idea.” I didn’t want to eat. This had been his idea, for some reason. I felt eroded from the inside out. “You only have your permit, anyway.”

“I don’t care. If it’s an emergency I can drive. That’s, like, serious. Seeing shit. That’s not normal.”

I was regretting telling him about it now. “What if it’s just nothing and I’m making a big deal out of it?” The coffee was weak and stale on my tongue.

The waitress came back and took his order.

“And I don’t think my family can take me being hospitalized again,” I continued. “I don’t know what to do.”
“Well, I’m your figure-outer,” he signed. He leaned back in the booth. “Let’s go down there, to the ER. After you eat.”

“What am I supposed to tell my dad?” The colorful neon lights seem to have dimmed.

“You don’t have to worry about it until they bill your insurance,” he signed. “Right?”

“I think—I don’t really know how it works—I’ll just… call Dr. Vu and tell her about it. I really don’t feel like going to the ER.”

A few minutes passed without speaking. He stroked the rough edge of his butter knife and stirred more sugar into his coffee. Speckles of white fell onto the napkin. The waitress brought out his order, a massive stack of pancakes, with eggs and bacon and a side of cantaloupe, sheeny pale green. She also brought a second plate and he began judiciously serving some to me.

“I’m not hungry—"

“Eat,” he signed. “Besides. You offered to pay, so you better eat, or I swear to God, I will call 911 on your ass. I’ve done it to others, and I’ll do it to you.” He slathered butter on syrup onto the pancakes and cut them roughly.

“I don’t think that warrants calling 911,” I signed. “I’ll do something if it happens again.”

He shrugged and kept eating. “Sure you will, bro.”

Outside, wind battered the poor stringy trees struggling to grow next to the busy road. They swayed precariously in the snow. “How is… how’s work?”

He gestured to my pancakes. Gingerly, I cut off a bite. It was typical diner fare—its flavor depended far too much on starch and fat—and it tasted kind of like cardboard to me. Maybe I’d had some sort of stroke, and it totally fried all my senses. Even my ears felt weirder than usual—full, and ringing more loudly. More likely, I tried to tell myself, my hearing aids had just died. When was the last time I had changed the batteries, anyway?

Living Strange by Allison Giese 105
“Sucks,” he signed. “Inventory’s coming up and all the big boys are flipping shit. Guess who gets to count every item on every shelf in every aisle in the goddamn warehouse?” He gestured to himself. “And if it’s not all perfectly perfect then they don’t get their bonuses, and we all get yelled at for not being careful enough, and we all go on wanting to kill ourselves a little bit more. You know? Of course you know,” he added to himself. “Just be lucky you don’t have to work right now, right?”

“I wish I were,” I signed. “I hate being stuck in the house all day with nothing to do. Jenna and I have been hanging out, but she’s got other friends as well. I’m looking forward to going back, actually.”

“Lucky you,” he signed dryly. He ignored the fruit on his plate.

I blinked. “Is something going on? You seem kind of… I don’t know… angry?”

“What makes you say that?” He stabbed into his eggs, flecking some onto his shirt. “My good clothes,” he signed dryly. “I guess I’m just… frustrated with a lot lately, alright? Ann and I might not be able to make rent.” I went to speak but he shut me up. “And don’t you even, okay? I have to at least pretend to have some dignity.”

“I thought you were working full time?”

“How much do you think I earn? We live in a natural disaster waiting to happen, but it’s still a thousand a month. Plus electric, water, gas, wifi, food, and laundry. So, you know. And because Ann just changed jobs, they’re not getting a paycheck for a few weeks because biweekly pay is ass, and it keeps going, and going, and going.”

I tried to keep eating because I wasn’t sure what he’d say if I didn’t.

“So, yeah, I might be a little snippy. I apologize. Truly.”

“You don’t have to apologize. You didn’t have to come out, either.”
He sighed. “No, I’m glad you got me out,” he signed. “I just don’t really have anyone to vent to. Saima’s always so busy. I feel bad.”

“She’s our friend, she likes being there for us.”

“I know. But I also know she doesn’t get it. She tries. God love her, she does. But advice can only be so sage from someone who can’t truly understand.”

“Wow. You should put that on a t-shirt.”

He rolled his eyes. “So there’s all that. I don’t know. Every time I think I’m getting ahead a little, moving up in life, something comes along to make me doubt all that. The toilet breaks. Ann loses their job. The landlady threatens to call the cops on us because of the weed. I don’t know. Depressing to think that I’ll probably be working at the ass warehouse until I keel over or kill myself.”

I was starting to get that funny, visceral ache of concern for him. “Whoa, dude, I’m afraid that only one friend at a time can want to kill themselves. You’ve gotta wait your turn.”

He nearly smiled.

“Are you getting bad again?” I asked. “In all seriousness.”

“I don’t know,” he signed. “What do you think they’ve got for dessert?” He reached for the small vinyl menu.

“Charlie,” I signed.

“Wanna split a brownie sundae?”

“If you want—” I wasn’t even done with what I had on my plate.

“I don’t know,” he signed after his enormous ice cream was brought out. It was almost as big as his head. “I just don’t feel right, but I don’t feel that horrible deadness yet in me, either. So I guess a lot’s wrong, but I’m not dying, I’m not like chomping at the bit to do anything reckless.

Living Strange by Allison Giese 107
You know what I do? I drink a Mikes and jerk off and contemplate that Dalí book you gave me like six months ago, and think about reading it, but then I watch dumb videos for three hours instead. And then I try to hang out with Ann, or go out for a walk, or go to the library. I feel dull. Mostly I just feel really stupid, especially when I read a draft Saima give me. And I try not to get mad at her when she asks to look at the new pictures I’ve taken. Because I’ve got nothing. Jack. Nil. Not even old stuff.”

I could barely keep up with him. His hands were moving so fast.

“And there’s a lot of situational stuff going on that just adds to it. Like what I told you. And I love you, Aaron, I really do, you’re my best friend, but you’re a fucking handful sometimes.”

This was true. “I know.”

“And that’s not your fault. I don’t blame you. But sometimes… sometimes I can’t find strength to do anything. And if I did, what would I really do anyway?” He ate a spoonful of ice cream. “Ugh. Refrozen. I also already know I have that seasonal depression bullshit, so how much of this is just my brain not getting enough sunlight, or whatever?”

“It’s still real—”

“Yes, I know. It’s still fucking valid.” His face was so sour, and also distant, like he had slipped farther into himself. “I almost wish I could go back to the time when we thought being sad and angry all the time made us cool and powerful.”

“That was pretty fucked.” I never knew what route to take with Charlie, whether to offer solutions, or validate, or distract.

He ate slowly, his expression distant and smeary. I hadn’t seen him cry since the funeral and hoped I wouldn’t see it now.
“Yeah. We were pretty pretentious. We still kind of are. Was that really so long ago?” I was only half conscious of what I was saying.

“No.” A pause. He picked at pieces of brownie. “I feel so small. I wish I were a kid again. Or a dog, or something. You know? No responsibilities. You just get to eat and sleep and shit all day, and maybe your owner bothers you sometimes, but you’re largely left to your own devices.”

“Why a dog?”

“ Seems like a simple life. Come here. Fetch. Sit. Here’s a treat. People only expect the minimum out of you. I think I’m done. We can go now.”

12.

A few days later Helen relented and said I could come back to work, though she insisted in her text that things would be different. I would be no more than part time, no more than a few hours a day. She said that my recovery should come first before everything, which meant Dad had told her more about the situation than he had previously let on. It made my dread my first shift back, even though I had previously looked forward to it.

That day ended up being a disaster anyway. I woke up late with a headache. I’d slept through my alarm and my phone had vibrated until it died. I rushed to shower, shaved clumsily, and took my pills without breakfast. My car didn’t want to start. When it finally did I got stuck in traffic on Center Road, and then finding parking was a nightmare. I was fifteen minutes late to open the store. I fumbled with the keys and dropped them in the brackish slush, and then found that the door was already open.

The whole store was maybe five hundred square feet. Bookshelves crowded most of the space—the dry smell of paper and heat hung in the air. A tiny table and few broken armchairs
hid in corners of the space. Most of them had a leg or two bolstered by some of the older books, or cut tennis balls. The soporific blue children’s corner had a few toys strewn about, and its small shelf housed picture books, in jagged messy lines. The floor was uneven and scratched with decades of footprints.

Helen was counting in the morning register. Her infant daughter, Theresa, was still in her car seat, happily sucking on a teething ring. Helen’s thick hair was pulled back behind a faded paisley bandanna and her overalls were stained with white wall paint. One of the brass latches had been replaced by a large coat button. She looked up.

“I’m so sorry I’m late—the traffic was a nightmare—I don’t know why. I think there was an accident and everything backed up—” I headed towards the office.

She grabbed my shoulder as I passed. “You don’t have to be here.” Her eyeliner was smudged. “I’ve got it, okay? You should go home and rest.”

“I want to work,” I told her.

“Do you?” She adjusted the pile of notebooks for sale. “You’re pale, shaking, and I’d bet money that you haven’t eaten today. Can you even make it through the day?”

I had before I’d gone into the hospital. “It’s not fair to you.”

“I did it before you worked here. There’s not exactly a lot to do.”

“That was before you had Theresa.” I glanced behind the counter. “What are you talking about? It’s a mess in here.” Piles of reject books sat in a box where we usually put things customers hadn’t wanted. “When was the last time you did these? And… dusted.”

She exhaled. “If you don’t pass out somehow, you can stay until lunch. And then you’re going home. Okay?”

“Fine.”
She really had let the place go to seed in the past ten days. Piles of papers and book donations had accrued. All these books were from one person. I had no idea how we would be able to sell them all. Post-It notes filled the event journal. None of them had dates or phone numbers or more than just a few scribbles of what someone wanted to do at some point.

I started organizing. Helen gave her daughter breakfast. There was a tedium to this work that was soothing. I tried to find room for some of the new books we’d received, but a lot of the shelves were crammed full and I refused to stack two or three deep because then the system would devolve into barbarianism. I started pulling things that I knew had been sitting around for a long time and marking down the prices to put on a sale rack out front. The price gun was jammed. My fingers shook when I tried to get the roll of labels out. I used white stickers and a marker instead.

The baby was done with her bottle. Helen set her up in the kid’s corner with some paper and disappeared into the office but she forgot to give the baby something to draw with. I pulled out a packet of Crayola markers and set them on the table. I handed the baby a periwinkle blue one and as a special thank-you she chomped into my wrist. I swore.

Ten o’clock. I forgot how slowly time passed in here. It was like another dimension. The screen door to the office was propped open, and a fan blasted directly inside. I didn’t understand how Helen could be hot when the heat was broken half of the time. I cleaned the front counter and started sorting the papers she’d received. A lot of them were manuscripts—she liked to do readings of new work—but some had sat under the leak in the ceiling, and they were bloated and waterlogged. A patch of ink stained the painted wood of the counter.
The room was fuzzy with dust. It hurt my eyes. I reached for the feather duster, only to find that it had been moved. I spent longer looking for it than I should have and grabbed a semi-clean rag from a basket under the register.

Outside the wide windows faces passed quietly on the street. Most of them were middle-aged but a few young parents with kids moved quickly through. The bright colors of their parkas flickered in the street, purples and oranges and pinks. Wellington boots in so many colors, some with prints, animals, hearts. I remembered my own pair of galoshes when I was little, with the little terriers on them, and the same exact feel of the rubber against the skin. The rag in my hand caught on a patch of sticky goo. My knees ached, so I sat for a moment on the stool behind the counter. I was dizzy again, despite an increased dosage in medication. Not the same catastrophic vertigo like in the day I’d been admitted but enough to give me pause.

Eleven o’clock. I picked up one of the donated books. In my hands it was solid and weighty, with a slim paper cover in green and pale brown. My eyes passed over the description on the back. Another copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, with another boring critical essay. It would go when somebody picked it up for a college class. The challenges were the middle-of-the-line books, the books your grandmother gave you when she was done reading them, the beach books with mediocre writing and plots that attempted to titillate without being meaningful or interesting at all. Shock violence. Shock sex. Sometimes both. Literature was so complicated. So vast. I’d rather draw, or look. The art books here were better—weighty and old, from all over, mostly garage sales—but they also went quickly. People liked to cut them up for Pinterest projects. I didn’t get that. It felt like silver blue sacrilege.

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 112
Someone touched my shoulder; Helen held out a mug of tea. I took the chipped mug and held it close to my face. Tea was always something I wished I liked but never could. “More Nora Roberts?” I asked. “You don’t have to keep taking this stuff.” I sipped at the bitter strong tea.

“Well, then where is it going to go?” she asked. “I’m not going to throw it out. It does sell. Eventually. Even if it’s not high literature. I quite enjoy them.” She lifted up one of the novels which had a straight couple kissing on the cover.

“And there’s nothing wrong with that. Not—er—my cup of tea.”

She smiled. “I thought I raised you better than that.”

We both watched water drip from the leak in the ceiling into the plastic compound bucket I’d put behind the register.

“What happened?” she asked. “Your dad didn’t give me much to work with.”

I felt it again, the sticky staticky humming in my bones, in my head. Bad/wrong can’t/wrong stupid/wrong, never’ll amount to anything, why even try. Better to quit while ahead. It sucked at me.

“It’s not important,” I signed. “Please drop it.”

She leaned against the counter and picked up one of the manuscripts I’d organized.

“These should be fun at least,” she signed. “Most of them are… pretty bad. But fun. Dragons. Really. I’m so sick of fucking dragons. Nobody can produce this on a shoestring budget.”

I shrugged. “I guess you never heard back from that producer about your play.”

“No. I didn’t expect to, honestly.” She tugged at the fake button on her overalls.

“It’s a shame. I liked it.” It had been good, a mystery thriller in a small mountain town.

The protagonist was a flower presser. She made stationery. That was a thing I’d like to do. I loved flowers, how bright or pale they could be, the soft petals like velvet. I’d never been much
of a gardener and I’d tried. The soil at our house was no good. Too acidic, too rocky. Nothing grew but weeds. I picked up a pencil and a piece of paper and started doodling one of these flowers. The shapes came out blobby and weird, like something a child would do.

“They probably wouldn’t find anybody Deaf to do it anyway.” She drummed her hands on the counter. “You know that a dance studio took the spot next door. They’re supposed to be moving in today.”


“I don’t know. But it means rich parents, which might mean more business. God knows we need it.” She nodded to herself. “You should probably be heading off now. It’s noon.”

“You’re not going to let me finish my tea?”

She took the cup from me and drank it all in a swallow. “You hate tea.”

I rolled my eyes. “All right.” I handed her the drawing of the flower, a daisy. “Kind regards.”

“Wait.” She touched my elbow. “The moving truck’s here. Let’s see who the hell these people are.” Helen watched, her bony pale elbows perched on the windowsill, as a couple of burly men unloaded a U-Haul. “So many boxes,” she signed. “What do you think they’ve got in there? Tutus?”

“I don’t know. Scenery stuff. Chairs. What do ballet studios need?” The varnish of the counter was gummy beneath my fingers. “Go talk to them?”

“Who’s gonna watch the munchkin?” She jabbed her fingers towards the kid’s corner, where her nine-month-old daughter was scribbling all over butcher paper with bright smeary tangerine Crayola. She snorted. “How’s that bite feeling?”

_Living Strange_ by Allison Giese 114
I looked at the bandage on my wrist—princesses with flowers, from Helen’s diaper bag. As much as I’d doctored it, I couldn’t help but think of where Theresa’s mouth had been. As she drew, she occasionally sucked on the end of one of the markers. “For someone who only has four teeth, she really got blood.”

“My little killer.” She smiled. “She’s a regular Sunny Baudelaire, don’t you think? Oh—you should read her *A Series of Unfortunate Events* next time you’re here. Show off that nice pretty hearing voice of yours. We’ve got the first one still, I think.”

“Isn’t that kind of intense for a baby?”

She shrugged and continued gawking out the window. “I want her to be a weird, intense type of gal. Or guy, I suppose.”

I glanced at the sales on the tablet nearby. Eight people had bought paperbacks since we’d opened four hours earlier.

“Now that’s the dress I want,” she signed, jabbing at the window. I wiped away the fingerprint she left behind.

“It’ll look great with your torn bandanna,” I signed without looking. In the middle of the street, carrying a chair in both arms, was a girl in a bright crimson dress. It was an A-line cut, not something you’d wear to carry around dusty furniture. Her hair was pulled back into a tight bun, which was so symmetrical that I was surprised it was real.

And then I saw her face and groaned. It was juice girl. She had told me that she did ballet.

“That’s her,” I signed.

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” Helen signed.

“Juice girl. From group.”
She snorted. And then she laughed, a deep, obnoxious belly laugh that crumpled her in the center. Theresa laughed too, and clapped her hands. Helen went over and scooped her up. “Fucking small world. Why don’t you go talk to her?”

“Fuck you,” I signed.

“Profanity! Not in front of my daughter!” She covered Theresa’s eyes. In response, the baby clamped her jaws on Helen’s left hand. “…I guess I deserved that.”

“Hurts, doesn’t it?” I signed.

Later that afternoon Charlie and I sat parked in front of the TV. It was getting late and I knew I should be getting home because I had to work in the morning. Charlie’s hand rested on my knee, warm through the fabric. We both pretended to watch the animated robots dazzling across the screen.

“I’ve got group again tomorrow,” I signed. “It was pretty fucking weird last week. Some of them kept gawking. And then I spilled juice all over this poor girl. I don’t want to go back.”

“Then don’t,” he signed. He ate some chips from the bowl on his lap. Thin wisps of crumbs clung to his fingers.

…I have to. It was a condition of release. I have to get the stupid lady to sign off on the forms every few weeks.” At least the living room wasn’t as cold as upstairs.

“I watched the original, of this, you know.” He pointed to the TV, resolutely playing the new Voltron. “This is a remake. It’s… it was awful. You know in the first episode the whole planet got nuked? And kids watched this shit.”

“Seems kind of brutal.”

“It really is.”
A few more minutes passed. The couch was soft in a garage-sale broken-in kind of way. A grape soda stain covered the arm nearest to me.

Charlie turned to face me. “We should go out. Do something. You know?”

I took a deep breath. “Like that?”

“I don’t know. I’m always holed up in this fucking apartment. We could go into town.”

He needed to shave. Jagged, wiry hairs stuck out of his jaw. He wasn’t able to grow a full beard, something he berated himself for. Instead, the patches of hair looked sadly prepubescent.

“Everything’s closed,” I pointed out.

“Not the Sev. We could walk down to the corner and… I don’t know, get some snacks, or something. What do you feel like? Maybe we can get one of those rolls of cookie dough—or—I might have the stuff to make cookies, if Ann didn’t do it when they were high.” He rolled the hem of his shirt between his fingertips and looked at the dim lamp on the coffee table.

I didn’t want to say anything but his pause warranted a response. “…Where are they? Ann?” I asked instead. “They’re never around anymore.”

“They got a new job as an overnight janitor at this elementary school. Sounds to me like Silent Hill,” Charlie signed. “But… it was the only thing they could get. You understand.”

I did. I had seen Helen’s tiny ad in the paper purely by accident. Everywhere else I had applied—grocery stores, restaurants, chain retailers—had seen my education, that I had gone to the school for the Deaf, and never responded. Even Charlie, who passed as hearing even better than I did, had only been able to find work in a warehouse.

“I was thinking of getting my bartending license. Seems like good money,” he signed.

The next episode of the cartoon shone out of the box at us in bright insistent colors.

“You’re underage.”
“Yeah, but I can still make the drinks, I just can’t have one.” He sighed. “And… well… in a loud club, who would care if I were hard of hearing? I’m just so sick of where I am now. Just the same shit every single day. I need a job that’ll let me save up for school. Not stocking shelves for minimum wage.”

I tried to think about that. “You could try trade school.”

“Even that’s expensive, man. You would not believe.”

“I do believe.”

He snorted. “No. You really wouldn’t.”

What was that supposed to mean? “Oh?”

“I mean, dude, you have to admit, you have it pretty good. Money wise. You said yourself that you’re privileged. College fund and everything.”

I couldn’t seem to follow his line of thought. “I mean, of course I am.”

He sighed. “Forget about it.” He shook his head and reached over to pause the TV show.

“Let’s go for a walk.” He held out his hands.

“Now? Why?”

“Why not? We’re young. Spontaneous. We used to so much cool shit last year.”

“We also used to do way more drugs.”

“Like weed is really a drug.”

I shrugged. “I’m really—I’m really tired.”

“Come on. Around the block. Please. I’m dying here.” He raised an eyebrow.

His brown eyes were wide and desperate. “Alright. Fine.”

We headed out along the street following the orange glare of the streetlights. Charlie pulled his coat around his neck. “Pretty fucking cold.”
“You should wear a scarf. That’s how you get sick.”

“Okay, mom.” He nudged my shoulder. “What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing. Really.” It was true. It was a deep void. Empty and largely thoughtless. Getting through it was like treading mud.

We turned the corner. There was a little threadbare and rusty park where the neighborhood kids used to play. Charlie headed towards the swings without a second thought and I followed him through the snow. Cold oozed into my socks. The swing set only had two working seats which had to scream tetanus. Charlie swiped the snow off both of them and sat down. My eyes caught the rotted fencing and the overflowing garbage can and I couldn’t help but think that no kid should have to play in a place this dirty. In the darkness we could see the four-way intersection and the 7-11—everything lit up in bright neon red—illuminating that the whole block was falling apart. Some of the windows on the houses were covered with boards or blankets to keep the cold air out. A homeless person pushed a cart of their belongings away from us. Boiling heating oil filled the air with a smoky smell. I perched on the swing and watched my breath float into the sky.

I used to enjoy stuff like this. Going out in the middle of the night. So-called “adventures” which usually just turned into convenience store runs and we pretended that the cashiers didn’t notice we were wasted. We always felt very clever for not getting caught. Summer bonfires with other friends we’d had before Dmitri’s funeral, most of whom had disappeared, moved, or cut us out of the friend group afterwards. Only the handful of us were left when it all simmered down: Charlie, Saima, Ann, Ann’s girlfriend Phoebe. And me. A hot flush scalded the back of my neck and I saw again that dreamlike image of him in the middle of the road, caught in my headlights.
“I can’t stop thinking about him,” I signed.

“Me, too,” he signed. “You mean Dmitri, right?”

“Feels like so long ago.”

“Aaron, that was last summer. All the debauchery? Just a few months ago.”

I pushed the swing back and forth and found it aggravated my vertigo. “Yeah, I know.”

Charlie did the same, but he went higher than I did, back and forth, and I became worried that he might fly off. When he came back his face was all red and splotchy but his eyes were dry.

“Do you ever miss him?”

“No,” I signed. My heart clenched. “Is that bad?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Charlie bit his lip. “I don’t miss him, either. I think I’m still mad at him. Especially after what he did to you. You shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, but he was a real piece of work. Talented. But nevertheless.”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t his fault. And it was such a shitty way to die.”

“He manipulated you, Aaron.”

“He was messed up. He wasn’t trying to hurt anyone.”

Charlie squeezed the chains of the swing hard for a moment. “I guess not.”

We swayed in silence for a few moments.

“He wanted you to be something you weren’t,” he signed finally. “That’s not something I can forgive.”

My head whipped around seeking the boy in the Genesis shirt. But I didn’t see him. I didn’t see anything. What I could imagine was the way he spoke, in great rushes, hands flying. The disbelief and the needling when I told him I liked girls too, and if I liked them so much I should just go out and get one, like a girl wasn’t a human being. He did that a lot whenever I
expressed interest in something that had nothing to do with him. Wanting to go to a museum in
the city with my father? He made me feel guilty for not inviting him. And so on, and so on, and
so forth. Charlie’s words dredged up a lot of things that I knew were wrong but I hadn’t realized
until too late.

The void inside me was cracking and the chaos started to wake up. “He did that to the
rest of us, though.”

“Not like that.” He kicked at a mound of snow.

“He said… he said I was the only thing worth living for.” I laughed. “Do you know how
much pressure that is?”

“I do,” he signed after a long moment.

My heart beat hard and slow and I wanted it to stop. I wondered if this was how
hibernating frogs felt.

Charlie touched my hand. “Let’s go back,” he signed. “It’s getting too cold out here,
anyway.”

The whole way back the void pulled. My body was a foreign heavy thing and I dragged it
along the pavement. I tried to tell myself it was because of the cold but I sweated in my jacket.
Dizziness followed, cold and insincere, and I let it obscure my insides.

Jackets hung, boots dripping snow on the linoleum, I kissed him and wondered if I should
try to find my way back to myself before I was too far gone. His arms slipped around me and
pulled tight. “It’s fucked up, but I need you,” he said.

I could feel I was breathing but the air hurt. “Upstairs?”

The frigid room with the small hard bed. We tangled there, aloof and messy, slipping off
clothes. We both trembled and pretended it was from the cold. We hadn’t gone so far in a while.
I couldn’t feel anything. I could feel entirely too much. I was afraid that I would start crying in the middle and this whole supposed-friendship thing would collapse under its own weight.

He was gentle. He’d always been. I’d nearly forgotten the awkwardness of it, especially even the strange embarrassment of the orgasm and everything that led up to it. We must have been noisy and the thought made me mortified.

When we were finished we both sat still for a moment, not making eye contact. I waited for Charlie’s usual one-liner joke but he was silent and resolute. He brushed the sweat off his brow. Neither of us spoke until after my requisite panic attack.

“…Every time?” he asked finally. He didn’t sign. “Does it even happen when you masturbate?”

“Sometimes,” I said. “To be honest, I haven’t in a while. I… can’t bring myself to. It’s so messy. And for what?”

“…To feel good?” Charlie offered. He kissed my cheek.

I shrugged.

“That was pretty fucking intense,” he said.

“Yeah.” I was quiet inside. Smooth like a pebble. I shut my eyes. “I guess the swings really get you going?”

He snorted. “Oh, always.”

My skin itched. I pressed my hands between my thighs. I had to go, to drive home, to shower, to get ready for work. A million other stupid things. Wash the dishes. Do my laundry. Things that piled up and got neglected.

He pressed his face against my shoulder. “You should stay,” he said.
I should. It was late. It would be so nice to wake up not alone, to sit in a house not stony with silence, to not force my way through another tepid conversation. “We both have work tomorrow,” I said. “And my dad’s going to worry.”

He frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

Charlie laughed. “Wham, bam, thank you, ma’am.”

“Maybe… maybe next time.” I started gathering my clothes.

“Well, don’t say it, because I’ll hold you to it. Cinderella.”

And when I got home and sat alone I cried like a baby for any number of reasons.

13.

Group this week was another bland topic with another bland conversation. This week we were talking about the benefits of meditation. Thankfully, Dr. Wood didn’t actually make us meditate, and instead only assigned it as “homework”. After another improv game, this one involving sentences pulled out of a hat, it was over, and it was time to go home. Louise started out on her commute back to the city. I had to get Dr. Wood to sign off on my release form.

“…Aaron,” she said, glancing down at my name tag. “I was hoping to have a word with you.”

“About what?” I eyed the felt tip marker in her hand. She grasped the form firmly.

“Well—I know things may be a little less intimate, what with…” She trailed off.

“The human subtitle machine?” I said.
She offered a hesitant smile. Her lipstick had smudged onto her teeth. “I think you could come to enjoy being here, if you would allow yourself. I know it seems difficult, or annoying, or a waste of your time. But you’ve got a lot in common with these kids. That’s the point, as it were.”

I shrugged.

“I’d like to hear what you have to say in discussions,” she continued. “You don’t have to agree with me. Half of the work in this group comes from questioning what I put forth.”

“I don’t have anything to say,” I said. I wished she would just sign the paper so I could go home.

“I don’t think that’s true. Everyone has something to say.”

I wondered if she owned a book where she got all these lines. It must be a psychologist thing. Hana had said them. So had every other psychologist I’d seen over the years. “Yes. Right. Of course.”

She pursed her lips and looked down her nose at me. “I think I will hold onto this,” she said. “At least until next week.”

“But why?”

“Participate in the discussion, and you may find out,” she said. She slipped the form and her clipboard into her handbag. “Have a good night. Be well.”

I watched her climb up the stairs in disbelief. I’d done everything I was supposed to and yet I was still in trouble. A heady exhaustion clouded my eyes as I followed her back up into the lobby. If I got thrown back into the hospital because I wasn’t participating enough, I was going to be pissed.

Juice girl sat outside on the curb. My head was still buzzing with a not-quite-there anger which was awake and hot. Her shiny black hair was still pulled back in its tight bun but fluffy.
bangs hung in her eyes. She was reading something. When I passed in front of her, she looked up. She said something.

“I didn’t get that,” I said. “The human subtitle machine is off the clock.”

She stood up and came a little closer into the light. “Does she follow you everywhere?” She asked.

“No. Just here.”

“But you read lips though.” She held the book against her side and I tried to make out the cover.

“Yes. Occupational hazard.” I reached into my pocket for my keys.

“I heard it’s hard.”

“More… tiring, than anything,” I said. “And inaccurate.”

“Sorry,” the girl said.

“It’s not your fault you don’t sign,” I told her.

She shrugged and pulled the collar of her jacket closed. It was white wool, surprisingly clean, but the elbows were starting to pill. “You work at Fine Print, don’t you?”

“Well… yes.”

“I thought I saw you the other day. I would have said hi if I weren’t busy.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I wanted to. Isn’t that the whole point of this? So people can get to know each other?”

I shook my head vaguely. “Do you normally wear dresses when moving?”

“Oh—that.” She laughed. “Harper—my boss, the dance mistress—she has this weird thing about new spaces. You want to bring the good energy in. She asked me to dress up, and I had just
dyed that pink dress. She wanted to create a welcoming, fortuitous space. Personally I think it’s tosh. But she paid for dry cleaning.”

“She sounds… eclectic.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

The streetlights in the parking lot popped off to cool. “…Waiting for a ride?” I asked.

“My mom has the truck tonight. I try to take myself. You?”

I pointed vaguely towards my car, which was thankfully no longer very visible.

For a moment we both pretended to pay attention to the car slowly driving down the street. “What were you reading?” I asked her.

“Persepolis,” she said. She held up the book, which had a picture of a woman leaning onto her fist on the cover. “It’s about this Iranian girl who survives the Islamic revolution. Pretty intense stuff. She’s kind of a badass, actually. She loves punk and tells this nihilistic guy to fuck off.”

“An acceptable response,” I said after a moment.

“I’m only about halfway through. I like graphic novels. Some people write them off, because they’re not serious literature, but they’re more impressionistic, you know? Overall. Sometimes I think it’s more meaningful.” She brought the book down by her side.

“So it’s a comic?” I tried to get a better look at it. I’d heard of the piece but I’d never read it. I hadn’t actually read a physical, non-Internet comic in a long time. I used to go to the comic book store diligently every Wednesday, not for superheroes, but for the lesser titles, smaller titles like Prez and Low which were beautiful and compelling and better than anything I’d ever do.

“Well. They’re not really comics. It’s still a novel. It’s still got a plot that arcs, and whatnot. It’s just more visual. I’m more visual. I like to see things, instead of having to wade through lots of boring description. Lay it out on paper for me and I can figure it out. Besides, what comics have you
read? Because if it’s anything from the DC New 52, it’s going to be garbage regardless.” She spoke quickly and I could barely keep up.

I smiled. I hadn’t read much of the New 52 but I felt much the same about it.

A battered pickup truck rolled into the parking lot and stopped some twenty feet from us.

The yellow headlights glimmered in the cold.

“That’s my ride,” she said. “I’d check out the novel. And I bet you only read the serious stuff, right? Aren’t you an artist?”

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s the shirt under the sweater that does it,” she said, and got into the car.

I did look up the graphic novel. We had a copy of it in the store but only the first of the two volumes. Bloated and dog-eared, it looked like someone had dropped it in the bathtub. But the images were still visible. At first I wasn’t too terribly impressed with the art style—I found the black and white to be a bit heavy-handed, simplistic, even careless at times—but after a while, even following only the images, I found myself sucked in. She was right, impressionistic was the word for it. I had to know what happened next. I tried to find the second volume online but to no avail.

I couldn’t remember the last time something struck me like that.

Juice girl came into the bookstore later that week. Her face was still pink with exercise and she carried a small duffle over her shoulder. She waved and started browsing.

“So she is human after all,” Helen signed.

“What else would she be?” I signed.
“I don’t know. A robot. A fanciful anecdote. You might as well make nice if she’s going to come in here all the time.”

“Maybe she won’t. Maybe she’ll come in once, realize that the owner is talking about her, and never give us any business again,” I signed.

“Look at her, she doesn’t understand a single thing we’re signing,” Helen signed.

Amanda had been watching our hands move, a befuddled expression on her face. “Hello,” she said out loud.

Amanda smiled and said hello. She browsed the skimpy graphic novel section—which consisted mostly of comics bought at garage sales—and came back empty handed. “…You’ve got Aquaman,” she said.

“That’s about it,” I said. “But there are plenty of copies of *Harry Potter* floating around.”

“Read it,” she said. “It’s entertaining but I would have preferred it if Hermione was the main character. Or, like, a brown person.”

Helen nodded appreciatively at this. “Have you read *A Series of Unfortunate Events*?” she asked. I interpreted.

“What’s that?”

“It’s not a graphic novel,” I said. “Neat illustrations, though.”

Amanda shrugged. “As long as it’s easy to get through, I’ll check it out.” She brought our battered copy up front and paid the few dollars for it.

“…I read *Persepolis,*” I told her. “I’m dying to find the second volume. I care about her so much.”

“Right? Oh. You should see the film. It’s all in her style. It’s brilliant. It’s in French, though.”

She fished in her bag and pulled out the second volume. “You can read mine.”
“…Are you sure?”

“Well, I’ll see you soon anyway,” she said. “If not in group, then here. It’s a book, right?

Not the end of the world if you keep it. As long as it gets read.”

I took the copy. Unlike ours, it was slick and new. The whole thing was so smattered with Post-Its I didn’t know how she saw the images. “Thanks. That’s really nice of you.”

She shrugged. “And thank you for the recommendation. I hope I like it.”

“You will,” Helen said. “I just wanted to pawn it off on somebody,” she signed.

The novel was heavy in my hands. I flipped through to the second part of the story.

January

2017 began without fanfare and the days slowly crawled into one another. I wasn’t able to get into the class the dick professor made me retake but there was a spot in Intro to Studio Art. It required a small portfolio and for two days I sweated over what to chose before randomly cobbling together a few drawings and comics that weren’t complete shit. I was overridden almost instantly into the class, which told me that the portfolio was probably just a finality. It was a base level class, after all.

Living at home I hardly felt like I was in college. The first day back of the new semester I made myself a PB&J with fig jelly. A juice box I’d bought for Jenna—strawberry kiwi, her favorite—a shiny knobby apple, and some chocolate chip cookies, and I was ready to go. People assume that because I like to cook everything has to be complicated, even school lunches but I like things easy. Simple.
A shiny new notebook, pages flat and naked and without lines. Smooth new pencils in a pack. A sketchbook, spiral bound, paper medium heavy, tucked behind. I hadn’t wanted to look at it but it seemed to have snuck into my bag on its own.

“You should have just taken the semester off,” Saima told me one day as we were leaving class, British lit. Our school was a public one, with outdated, old, 70s architecture. Of course she’d dreamed of Gallaudet—and she had gotten rejected, mostly, the administration insisted, due to “the largest pool of applicants to date”. Saima still believed she’d be able to transfer in within the next year or two. I tried to make myself think I would but in all probability I would finish my degree out here.

“It would have been a waste of time. I’d just be sitting on my ass anyway. At least now I get to hang out with you and Louise. And not wreck cars, like Amani.” I nearly smiled but couldn’t get the elastic of my mouth to stretch. Amani was her sixteen-year-old younger sister and she’d just gotten her learner’s permit.

She groaned. “It was only a side mirror. And she just started. Cut her some slack.”

We funneled in with the panoply of students going to class. “You’ve got sociology now?” I asked.

“Yes. Lucky you. I get Louise next time. The other one they sent me last time, I swear, she could barely finger spell.” Saima rolled her eyes. “Oh well. Have fun in art class. Play along with the other kids. Don’t shove anybody’s crayons up your nose.”

That did make me smile, for real, and I was caught off guard. It felt weird. Unnatural, like. “Is that what you think we artists do all day?”

She shrugged. “See you, Aaron.”
The art studio was big and pearly white, like any studio I’d been in. North-facing windows. A dozen little work desks with stiff cardinal feathered red stools guaranteed to have your butt hurting in ten minutes. Walls of storage which would soon be cluttered with paintings, sketches, watercolors. I’d never really been too much of a traditionalist, instead sticking with my tablet and good old Photoshop, but I’d studied enough in high school to want to know more. And to have enough paint to kill a horse. I sat down at one of the random desks. The room was nearly empty and the air simmered with the smell of incense and paint thinner. I noticed a stick or two of incense taped at random intervals to the furniture. Didn’t the professors have to share these rooms?

People enter in twos and threes. Louise, head hidden under a beanie, took one of the stools and sat across from me. “I haven’t gotten to talk to your professor yet,” she signed. “She hasn’t responded to my emails about the accommodation.”

Of course. All the professors I’d had so far had understood about the interpreter but this was a tenterhook I’d never gotten used to. I missed high school, suddenly and painfully, and it sent a sour feeling into my throat. I understood why Saima was so gung-ho about Gallaudet.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” she continued. She took off her hat, revealing a bald pate, all her hair gone.

“You shaved,” I signed.

She touched it as if she had forgotten. “Just felt like it.”

I couldn’t conceptualize doing something like that on a whim. I hadn’t changed my hairstyle in years mostly because my hair didn’t like being anything but chin-length. A comic idea bloomed phosphorescently and I reached for it. A whole new style, deep edgy Depression Lookz, something like that—
Louise touched my hand. Class was starting.

The professor was an older woman. She had a thin, high nose that poked the air above her. Her silver hair was in pigtail braids and she had these rigid horn-rimmed glasses. Dressed all in baggy brown, her lips a tight tarnished maroon. “Sorry about the smell,” she said. “Someone in one of the other classes spilled a bottle of thinner—trying too hard to be Bob Ross, I guess.”

Nobody found this funny.

The professor cocked her head when she saw the signing but didn’t acknowledge it. “So you all made it. I hope you received my email about the assignment. I’ve found the system to be slow and buggy lately. Technology at work, people.”

“What’ve you got?” She asked me.

“I didn’t get the email. I’m sorry. I don’t have anything.”

She gestured to my bag. I opened it, confused. She took a brief look inside.

“'The lunch box,” she said.
I took it out, suddenly embarrassed. It was an old one, the only one I could find in the house, a child’s one with a shark on it. She whisked it to the front of the room and put the cell phone on top of it. I worried about my lunch.

Once the whole rigmarole was through she said, “Is this art?”

The room hesitated. Someone went to raise their hand and then withdrew it.

“A pile of random objects on a table. Why would it be art? I had no idea what any of these things would be. Neither did some of you.” She touched my box and the phone. “I threw it together without rhyme or reason. I didn’t think about it. This is a still life. Draw it. You have fifteen minutes.”

My head was spinning. I missed the calm orderliness of Mrs. Brock, my art teacher from high school, with her slideshows on the baroque period. From the back of the room it was hard to see. I wondered if I should draw in Louise and the other students as well but I had no time. I hesitated. The people around me were scribbling away. I sharpened my pencil and looked at the clean pretty white paper.

I started doodling the lunch box absently, imagining the contents. The pills—the Meclizine, the Lexapro, the Prozac—in candy wrappers, motivation sandwich (with cream cheese), a juice box of Excuses.

I didn’t realize the fifteen minutes were up until I felt the professor lingering at my shoulder. “Funny, that doesn’t look like the still life,” she said.

My face flushed hot. “I’m sorry.” Another thing for the comic—getting off on the wrong foot. “The still life made me think of it.”

She nodded very seriously. “I’m afraid I can’t count that as the assignment. I can, however, gently suggest you finish your leisure work during the break. Don’t want to start off behind, do we?”
I exhaled. I turned the page. “Right. Sorry, professor.”

“Professor is so… lofty.” She addressed the room. “Call me Petra.”

At home, I scanned the sketch into my computer and begin to line it. Titled it “School Dazed”. I put it online without fanfare, patching it through to the social media pages and website robotically. My followers never seemed to notice whether I posted or not. The last post I’d made before Christmas was just a simple sketch of a bottle of pills, the text, in a loopy ironic cursive— *Going on an indefinite hiatus*. I’d drawn it on a napkin in the psych ward when a nurse dropped a pen, posted it a few weeks later.

My bedroom was quiet and empty and growing dark. I went back and back and back through my archive some six months until I find the last page of *Strike Meets the Universe*. I’d only done the illustrating, nothing else. Though it had always been a monster to draw, that thing. I always redid the coloring. The balance never seemed right. The style he’d wanted—rigid, stiff, and simple—had felt awkward to me, strange, not when the story called for fluidity. Such stiffness seemed too amateur. I was capable of better, I’d done better. Still, I’d labored over that comic, day after day after day, pushing out pages of dialogue for the twice-weekly updates.

There it was, the last page. Elena, the main character, alias the eponymous Strike, and her friends had been put into a bunker by her archenemy. They had to find a way to escape so they would be able to save Elena’s mother, who had been captured. Elena, in her rust red jumpsuit, by the door, her words in a clinical font—“What are we supposed to do now?”

A comment, brand new, appeared below the image as I stared at it. *Well, what *are* they gonna do*, someone had written. The username peeked out at me and stabbed me. Dmitri. *I had it all planned out. Sorry every1, show’s over. Spoiler alert: the hero dies.*
I slammed the laptop shut and sat with my head in my hands for a long time.

I was still thinking about Strike the next day at work. My hands shook. I stared at my sketchpad, blank, empty, tried to conjure an image of Elena’s face, to get her to talk to me. But she’d never been my character, she’d been Dmitri’s. Siobhan, the witch from my other comic, was mine, and she too dozed in the back of my head. I nudged her gently. What do you want, she seemed to ask.

She was trying to learn magic in order to free herself, because her life was bound to the library where she lived. I saw the curse that had done it, this great black thing that loomed over her cradle when she’d been born. My head felt a little buzzy and my hand moved loosely, smoothly, across the page.

Someone entered the store in my peripheral. “Sorry, but we’re closing soon,” I said to them, without looking up. Shapes were emerging on the paper. Siobhan’s long scraggly hair, in that knot she always wore, the brown sweater that rough handwoven linen—big midnight eyes so black they could suck you up—I could almost see her face again. Almost. It was all a little blurry, out of focus. I tried to get her to come closer to me.

The customer approached the counter. “Can I help you?” I asked in a nastier tone than I meant and Siobhan’s face slid back into the abyss.

The customer and I stared at each other.

“I found you,” she signed.

My pencil froze over the paper.

“I can’t believe you’re here… that I’m seeing you.”

I wondered if she was a ghost too.

Living Strange by Allison Giese 135
She came closer to the counter. “Say something,” she signed. “I know this is a shock, but... I’m finally here. Mom’s home.”

She was smaller than I remembered and thinner. Her hair was all lank down her back. Her cotton dress hung limply around her joints. In one hand, a black plastic bag, crumpled and used.

“We’re closed,” I said out loud in a strangled voice.

“Please, I came all this way,” the woman signed. “Let’s at least talk. You owe me that much.”

“I owe you?” I asked. The words were heavy in my hands. “I’m sorry, what do I owe you, exactly?”

She rested her bag on the counter and lifted her hand as if to reach out and touch mine still curled around the pencil. She didn’t know what to say, either.

“Leave,” I signed. “It’s past six. We’re closed.”

A thin color rose in her cheeks, drawing my attention to her dried withered mouth. “I drove all this way to see you,” she signed.

“I didn’t ask for that.”

She shook her head. A smile crossed her face that I realized was probably nervous, involuntary. “Let’s at least talk.”

“About what?” Cold sweat beaded under my arms. I set the pencil aside before I could snap it in two.

“About why you tried to kill yourself,” she signed. She drew her hands through her hair.

“Why I—oh my God.” My breath was hot in my throat. “Don’t you have anything better to do?”
“I don’t understand, Aaron,” she signed. I could barely look her in the eye else I would see my own mirrored back at me, ugly tin gray, flat and corrugated. “You were always such a sweet, kind child.”

“Was I? Or is that just what you thought?”

She said nothing for a very long time. I struggled to figure out a way to get her out of here. And I couldn’t lock up shop with her in it. Well I could but nothing would come of it other than a headache.

“I thought you’d want to see this,” she signed. She pulled something out of her bag. It looked like a magazine, one of those flimsy, cheap, poorly edited things towns put out to advertise the next farmer’s market or music in the parks. Somersville Gazette. “It’s a little town in Arizona.”

“Why the fuck should I care?”

My mother opened the magazine and flipped through page after glossy page. The background of these pages was a dusty olive green that made me want to heave. She found what she wanted—a worn, dog-eared page titled Somersville Fine Art. Six panels of different pieces of art. A still life of fruit with jagged rough shading. Loose, sloppy, birds in trembling brush strokes. A kid’s drawing, in musty blue crayon, of their dog.

And then everything just stopped. I saw my own drawing in the little paper, something I’d put on Instagram last year, a sketch of a single drooping carnation in a vase, petals kissing the floor, thin trickles of color snaking down the stem into the vase, sneaky pink. Jenna had gotten it from her basketball coach after their championship game.
“The critic loved it,” my mother signed. “Said it was one of the most beautiful still pieces he had ever seen submitted. What you did with the color, making it look like the life was sucked out of the flower… he said that if they handed out prizes, you would have won.”

“I can’t believe this,” I signed. Something bright and angry pierced my numbness, shining heavy and shattering.

“Me either,” she signed, looking at it.

“You stole my art,” I signed.

She turned stiff, stony, the look on her face incredulous.

“How did you even find my accounts? I blocked you.” The fury popped and scalded. For a moment I was too angry to comprehend the lack of numbness, the clarity.

“Stole your art?” she echoed.

“Anything I post is mine, legally. You taking it, printing it, submitting it like it’s yours--that’s illegal.” I glanced at it again. She’d put it under my name, sure enough, like my name was her property and she could do whatever she felt. “What made you think you could do that?”

“I thought it would make you happy,” she signed but her former enthusiasm was about gone. “This is a good thing. People like this.”

There was no way this was really happening. I laughed, an uncontained bitter sound, until my stomach hurt. “If you wanted to stay in my life so fucking badly, then you shouldn’t have left,” I signed. “And what about Jenna? All this time, fuck Jenna. Why didn’t you ever write to her? Yeah, you sent her money, but you never wrote to her. Not like you wrote to me.” The words spilled from me and I laid them at her feet. “She misses you. She needs you. Did you ever think about that?”

My mother didn’t speak. She wouldn’t look at me. I knew I was right.
“What, do you want me to set you free, or something? Absolve you from all guilt?” I asked her. “Let you know it’s all okay, that I didn’t really die, so what does it matter?”

She had tears in her eyes and for a second I almost stopped. Was this worth getting upset over? “I expected better from you,” she signed.

I exhaled. “Well, then you’re wrong. Now I’m going to have to ask you to leave. You’re trespassing on private property.”

She paused. Through the heat in my eyes I saw her stricken expression. She took the magazine, turned away, and left, passing into the night.

For a long time after that I sat in the shop, on the floor. Something in me was unraveling again. I could taste it. Where could I begin fixing things? Not with her, but with everyone else. I didn’t know how to get back to myself. The therapy wasn’t working, the pills were barely working, friends and love and sex wasn’t working. Family wasn’t working. Art wasn’t working.

I lay on the ground and looked at the ceiling, the thin spidery cracks in the molding. I shut my eyes. I could sink through this ground. Disappear right now.

No, I couldn’t. I would be here for a long time, my life stretching on in front of me horribly. To be able to get through the day I would have to work at it, really work at it, push myself, crawl out of the classic hole in the mud that I was stuck in. It would be work, day in, day out. I didn’t know how I would do it. But I would have to. I had to survive this somehow. My other option was—what—rip another hole in my family?

I reached for my sketchbook and started drawing.
I was making headway into a cavernous sleep when a hand shook me awake. At night, half asleep and suddenly terrified, my animal body lit up with adrenalin and I switched on the lamp, hands held in front of me.

It was Jenna, in her red *Star Wars* pajamas, hair limp, face ghostly. “Jenna?” I signed.

“What’s wrong? It’s late.”

I could see the veins in her face. It looked like she’d been crying. “So, um,” she signed.

“Did you get sick?” There was a nasty stomach bug going around. “What happened?”

“I… I think,” she started. “I don’t know what to do…”

“Just tell me what’s wrong so I can help you.”

She looked mortified. “I started my period,” she signed. “Really bad.”

Oh.

For a second I hesitated, my brain wasn’t fully on. Of course. There were no grown women in the house, who else could she turn to? Dad, deep in a medicated sleep, like I had been?

“How bad is it?” I asked her. “Can it wait until morning?”

“Bad,” she signed. “It’s on the sheets.” Her blush grew deeper. “It’s not supposed to be this bad the first time.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re going to be fine,” I signed to her. “Are you… in pain?”

“It hurts real bad,” she signed. She started to cry.

“Jenna…” I hugged her and felt her sob into my chest. “I’ll get you what you need, okay?” Was there anything even open this late? There was a gas station down the road, but who knew if they had…? I handed her a tissue. “Go and take some medicine. It’s going to be okay.”

She nodded, still crying. “I miss mom,” she signed.

That hurt.
As it turned out, the gas station did have pads. Thank God. I grabbed some Midol while I was at it, and also some candy, slimy redgreen gummy worms, because I figured Jenna might need the comfort. The sleepy clerk gave me an odd look but didn’t say anything.

For a second I sat back in my car, staring at the little plastic bag, thinking hard and trying not to think at the same time. Why hadn’t I thought of getting some of this stuff for her before? Of course she was at the right age to start. I just hadn’t thought of it. It wasn’t like I could speak from personal experience. And of course nobody would have been around or thought to have a chat with her about it, either. I doubted the school’s health class would have been very informational. It was surprising she didn’t wake up thinking she was dying. Or maybe she had…

I got back on the road. Snow pounded onto the road but it was nothing my heavy old car couldn’t take. When I got back home he found her sitting on the side of the bathtub. “Well… here,” I signed, handing her the bag.

She nodded.

“Did you change the sheets? Or…”

She nodded again. “I left them on the floor. I wasn’t sure what to do with them.”

“I’ll… bleach it, I guess. Did dad wake up?”

She shook her head. “He took his sleeping pills again.”

“…Right.” A beat. “Will you be okay?”

“I think so.”

“…Alright. Um, before you go to bed, you should… put it on your calendar.”

“I will.” She took the package out of the bag. “Aaron?”

I turned.

“You won’t tell Dad, will you?”

Living Strange by Allison Giese 141
“No,” I signed. I sat down next to her. “There’s something I don’t want you to tell him, either. Okay?”

Her eyes widened. Jenna loved secrets almost as much as she loved being treated like an adult.

“Mom’s in town. I wasn’t going to say anything, but…” If I were her and loved Mom, wouldn’t I want to know about her? “You didn’t want to see her, do you?”

Jenna frowned. “She’s here?”

“Or she was. Yesterday.”

She brushed the stringy hair out of her eyes and looked down at the tile.

“It’s up to you,” I signed. “I mean, I don’t know where she’s staying or how long she’ll be here, but Dad could probably set something up for you.”

“I don’t know,” she signed. I couldn’t read her expression. “I have to think about it.”

Fair enough. I kissed her greasy part. “Try to get some sleep, okay?”

Fitzl’s office was freezing. He offered me a blanket. It smelled like cheap detergent and patchouli. “The furnace finally shat the bed,” he signed apologetically. “I’ve called and called somebody to fix it. But it’s so cold that there’s a waiting list. Everyone’s pipes are freezing.” He went to the wood stove in the corner and tried to stoke the fire. He plugged in a space heater. “Hopefully this’ll make things at least a little more bearable. How have you been, Aaron?”

“Not… great,” I signed. “My mom came to town.”

“You haven’t really talked about her before.”

I shouldn’t want to trust him. He hadn’t been nearly so cold and clinical like the therapists I’d had. He was still one of them. He was the gatekeeper.

_Living Strange_ by Allison Giese 142
“Your file says that your parents are divorced,” he prompted. “Do you have a relationship with her?”

I shook my head. “Not anymore. She’s a trucker. She just… well… left one day.” The anger burned hot in my stomach.

“Oh, dear.” He frowned. “Yes, that can be quite painful, I’m sure. How old were you?”

I sighed. “Fourteen.”

“Not a great time to lose a parent under any circumstance, living or dying.”

“This used to not bother me,” I signed.

“Well, maybe you convinced yourself it didn’t,” he signed. “I gather you’ve had to be very strong for other people. Is that right?”

I thought back to those awful first months after she left. It was like looking through a veil in my memory. That first week Dad had tried to keep it together but once she served him the divorce papers he broke down. Chainsmoked. Didn’t go to work for a month, grew paler and grayer. It was all so overwhelming, the house filthy, Jenna devastated. She was only barely nine at the time. I tried to manage it on my own, making TV dinners. One day my Aunt Kate called, to see how we were doing, and I cracked and sobbed on the phone. She was there the next day, driving the two hours from Albany. She cleaned the house. Cooked a decent meal. Told off my father but it would take more than that to help cure him. Taught me how to cook real food. She stayed two weeks and then turned the house over to my father, who inadvertently turned it over to me. “Yes,” I signed.

“That’s so much for a child to deal with,” he signed. “Not only are you trying to figure yourself out, as well as dealing with anxiety, you’re quite literally raising yourself. No wonder
your mother’s return is bringing up all these feelings. Probably you’ve never let yourself feel them before, because if you had earlier, you wouldn’t have been able to survive.”

I shook my head. I was used to having a therapist explain my feelings to me. Usually they were wrong but I nodded along anyway. Yes, that makes sense. Yes, absolutely. Just get me the fuck out of here.

“Of course, this is all speculation,” Fitzl signed. “How did seeing her make you feel?”

“Angry,” I signed. “Like, I’ve never been that mad in my life. I thought the whole “seeing red” thing was just an expression.”

“This is someone who was supposed to take care of you, abandoned you, and then all of a sudden shows back up,” he signed. “I’d be surprised if you didn’t feel that way. There’s something else I’m sensing, and don’t hesitate to tell me if I’m wrong. Your mental health may have deteriorated, but so have your defenses against the negative emotions you’re experiencing. The only way to move forward, I feel, is to confront these things from your past, to let yourself feel it, so it’ll pass on its own.”

“I don’t want to,” I signed automatically.

“Why not?” he asked. “This work, Aaron, is crucial to saving your life.”

I knew he was right and I hated it. A few moments passed. He let the silence sit, clearly waiting for me to fill it.

“We can take this session by session,” he signed. “I’m not going to expect you to do it all at once. You will begin feeling better. I’ve been practicing twenty years. I’ve gone through this process many times, and I’m sure you have too. But I’m not sure whoever you’ve seen before has handled your case properly. Bad counseling is worse than no counseling, in my opinion. A
lot of shallow things said, a BandAid slapped on the issue, and you’re discharged.” He shook his head.

I felt a lump gathering in my throat. Fuck.

“And I think this worsens the sensation of abandonment, detaches you from yourself even more. The people who are quite literally being paid to help you don’t care. So you start to feel like you shouldn’t either. Is that right?”

I nodded. My hands were shaking.

“Well, Aaron, I care. And I hope that you’ll come to learn that I mean it.”

I didn’t want to let myself believe him. I felt like I was burning again. I started to cry, not the frustrated stuff from the past few weeks, but real pathetic sobs that hurt my belly. He pushed a box of tissues towards me and waited, a patient expression on his face.

I didn’t calm down until the end of the session. My eyes were swollen and painful.

“Believe it or not, I think this is a good sign,” he signed. “You’re starting to let yourself be vulnerable with me, and more importantly, with yourself. We can work with this. I’ll see you in a few days. Text me if you need.”

For a while after it was over I sat in my car. Everything hurt, just a little bit. If I did what he said, it would hurt a lot. I couldn’t imagine a time when this would all end.

I started the engine and went home.

15.

When I got home from therapy Dad’s Lexus was in the driveway which was strange because it was light out. This was my first indication that something was wrong. I could sense it in the air
like a bloodhound. Panic flew into my throat and hesitated there, ready to choke me. With small, controlled steps I approached the door. Unlocked it.

He was on me before I even got my foot in the door. “Aaron. Oh my God. Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

I looked at it in my hand, heavy and dumb like a brick. “It died,” I signed.

The color was high in his cheeks and stained his pale face. He pulled his hands through his hair.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I can’t find Jenna,” he signed. He was shaking and touched his face convulsively. “She never went to basketball practice. She won’t answer her phone. I’ve tried all her friends. I’ve called the cops. They’re sending someone now.”

The room became shimmery and unreal. Stress leaked off of him, permeating the air, and even though my own heart felt like it might burst I knew I had to remain in control.

“I was hoping that she’d gone to your job,” Dad continued. “Helen said she hadn’t seen her. When was the last time you talked to her?”

I took him by the elbow. “Sit down,” I signed. I led him to the table. Made him some tea.

“Oh God,” he signed. “What if someone took her? Came up behind her and took her at the school?”

It was possible. It was more than probable. Sometimes the basketball team helped haul out the track and field supplies. They kept the supplies in a shed at the back of the school near the woods. Someone could have popped out and grabbed her.

“She went to school,” he signed. “The secretary said she saw her come off the bus this morning. Where did she go? Where is she?”
“The police will find her,” I signed but I didn’t believe it. A girl, snatched into nowhere—this couldn’t be real. I grabbed the charger that Dad usually left by the coffee pot and plugged in my phone. Turned it on. Waited for the notifications to load.

He sat huddled there at the table, eyes squeezed shut, mouth in his hands. Tears dribbled loosely down his face. He was mumbling to himself.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” I lied. I looked down at the phone screen. Jenna hadn’t responded to my text asking if she’d made it home but she had a tendency to ignore texts until hours later.

“They’re here,” he signed and darted towards the door.

Jenna, where are you, I wrote. Are you okay? Did you skip practice? Are you with a friend?

An officer in a stiff navy blue uniform came into the living room. My father’s face was tight, desperate and his chest was heaving. He spoke to the cop in rushes that I couldn’t make out. The cop touched his hand and said something with a reassuring expression.

“…I was at work when her friend’s mother called me,” Dad signed once he had regained composure. He slumped in his chair. “I grabbed the first train I could and called everyone I knew. Nobody’s seen her in hours.”

The cop asked something.

“No, she’s not the kind to run off,” Dad signed. “If she’s not with a friend, she’s at home.”

Another blank question. The cop had a mustache, which made it almost impossible to read his lips.

“She’s about 5’1”, twelve, she’s got brown hair and brown eyes. She’s athletic. Strong.” He pulled out his phone and dredged up a photo of her from her last birthday.
My phone buzzed in my hand. I jumped. Dad did, too. The cop didn’t as much as twitch.

It was a number I recognized, which made my stomach clench even more.

_Jenna’s with me, _the person wrote. _She’s safe. We’re in Pennsylvania._

Something wasn’t right. Other than my sister being missing.

_I didn’t realize she was with me until I had already crossed the state border. She must have gotten in the truck somehow and hidden._

“Oh, fuck,” I said out loud.

“Is it her?” Dad asked sharply.

“I found her,” I signed. “She’s with mom.”

The cop asked Dad something.

“…We’re divorced,” Dad signed. “I wasn’t even aware she was in town. How would Jenna even know where she was?”

“She visited me a few days ago at the bookstore,” I said slowly. “I thought she’d just left town. I told her I didn’t want to see her.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Dad asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t. I just… I didn’t want to deal with it—”

Dad abruptly picked up his phone. The cop said something else. Dad held up a hand, on the phone, waiting, waiting. He had a long conversation, back to both of us. I heard his voice rise. He shook his head, arms clasped to his body.

“It’s true,” he signed after he had hung up. “She’s with her. Sorry for all the trouble, officer.”

The cop nodded and said something else. He showed himself out.
“Bloody Pennsylvania,” Dad signed. My eyebrows shot up. “What is she doing? Oh, Jesus.” He picked up his keys. “I’m going to go get her. Your mother wants to put her on a bus. A bus. I think our daughter’s missing, kidnapped, worse, and she wants to put her on a bus. Are you coming?”

“Wait—where are they?”

“Town called Lewisburg,” he signed. “She said she’ll stay there until we get Jenna.”

I Googled it. “That’s like four hours from here.”

“Yes, well, I trust your mother about as far as I can throw her.” He grabbed a travel mug out of the cabinet poured the rest of the hot water from the kettle into it. “Are you coming?”


“You’ve never driven that far by yourself,” he argued. “And what if you have an attack? What if something happens to you? And in your car? It’s a death trap.” His gestures were harsh and snappish.

I grabbed my phone and its charger. “I’m going with you.”

On our way west we hit terrible traffic in New Jersey. Rush hour, combined with what looked like an accident, stranded us behind a long line of angry commuters. Dad drummed his hands on the steering wheel. “What am I to do with the both of you?” He signed. “You nearly kill yourself and your sister disappears into the ether.”

I leaned back in the seat. In here, cigarette smell permeated everything and it made me woozy.

“Am I going to need to start keeping curfew? Demanding you check in every hour?”
“Why are you asking me?”

He took his hands off the wheel. Pulled out a cigarette. Lit it. I watched the faint burn of the ember in the fading light. He cracked the window. We both waited in silence. “Why didn’t she say something?” Dad asked. “I could have put her in contact in a heartbeat. She never seemed interested. She didn’t seem to care. I could have given her the phone number. She didn’t have to go across the country.”

“That’s not true,” I signed. “She misses mom.”

“She’s talked about it?”

I thought back to the whisper blue night of the period. “Not much,” I signed. “But I know it’s still got to be affecting her. She doesn’t really know what happened. Hell, I don’t really know. All I remember is her just walking out the door.”

Dad exhaled a faint cloud of smoke. “We’re going to be here a while,” he signed. “I guess I should tell you the truth.”

“…Truth.”

He crossed his arms. Ground out the cigarette in the tiny ash tray. “You remember I met her in university,” he signed. “I was studying abroad. She was a journalist. Said she wanted to travel. I’d come halfway across the world from Scotland. Naturally that appealed to her. She was always very… quixotic, like that. Instead of paying her rent she’d just up and move into a new apartment. Or she’d quit her job as soon as she got tired of it, only to find a new one. I knew if I was with her it wouldn’t be for long. But we got along, and she stuck around until we graduated. She was the one who pushed me into this bloody career in the first place, after her best friend was deported. We both wanted to make a difference. Moreover, we thought we could.
“But before I started law school my application for a new visa was denied. I didn’t think that could happen. That didn’t happen to people like us, you know. I would have to go back, try to get into a school back home. You’ve never been there, Aaron, but there’s just nothing for miles and miles around. It’s hours by train to get anywhere. A pub, the shop, the school, sheep. So many sheep. Nothing to do or see. Lots of drug abuse. Nobody gets out. It seemed to me at that returning the worst thing possible. Now I realize it was quite silly. Quite immature.” He paused and looked out at the traffic. In the distance, we saw the twinkly flickering redblue lights of the cop car.

“So it was a green card marriage,” I signed at last.

“Yes. And no. I did love her. It was her idea, you know. Caused quite a scandal in my family. Here I was, marrying some woman they’d never met, never even seen a picture of. Your gran had the time of her life telling me off. I should’ve listened, but there you go.” His eyes had the blurry quality of memory.

I sat there in the car next to him. All these years we’d been family and I realized I barely knew him. He had always been a working shadow, here, then there. Mom and an array of babysitters had taken care of Jenna and I. He’d always tried to bond with us but it felt a little strained. A little like he didn’t know how. Strained. The same questions over and over. “How’s school? How’s work? How are your friends? What have you been doing all week?”

“So we got married. I was able to stay in the country. I started school. Your mother picked up a job with a local paper, other odd jobs, things to keep her busy while I studied. Everything seemed like it would be fine. But we started butting heads soon before I took the bar.

“She wanted to be a travel journalist, not some columnist for a tiny local paper. And if I wanted to go into this kind of law I would have to stay some place stable, some place I could
build my career. I think at that point my vision was a little broken. I’d realized just how hard it was to make a change—any change—for the good. They treat all these poor people so viciously. Not just parents, but kids, babies, the disabled and the elderly… I feel so helpless. But at that point… I had loans to pay, and a family to take care of, because by then she was pregnant with you.

“I don’t think your mother ever forgave me for making her settle down,” he signed. He lit a second cigarette. “I insisted it would be better for the kids, that somebody had to take care of you. I was so stupid. If I’d only realized—or tried—to really put you all first, I could have saved us all a lot of hurt.”

The cigarette burned in his fingers but he didn’t smoke it.

“So what was the final straw?” I asked. This didn’t seem real to me, still.

“She was offered a job by a friend of hers,” he signed. “The trucking company. We had a row because by then you were starting to get sick. I knew you’d need someone to help you through it. It should’ve been me. She said that, after all this time of a life she’d never wanted, she wasn’t going to give up her last chance, and if I cared so much I should be the one taking care of you two, not her. And that was that.”

The story hung in the air and crawled into my lungs. I peered through my own dim murky gray memories. It was so hard to remember being small and taken care of. Had she ever been cold? Raised a harsh word? On the other hand, had she ever been warm, caring, present, the way any parent should? I couldn’t remember. It was all foggy and soft and blank.

“No parent should abandon their child if they can help it,” he signed after a while. “Regardless of their lot in life. Have you felt…” He paused. “Aaron, have you felt like I’ve left you too?”
My breath twisted and I dug my nails into my thighs to steady myself. “Yes,” I admitted.

A purple-black silence tightened around the car, the color of a bruise.

He smoked down the second cigarette to the butt. “How?” he asked. His expression was stiff and I could tell he was masking hurt.

“You were never there,” I signed. I wanted nothing more than for this traffic to break so he could go back to driving. “You were always working. Even when you’re at home, I always feel like your attention is elsewhere. Like you don’t want to deal with it. Or how, like, after she left I was the one who made Jenna’s lunches, who cleaned the house, who made dinner, who made sure everything was working smoothly. You made me do all that. When she left, you wanted to go on like everything was fine, but it wasn’t.” A knot began to unwind in me, dredging up sour bitterness. “Sometimes it’s easier not to talk to you because I feel like you’re always busy. Like you’d rather be somewhere else.”

Another long pause. I couldn’t look at him. I continued on, speaking out loud, my hands pressed between my thighs because otherwise I wouldn’t know what I would say. “I just don’t think it’s fair that you got to move on with your life like normal but I have to do everything myself.”

“I don’t want you to feel like you’re a burden to me,” he signed. “Neither of you are.” He rested his head against his hands. “All this time, I thought I was doing the right thing. I’ve worked hard to try and make this a good life. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Good for who?” I asked. “Yeah, we don’t have to worry about money that much. But you’ve left no time for anything but work. You choose to take care of your clients instead of your kids. Maybe you’re helping those people but still. Still.” I didn’t want to do this anymore. “You’re supposed to be the parent. Not me.”
A police car crawled along the shoulder, redblue lights flickering. I could barely hear its wail.

“You know Jenna started her period?” I asked. I thought I might throw up. “She woke me up in the middle of the night. Me. And you know what she said? “Don’t tell Dad.” I’m eighteen. I’m a fucking kid.”

“I know,” he signed at last.

“Do you?” Acid burned in my throat. “Because—if things don’t change, I’m not going to get better.” My heart hurt. “I can’t do this myself.”

He wiped at his eye, a quick, convulsive gesture. I was tempted to tell him off for daring to get emotional. Fatigue was starting to bleed out my bitterness. “I’d say I’m sorry,” he signed. “But I don’t think it’d be good enough.”

Traffic was starting to let up. The cars, black and silver and red beetles, began to crawl along the road.

“Just drive,” I signed.

The rest of the trip to Pennsylvania was mostly quiet and dark. Night grew and deepened. I was exhausted in all meanings of the word. I found myself clipping in and out of a light sleep. Miles and miles of highway chewed into nothing. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been in a car this long with my father or if I ever had.

We got into Lewisburg a little after nine. The town was small and rose stubbornly on ribbons of highway. I didn’t see most of the town, just the one long route leading into it, traffic light after traffic light, strings of chain restaurants juxtaposed with antique shops and strip malls.
It looked like any generic place in America but wider and longer and smaller like it had been stretched. Gluey.

They waited for us at the local Wal-Mart where Mom had been making a delivery. She hadn’t even bothered to turn around.

“Wait here,” Dad signed once we’d parked. “I’ll be right back.”

“No,” I signed. I rubbed at my eyes. “I’m going.”

The parking lot was massive and almost deserted. I glanced up at the bright shining bowl of the sky which here felt closer, almost smothering. The big box store loomed and blotted the horizon. I wished I had brought something to sketch on.

I saw it, finally, the rig. It looked exactly like every other truck I’d ever seen, strangely naked without the trailer behind it. The light was on inside. Its paint job was a mushy purple, pale and runny. It already looked old. There was a rusty scratch across the wheel well.

The door opened and out came Jenna, weak and kind of shambling, not meeting my eyes. Her backpack was full to bursting. The bright yellow zipper taught and stretched. She came over into my arms wordlessly and stayed there a long time, shaking.

After a moment our mother got out of the rig. She wore thin metal glasses.

Dad touched Jenna on the shoulder. “Are you okay?” he asked.

She looked up long enough to nod and rested her chin on my collarbone. Her heart was beating so fast, like a rabbit’s.

“…I went to a stop to shower and feed the cat and noticed her hiding in the cabin,” Mom signed. “…The cat was scared of her and almost escaped.”

The air was cold and damp. In the cold streetlight something in me clenched.
“She wanted to travel with me,” Mom signed. “But I knew she had to go home. It’s not safe for her out here, not where I stop. I keep all kinds of crazy hours.”

“Yes,” Dad signed. His expression was harsh and indifferent like it had been hewn from stone. “Well. Let’s go, kids. It’s a long drive home.”

“That’s it?” Mom asked.

“Yes,” he repeated. “That’s it.”

“I wanted—” Mom began. She hesitated.

“You wanted to put her on a bus,” Dad signed. “In the dark. At night. After our other child nearly dies.”

“I didn’t know what else to do. I have a schedule to keep—they track my mileage…” she trailed off. “Will I see you again soon?” she asked me.

“I don’t think so,” I signed.

“Can I keep writing?” she asked. “I’ll write both of you.”

“You can write,” I said. “I can’t promise I’ll read them.”

“Do you…” Mom couldn’t find the words. Jenna looked up at her. “Do you hate me?”

“No,” Jenna said. It was so rare for her to actually speak out loud. I knew that she’d never liked it, that spoken word had always felt like tin in her mouth, hard to wield and sharp. “No, I don’t feel anything at all for you. You…” her hands were trembling. “You saw me and all you cared about was the cat.”


“Yeah, it is,” Jenna said. “It’s okay though. Well. It’s not okay. But I don’t want to waste any more time hating you.” She turned to me and added, “We can go home now.”
“I’m sorry,” Mom said. She reached towards Jenna as if to touch her but withdrew her hand. She nodded. “Take care of them,” she said to Dad.

“Of course,” Dad signed. He laughed a little to himself. “Goodbye, Lorraine.”

“Goodbye, Adam.”

We climbed back into the car. I saw my mother get into the cab and start the engine, her face already blurry with distance. The silhouette of the truck trailed into the night, out of the parking lot and onto the highway. Jenna and I watched it.

“You, missy, have a lot of explaining to do,” my father signed to her. “But let’s eat first. I’m starving.”

To be honest now that this had all passed I realized I was ravenous too. We went to a diner, a dive. They got cheeseburgers oozing grease. I ordered a soup, French onion, the ugly industrial bowl crusted with cheese. The diner’s turquoise and salmon color scheme made me even more exhausted. I felt as though I had entered a liminal space, that this was all a dream.

I got up to use the bathroom and on the way back I saw him. Dmitri, nursing one cup of weak coffee out of the checkered cups. We made eye contact for a prolonged moment but I shook my head. Not now. I went back to the table.

16.

The night we got back from Pennsylvania the wind kicked up into a blizzard. I woke up in the morning to find my bedroom window screen filled with snow, thick and rich and violent. The snow, mid-February, had led to the kids’ schools closing, while the rest of us had to go about our day unfettered by the ice and the slow drivers and who-knew-what-else. Helen told me she was taking the morning off and that I better sleep in, too.
I sat on the couch with Amanda’s book and saw the fat specks of white pile up on the porch outside the door. I saw my neighbor’s fence, and their neighbor’s fence, each in a long unending line of houses that looked more or less the same, all the way up to, in the far distance, the houses that the contractor had defaulted on. All that were left behind were the skeletons, finished in some places with plywood, but otherwise naked, bones poking through snow.

I had a sudden reckless urge to play. With the snow, hop on a sled, slide down the non-existent hills. Come home, sweaty with frosted cheeks, to hot chocolate, a warm soup for lunch, a cozy movie on TV.

We had no sled. There was nothing to make hot chocolate with. And the TV was playing nothing but old sitcoms. I put the book down, slid on a jacket and snow boots that were too small and walked outside into the drift.

It was that kind of pleasant cottony snow that took its time. Clusters of several flakes broke on my elbows and nose. I felt the quiet pressing up against me, though I couldn’t see it. It felt like a sigh, nice and smooth.

The streets of the development had yet to be plowed, so I trudged through acres of white. A few kids built a snowman on one of the yards. Their scarves and jackets seemed so bright and neon. The snowman didn’t want to take form. The snow wasn’t wet enough. A mom in snow pants came out with a pan of hot water, and melted the snowman by accident.

I pushed forward, down the gently curving drive. We used to live somewhere else before this, a tiny townhouse in Scarsdale, which I could only remember vaporously at the back of my mind. It was very crowded and the streetlights always glared into my bedroom window. We moved here just before Jenna was born. This house was based on a model, very modern, granite countertops, hardwood floors, a lot of room for entertaining, a real estate agent’s orgasm. I
remember getting lost in the house, those first few days, because there was so much space for four people. Too much, a considerable excess. We hadn’t had enough furniture to fill the space.

Cars were parked obediently, sheeted under the snow. Mazdas. Lexuses. BMWs. This was a land of city commuters with good jobs and stable incomes, who threw barbecues and teas and get-togethers a few times a year, everyone is welcome but space is tight, I wish they would finish those homes, so ugly, I’m going to call the homeowners association. Space. Always an obsession with space, the spacious, but nobody ever seemed to notice that you could barely see the stars.

I only dimly knew who my neighbors were. On one side, a German couple with their children in college, on the other, newlyweds from Jersey, I thought the wife was expecting, either way they were here to have kids because the schools were good and this was a good (white) neighborhood. We communicated solely in waves, or nods. We didn’t go to the parties anymore, not since Mom left. Dad worked too much, that was always the excuse, but the truth was he couldn’t stand the looks, the silent judgement. If we weren’t good enough for one of our own, how would we be good enough for anyone else?

Plus everyone always gave my car a dirty look.

I stood in front of the unfinished part of the development. There was a barricade to stop kids getting in, and a faded “COMING SOON” sign, with the contractor’s number. The houses were eerie, sloping gently upwards on an incline, some of them more finished than others. The finished ones had been subject to several years of weather damage. One of the ones that was purely scaffolding had collapsed during the last bad summer storm. The HOA tried to call the police. The city. But there was some boring legal battle going on that I probably could figure out, if I cared.
There was a hole in the fence of the barricade, which some genius had cut open with wire cutters. I looked behind me. Nobody was watching, nobody was even close enough to see me. And I slipped through.

The house was all the way down on the right-hand side, just out of sight of the main road. We stared at each other. It was more finished, a bright Tyveck wrap shrouded the structure, but there were no doors and windows. No roof. It looked old, piled with white. Only my footsteps punctured the veil. Nobody else had come here in a long time.

“A failure in development,” Dmitri would say. “They couldn’t spread out thin enough.”

The monolith of the structure looked like any other house on this street, too many bedrooms, emptiness and nothing to fill it with. Nobody had taken anything from this place because there was never any copper piping to steal, no windows to shatter. It was purely abandoned.

It took a real effort to go inside. I felt as if I were stepping into a fairy ring, into an alternate universe. I was basically begging for something bad to happen. It was just a house.

Even though it had never been finished, it still had watched.

I hadn’t let myself come here in a long time.

“It’s all bullshit,” Dmitri signed. We smoked cigarettes purloined from his mother and pretended to be grown up. The sun was hot against the thin hairs of my bare belly. Sometimes here it rained and there was nothing to shield us from the drops. Now, it was dry. And so hot.

I kind of liked the cigarettes. There was a nice rush, it was true, like the world slipping both out of your control and into it at the same time. “What’s bullshit,” I signed wearily.
“The concert. We got there, all decked out, all excited, a little drunk, and the interpreter never shows up. Wait here, the concierge said, and I did, and then everyone else went to their seats, I told them I would wait. But they never showed up. I tried to complain, but the guy at the counter wouldn’t read my notepad. By the time I got into the auditorium, to get someone oral, it had already started. Ann told me not to let it bother me, that it wasn’t worth the stress.”

“Well, Ann’s right,” I signed. I was still bitter. I had not been invited.

He kissed me on the cheek. His skin was so smooth, like a doll’s, half of the time I didn’t believe he was real. “You know I wish you had been there. You probably would have enjoyed it more. But the tickets were theirs, and I’ve known them longer.”

“I know,” I signed.

He stubbed out the cigarette on a paper plate and reached into the milk crate behind us. He took out a stack of papers—in black and white—and fanned them out. “Look. It’s the new issue of Strike Meets the Universe. Hot off the press.” He handed me a pencil. “Work your magic.”

I took a look out at it. The writing was sloppy and all over the place. Sentences eddied awkwardly into each other, characters gave exposition at the wrong time, the story was arguably too political to stand on its own. I started correcting his grammar instead of sketching. “If you want me to draw it,” I told him, “you know you don’t need a lot of this information. You can just show it.”

“But I wrote it all,” he signed, “why shouldn’t I include it?”

“If Elena had heat vision in chapter thirty-two,” I signed, “why wouldn’t she just use it to melt the bars holding them in the cell?”
“Dramatic tension,” Dmitri signed. He traced circles on my thigh, tracing upwards, and I found it hard to concentrate. “Or maybe they were drugged.”

“Then you have to, you know, include that.”

He kissed me and tugged his hands through my hair. “I love it when you get editorial.”

Getting to know him was probably the strangest part of our relationship. Dmitri was less good looking, more striking—regular, flat white features, hair dyed a bright red with Kool Aid, boxy, compact shape. He spoke in epithets and liked to buy antiques. Not records, or jewelry, but silly useless things, like empty tea tins, or half crushed buttons, or single shoes.

“I’m going to make a modern art piece,” he signed when he invited me over to his house. He lived in an old apartment complex off the highway, five minutes from my development, but somehow in another world. People on top of people on top of people. The neighbor in the next unit was playing music so loudly I could actually hear it.

“Where are you going to put it all?”

“In a gallery. The MoMA.” He chewed the end of his pen.

“And how do you plan on getting it there?”

He grinned. “Why, they’ll pay for it, of course. And then people will come from all over to gawk at it. “Beautiful uncut hair,” I’ll call it.”

I looked at the cardboard box of shoes. A once-white yellowed high heel, a crusty brown slipper that must have belonged to an old man, a baby’s sneaker, bright green with blue laces, among others. “What do you mean?”

“Whitman,” he signed. “From Song of Myself. “And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.” You read it?”

Living Strange by Allison Giese 162
“No.”

He was scandalized. “I finally found something you haven’t read! What was the bet?”

I shrugged.

“You have to remember the bet we made,” he signed.

“We were pretty drunk that night,” I signed. It had been the first time I’d gotten drunk, heavy and tingly and ecstatic, at one of Phoebe’s parties.

He lifted his nose into the air, as if offended. “I find something you haven’t read, and you owe me one kiss.”

“Kiss.” My face burned. “I don’t think it’s right that you hold me that when I was under the influence.”

“Fair is fair. One chaste kiss. Pretend I’m your grandma. I’ll be good, I promise.” He grinned. “You would think you’d never kissed a boy before.”

My breath hurt. My throat had gone tight. I had not kissed a boy before. I had not kissed anyone.

He came closer to me and caught a loose curl on one hand. I felt the heat of his hand through my shirt. He had to lean up to get to my mouth. He was right. It was chaste, a peck, and then it was over. “See, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” he signed.

I touched my mouth.

“Oh.” He flushed. “That was your first, wasn’t it? Why didn’t you say anything? It was… it was just something silly. You could have just said no.”

“I don’t know.” My hands shook. The air between us had become weighty. Something new was opening in me, a side of myself that I hadn’t known before.

“A do-over.”

“Like this.” He pressed his hands to the side of my face and kissed me again, gently, slowly. Goosebumps cropped across my skin. His bedroom was warm. It was always warm, it was the summer. I could never separate Dmitri from summer.

The snow was worsening. I thought I should probably go before it got too difficult to get home.

The house was empty. We had cleared almost everything away. All of the chairs, the milk crates of books and notebooks, the cases of empty glass bottles of God-knows-what, the ash trays: all of it was gone. Ann had wanted to leave it there, in the first few bleary days after we’d heard what happened, leave it as a memorial. But them someone said that some HOA representative or another would come and empty the whole place out, and we should probably save the art. I thought maybe it had been me that said that, it seemed like something I would do.

I remember that day it had rained, mid-July, insufferable humidity giving way as we tried to herd it all into Ann’s jalopy pickup truck. Right onto cases of *Strike Meets the Universe*. As I watched the ink start pooling down, Ann shoved me and grabbed the case.

“What are you doing standing there?” they signed, eyes bright and angry. “You’re letting it get ruined!” They shoved the crate into the cab. “If you’re not going to be able to help us, go home.” They pointed towards my house.

“Be cool,” Charlie signed. “He’s had it rough.”
“We’ve all had it rough,” Ann signed. “I knew him longer than you two.” They bit their lip. Watery streaks of green hair dye ran down their neck, into their white shirt. “Save the art,” they repeated and ducked back inside.

Most of Dmitri’s stuff did get saved, but as for the rest of us, books became waterlogged and gluey. I puttered around, picking up empty glass bottles, as Charlie tried to salvage the rest. I was numb, depersonalized, encumbered, it seemed very easy to run into things. Charlie came up behind me and took off my hearing aids. “They’ll get wet,” he signed. “Don’t get worked up about them,” he added out loud. “They don’t mean it.”

I shrugged. My hands were sticky with the residue of wine coolers and beer.

“We should probably come back another day,” he signed. “Let’s just get the basic stuff gone. It’s a wash. We’re all wet and miserable.”

The air was wrong. I didn’t like how this felt but even worse was the sense that this thing was just getting comfortable. I thought the weight of it might kill me.

Charlie hugged me. His arms were wiry and strong and for a moment I tried to get free, but I was too tired, so I rested against his shoulder. “Let’s get out of here,” he signed.

I decided I was going to smoke. For the moment, it seemed right. It would be nice to have something in my hands. I never missed the smell, or the flavor, but I liked the fake sense of occupancy. A fullness. *I’m gonna have a smoke.* Straight and to the point, an easy-to-complete objective. An acceptable deviance from the norm. I lit one but it tasted wrong on my tongue, worse than dirt. As it burned I twisted the end of my scarf, breathing nicotine and carcinogens and regret.
There was a lump in the snow larger than the rest. It must have just been a board or a concrete block or something but I swept the snow off it anyway. A box, a shoebox, done up like a little kid’s school diorama. Inside was the yellowed high heel from Dmitri’s project long ago, as well as a votive candle, glued down. And an old-fashioned Polaroid, swollen, of us at one of the parties, in a neat solid line: Saima at one end, eyes sarcastic; Charlie next, one arm hanging on her shoulder, Mikes in another, saluting the photographer; Dmitri in the center, face luminous but eyes unfocused, the lighting scarce and smoky. Ann at the other end, smirking like they always did, too cool to smile; and me, lodged between them. But I wasn’t looking at the camera. I was looking at him. That was the worst part.

It was almost too maudlin, too unreal. Someone had to have come and left this, deliberately, the candle had been partially burned. Saima? No—she had grieved in her own way, made it work for her, and the handwriting on the photo wasn’t hers. I didn’t know whose it was.

I slipped it into my pocket and left the rest. This would all be wet and ruined soon enough.

17.

“…Aaron?”

Fitzl’s office was always either too cold or too warm and it made me sleepy. Maybe it was the medication or a general malaise but today I could barely keep my eyes open. “What did you say?”

“You were just telling me about Amanda.” Oh, right. I’d fed him that so he wouldn’t bring up Mom again. I’d had about enough of her for a while. He sat back and sipped at his tea.
It was a fruit tea, a raspberry, and I could smell it. “So you have made a friend? One that likes books?”

It didn’t sound like an achievement. Oh, look, I made a friend! Wow! So great! “I’m not sure if we’re friends.” She’d lent me her books. She visited me at work when she had time. She always came to me first at group. She hadn’t been at the last one. I worried about her, I realized. “I mean… I guess so. I was the new kid and she saved me from sitting alone at lunch.”

Fitzl adjusted his glasses.

“It’s nice to have someone to talk to, no strings attached,” I signed. “No baggage. Just book club.” I wanted to take a nap. “I hope she’s okay. She didn’t come last time.”

“Flu’s going around something wicked. Maybe she got sick.”

“…I guess.” I hadn’t liked that look in her eye. She’d looked haggard, had left without speaking to anyone. I didn’t have her number or anything. Maybe her boss knew what was up and I could ask.

Or maybe I was overreacting and that would be overstepping my bounds.

“Has the new medication been helping? Did you talk to Dr. Vu yet?”

“Yes.” Thinking about it made a thick syrupy panic drip down my throat. I had so much to do, enough that it made me want to do something stupid and impulsive. I told him so.

“Well. Maybe you do need to withdraw from college for the semester. Take some time off.”

“Then what would I do?” I leaned into my knees. It was an aches-and-pains kind of day. I blamed the weather.

“What do you want to do?” he asked.
“Nothing,” I signed. Then amending. “Sleep, actually. Sleep for a while. A few years, maybe. Besides, I don’t feel… stuck,” I signed. “I’m just not sure I know how to get out this time. Back to myself. It’s weird. Most of the time I feel so… not real. Fake. Even my body, I barely feel it sometimes, maybe because I’m so doped up on all these meds. I run into walls. I’m always hungry. I never feel… much of anything.”

He leaned forward.

“Before, I would just… draw my stupid books or get invited out to go drink. Now… there’s… nothing. Nothing to do. All my friends are busy, or they disappeared. So I just sit alone and do nothing.”

“I’m trying to get a sense of the bigger picture here. Before, whenever you would feel sad or overwhelmed, you had something to take you out of it. But now you feel that the depression is making you too numb, and you don’t know what to do if you can’t numb yourself. Is that right?”

The chair was uncomfortable. “We were all like that, stupid and sad.”

“You mean your friends?” I nodded. “So your time with your friends was a cathartic experience, a comforting one,” he signed. “You want that sense of catharsis.”

“Would you stop trying to tell me what I want?” A hot flash of panic shot through me and for a moment I was positive I was going to be sick. But there was nothing in me to come up.

Fitzl paused. His eye glimmered. I’d never snapped at him before.

“I guess I want a sense of assuredness, that there’s a point to any of this,” I signed. “But then he died and that all fell apart, because I was the boy toy, after all. Can I go?”

“Who died?” he asked. He flipped through his notes. He didn’t know. My stomach felt full of rocks.
“Dmitri,” I signed. “He… his name was Dmitri.”

“And who was this Dmitri to you?” His attention was rapt. I could practically smell his mind working.

“My… my boyfriend,” I signed. “I’m pansexual.”

“I’m so sorry,” he signed. “How long were you two together?”

“Two years,” I signed.

He took off his glasses and thought for a moment.

“He died in July,” I signed. “A car accident.”

I could feel the words gathering in the tendons of my wrists. I could tell Fitzl about the ghosts but if I did that he’d throw me back into the hospital for sure. As much as he claimed to be helping me.

“That must be very overwhelming for you,” he signed at last. “To lose someone you love—especially a partner—is… well, it’s catastrophic. Traumatic events like these… naturally, they can trigger a relapse of any mental illness.”

A few heartbeats passed. “You think this is because of him?” I asked.

“Not necessarily,” Fitzl signed. “I think there are some issues that your previous therapists did not deal with in a way that was beneficial to you. But these instances have a habit of reawakening old problems. And if one has difficulty or an inability to grieve, doubly so. It sounds to me as though you haven’t even allowed yourself time to do that much.”

My mind was racing. I could barely think.

“Can you tell me what your relationship was like?” he asked gently. It was hard to see. The room had gone blurry. I looked out the window towards his back porch, which was closed in. Ethel was watering some plants.
“I’m sorry, I can’t,” I signed. “I just… I can’t do this right now.”

His lips were pursed in a thin line. I could see him thinking of ways to keep me in the room but my heart was racing against my ribs. I grabbed my jacket and left.

Several hours later, Klonopin-numb and dizzy on the living room couch, I looked at the stupid sketchbook sitting on my lap. It was small but seemed to weigh a million pounds. The pencil shook in my hands.

Fitzl would have me thrown back in for sure. I shouldn’t have walked out. Fucking dumbass.

The sketchbook shimmered in an out of focus. I was too wasted for this. Part of me wanted to go over to the liquor cabinet and start drinking indiscriminately, but I didn’t, because I was too tired. I knew I should text someone. Call someone. Go knock on Dad’s office door. I stayed still.

I opened the sketchbook. I ripped out a clean white sheet and crumpled it in my hand, over and over again, until the fine grain paper was a tiny ball.

Trauma. Really. Was it trauma? Was that another label they would slap on me to draw me farther from myself—traumatized?

I ripped out another sheet and started crumpling. It was dumb. It had been so long ago. There was nothing I could do now.

But maybe there was something I could have done then. Said something differently. Offered to let him stay the night, when he’d showed up that last day. But at that point I had barely been able to look him in the eye. Not after what he’d said to me.
I couldn’t tell if I was heaving or sobbing. I forced myself to lie down on the couch and try to breathe.

Sudden movement grabbed at my peripheral. Dad, five o’clock shadow glaring violet and shirt half untucked, placed a mug in front of me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I didn’t think I had been making any noise.

“Drink it,” he signed. “You’re so pale.”

“I had a really bad session and I’m kind of overwhelmed. I’ll be fine.”

He touched my head and I could feel the warmth of his palm through my hair. He sat down in the chair next to the couch and turned on the TV but didn’t watch.

I sipped at the drink, at first positive it was tea, but surprised it was hot chocolate, the powder mix from the box, but still. He must’ve gotten some on the way home.

“You took your meds?” he signed.

“I’m pretty sure I can’t go much higher. I hate them. I really do.” My tongue felt thick and I was positive the words were garbled.

Dad gestured to the sketchbook. “You were drawing again?”

“No. I don’t know why I had this out. I… I can’t.”

“It’s good to take a break from these things.”

“I’m not sure if I can draw at all anymore.”

“Sure you can. You’re in a rut, is all.” He was talking to fill the space. It didn’t matter what I would say. It was the guise of trying. “Jenna wants to get a pet. I think I may let her.”

“It’s just something else to take care of.”

“It’ll teach her responsibility. And it might be a comfort to her. You too.”
I wasn’t so sure. The last time we’d had a pet, it had been a cat, Wilke, who we’d had for two years before he’d run away. We’d searched for hours, but in so big a town as Scarsdale, he’d disappeared. Mom had been so devastated that Dad didn’t want to risk getting another pet.

“Why don’t you come with us to the pound to look? It’ll give you something to do tomorrow.”

“I’ve got work, and besides, so much homework.” Thinking about it made me feel hot and itchy again and I tasted bile in my throat. “I love my British literature class, but it’s killer. She wants us to read two books a week.” Never mind that I hadn’t started either and likely would not. I didn’t see myself moving from this couch.

“Well. I’ll let you know what we decide, if anything.” He stood. “I’m off to bed. Try to get some rest.” He kissed me on the forehead and the touch was so strange and light that for a moment I’d forgotten that it had been years since he’d done that.

The next afternoon I visited Charlie. I had to do something to get out of the house, to avoid my thoughts crashing together like symbols. Charlie flicked through the old photos on his digital camera. It was a hefty Nikon camera, plastic, something you could hold in your hands. He’d taken it from his house when he’d gotten kicked out. “Look at these,” he signed. “This has got to be like 2013. Disgusting.” He moved his thumb to wipe the memory card.

“What are you doing?” I reached to snatch the camera out of his hand and he blocked me. He worked heaving boxes in a warehouse—he was much stronger than I was.

“You tell me you’ve saved everything you’ve ever drawn?” he asked.

“Not everything.”
“Exactly. Nobody will miss these. They’re not exactly worthy of exhibition in the MoMA.”

My throat was tight. “Don’t delete them.”

He stared. “Fine. All right. I won’t. You want these shitty pictures? You can have them.”

He popped out the first memory card and handed it to me, then put in the second. “I don’t want to look at them.”

I took the tiny chip. I didn’t know how he could be so careless like this. The thought of throwing out any of my sketchbooks or deleting any of my files caused me an acute physical pain.

“This thing’s a mess,” he signed. “Look at the screen. I’m pretty sure that’s water damage. And it can’t hold a charge. It’s basically unusable.”

I sat down, passing the chip from hand to hand.

“I mean, look at this garbage,” he signed. He flipped through image after image, wash after wash of color. Rocks. Faces. Street corners and street corners, each different, some people, some silent and alone, in the dark.

“What’s that?”

“It’s dumb,” he signed. “Half of them aren’t even in focus.”

“It’s not dumb.” I leaned over his shoulder. “Was this a project?”

He shrugged. I took the camera from him. There were so many of them, but they were all familiar to me. Local. By the Deaf school. The pharmacist. By my house. By Saima’s. “I get bored,” he signed. “So I just walk around and take pictures. There’s not much else to see around here. You know that.” He pulled it out of my hands before I could go farther into the roll. “I can’t develop them and I don’t have anything to edit them with. So I might as well get rid of it.”
“Don’t,” I signed.

He shut the camera. For a moment we sat in tandem silence. Ann, in a large t-shirt and bright green boxers, shambled sleepily past us to the kitchen to get a glass of water. Their hair, dry as straw from too much repeated bleaching and dyeing, was a weak coffee brown. They didn’t meet my eyes, even though we hadn’t seen each other in weeks. They swept back upstairs, clutching the banister.

“They dyed their hair,” I signed.

“They had to, for the job,” he signed.

“Nobody’s going to see them. Why did they need to dye their hair?”

Charlie shrugged. “Stupid school shit. I don’t know.” He kept his eyes forward on the TV, which spat The Office off of Netflix.

“I thought you hated this show,” I signed.

“I do,” he signed.

Another few moments trickled by. I was getting dizzy for no particular reason.

“How’s class,” he asked dully.

“’S fine. Busy. A lot of reading. How’s work?”

“I don’t know,” he signed. His eyes had gone muddy and were all swollen. “Every day I go in and it’s the same. It drags. And drags.”

“That Polaroid camera,” I blurted. “Was it yours?”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I… found a Polaroid the other day. I was trying to remember who had taken it. There used to be so many. What happened to them all?”
“I’m sure Ann and the others must have some,” he signed. I could see the river of his pulse beating beneath a thin shirt. “Why do you even want to see them? A lot of it’s just party stuff, all of the same. It’s kind of trashy, to be honest.”

“I just wanted to see, you know. Sometimes it’s hard to remember any of that was real.”

“You think so?” he asked.

“Well—yes.”

“Lucky you,” he signed. “I can’t forget it fast enough.”

I looked away, towards the empty blank mantle, which was free of items other than a few long candles crammed into empty bottles. At the dirty prickly carpet. The curio cabinet in the corner, from the previous renter, contained nothing but paper plates.

Charlie kissed me. It was a needy, rough sort of gesture. He threaded his hands through my hair. His eyes were tight and bloodshot and his chin dimpled. “Can we do this?” he asked. “Please. I feel so fucking—” He exhaled.

I touched his face. His skin was warm, and flushed, and he looked away from me. When I kissed him I meant for it to be comforting but he held me tight against him and lay me down right on the couch with the grape soda stain. For a second feeling bled into my body and I was so surprised I couldn’t breathe. It was such an immense, sprawling thing. I couldn’t catch my breath.

He unbuttoned my shirt, pressing his mouth against my collarbone, then lower, and lower still and the clarity gave way to a crippling self-awareness. I was fucking my childhood best friend. Not in a particularly controlled manner, or even in a healthy way. Sex had become a need-based currency, not a real desirous thing.

I saw Dmitri behind my eyelids. Then saw Fitzl talking about triggers.
He slipped his hand below the waistband of my underwear and for a second I almost forgot all that. But not quite. “Stop,” I signed.

His head snapped up. “Would you rather go upstairs?”

“No. I just can’t.”

He paused. His weight was bearing into me and it was hard to breathe. “Oh,” he said.

“This isn’t right,” I signed. “Get off me. Please.”

He sat up, dazed, loosely cupping his erection in the cold room. “What do you mean?”

“It’s not fair to either of us.” I pulled my pants back on. My hands shook, and it was hard to work the buttons of my shirt.

“So you’re the only one who gets to pity-fuck,” he signed blankly but hurt spilled from his eyes.

“No,” I signed and hoped I seemed calm. “Pity-fucking. I can’t believe you just said that.”

“That’s true,” he signed. “That’s all we seem to do anymore.”

He had a point. “I don’t want it to be that way,” I signed. I had gone fuzzy again, like someone had pulled me sharply from my own body.

“Then what do you want?” he asked.

“I want you to be my friend. I don’t want us to use each other this way.”

“Friend.” He shook his head. “What. Is this too gay for you?”

“Don’t be stupid, I just don’t think it’s healthy.”

“It’s because I’m not him, isn’t it?”

For a second time seemed to legitimately stop. “Fuck you,” I said.
For a long while I sat in my car, in a dark forgotten corner of the Sev’s parking lot, sobbing in a blank and scraping kind of way automatically, like a switch had been flicked. This flavor of panic wasn’t one I had dealt with before. I didn’t know how I had driven here but he hadn’t followed me.

I crawled into the backseat like an animal and choked on the pain.

I met Charlie my first week at the Deaf school, sophomore year. It had been a midyear transfer and messy. Combined with the newness of my condition and a burgeoning mental illness, I was often overwhelmed to the point of numbness, and I spent a lot of time in the boy’s room, freaking out. He only found me out because, instead of making it into a stall, the anxiety clattered over me and made me puke in the sink, right as he was coming in.

“Hey. You alright, bro?” he asked. “You should go to the nurse.”

“I’m fine, I’m just…” I forgot to sign instead of speaking and my hands were shaking. I hastily signed “Fine.” My breath hurt my chest. I sat on the radiator, my mouth tasting like hell. He was staring at me like I was a bomb about to go off. “Look, just… do what you have to, alright?”

“Anxiety?” he asked. He turned on the tap of the sink I’d puked in and got rid of the evidence.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“You’re new here. I’ve never seen you before.” He handed me a paper towel.

“Yes,” I admitted. “Is it that obvious?”

He sat down next to me. “You weren’t always Deaf, right? You spoke just then.”
“Don’t you have class?” I asked. I wanted to be left alone still, the panic throbbing in my veins.

“Eh, math. Who cares?”


He flinched. “Ugh, I’ve heard about that. It sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“So you probably don’t know anybody then,” he signed. “No wonder you’re freaking the fuck out. Yeah, this is a pretty weird place.”

“Everyone seems to know each other.”

“Well, you know somebody now. Charlie Seomoon.” He offered me his hand, which was cool and strong.

“Aaron Bateson.”

“You’re sitting with me at lunch tomorrow,” he signed. “I’ve got a bunch of weird friends and we always need more.”

That was how I met Saima and Ann and Phoebe and the others, and even Dmitri. Charlie had made himself out to be the ringleader but really he wasn’t, he was the funny guy, the curio. Turned out we had a lot in common. He’d also only recently begun to go deaf, through some kind of nerve condition. We watched the same shitty movies and picked on our little sisters. It started out as an easy, instant friendship.

Like Dmitri he’d been closeted, but unlike Dmitri Charlie had assumed his parents would give him support. They had never said anything overtly homophobic, just simply ignorant. They were Christian, but the wholesome “love everyone” kind, not the kind that raise alarm bells.
They’d always voted Democrat. He waited until after graduation. I imagine him standing there, in his bright cobalt blue gown and mortarboard. He tells them with a smile on his face.

He was dropped in my driveway a few hours later with a couple of boxes and suitcases. He didn’t react until I had made up the guest bed and then he cried until he couldn’t breathe, clung to me so hard it hurt. I told him he could live with us permanently, or at least until he recovered.

Dmitri didn’t like it. “You let him stay with you but not me?” he asked.

“He has nowhere else to go. You still live at home.”

“And, what, I’m supposed to let them drive me off the deep end? You know what they do to me.”

“But when I finally do, like you keep badgering me to?” A fizzy feeling had come over me. I remember that. “You have options right now. You haven’t told them.”

“And when I finally do, like you keep badgering me to?” He crossed his arms. “What then?”

But I’d never pushed him to come out, only asked once, and then saw it was impossible. He didn’t have to risk himself just for me, though his shame over us threatened to drag us under the waves. “I don’t know.”

His expression became smooth. “You two have a thing, don’t you?”

That was the precise moment I fell out of love with him, I could feel it in my body, hot then cold. It had all become too much. “Why are you so paranoid all the time?”

He laughed. “I’m the paranoid one. You and your crazy anxiety flying off the rails, and I’m paranoid.” His face suddenly darkened and I turned. Charlie was standing there, eyes wide.
“What’s going on here, guys?” he asked.

Dmitri chuckled. “I’ve got to go. You… do whatever you want, I don’t care.”

I think Charlie didn’t stay only because he saw that argument. Three days later he’d arranged to move in with Ann, even though I tried to persuade him out of it. Then Dmitri died and I realized that even if I wasn’t in love with him I was still drowning in something too big for me to comprehend, something that impacted everything.

Three weeks after the funeral Charlie and I were in my room. Charlie had been slated to start at the community college in the fall but his parents had pulled all their payments, leaving him with a huge bill.

“I can’t afford this.” He touched the numbers on the computer screen. “Paying rent has totally wiped my savings. I’m just going to have to put it on hold. I’ll go to the registrar tomorrow and have them unenroll me.”

“Don’t,” I signed. I touched his hand. There was something strange in the touch that hadn’t been there before and I think we both noticed it.

“There’s just no way,” he continued. “I need to save up money. It’s not… forever, only a few months. I’ll be fine, Aaron. You know that warehouse called me back? Full time, benefits after a year.”

“For minimum wage doing hard labor.”

“I’ll be fine,” he asserted.

“Just come back,” I signed. “If you live here you won’t have to pay rent, you can just put all your money towards school. It’s not safe for you there.”

“It’s not safe for me anywhere,” he signed. “What about Ann? What would they do if I couldn’t help with the rent? You couldn’t put them up too.” He touched my face and again I felt
it, the something strange. He kissed me, all softness and tenderness, and for a second the cold awful void in me eased. He pulled away suddenly. “I’m sorry. Oh, God. I should go.” He shut the computer and went to put it into his bag. I took his hand.

“Stay,” I signed.

He sat down. “I’ve thought about it,” he signed. He was shaking. “Ever since he brought it up that day, I can’t stop thinking about it—”

“It’s okay,” I signed, and kissed him.

There was no way for our friendship to be sustainable once we started sleeping together. I knew that other people did it all the time but Charlie and I were such messes that there was no way we could avoid hurting each other. I knew that now, sitting in the car, choking on the pain. I didn’t know what would happen if I lost him for good. Was that what this was? An ending? But he’d known what he was saying. I couldn’t believe it. Below the panic, below the pain that was starting to bloom like a fresh bruise, there was a hot, achy anger.

I started the car and went home.

The house was quiet. Jenna had fallen asleep on the couch while some cartoon on Netflix played itself. I shook her gently. “You fell asleep, bug,” I signed. “Why don’t you go up to bed?”

She blinked sleepily and sat up. “What’s wrong? Your face is all red.”

“It’s just cold. You know the heat in my car is broken.”

I hate lying to Jenna.

She pulled her blanket around her shoulder and shut the TV. “But you’d tell me, right? If something had happened?”

I hesitated. “Sure.”

Living Strange by Allison Giese 181
“You promised,” she signed. She kissed me on the cheek. “Goodnight.”

I took my sleeping pill and went upstairs. My room was freezing. I turned up the thermostat and huddled under the covers, feeling my whole body quake, for fifteen minutes, an hour. A weird shadow blotted the light cast by my lamp and I sat up.

“I’m not surprised,” Dmitri signed. He perched on the lip of my desk chair. His old band T-shirt was translucent with wear. “I mean, I’m surprised it took this long. It was never going to work out. Was it worth it? Are you ever going to talk to him again?”

I tried to speak. My hands were shaking too hard to sign. The pill weighed down my body.

“It’s always going to be like this,” Dmitri signed. “I know. I’ve been there. You’re always going to treat everyone you know the same way. It’s never your fault, of course.” He brushed a strand of hair out of his eyes. “You lie, you lie, you lie, and then you get angry when someone hurts you. The thing is, I don’t even think you know you’re lying half the time. You’ve even convinced yourself.”

I shook my head. Blinked hard. He didn’t go away.

“You keep lying to people about what’s going on in your head, you’ll end up like me,” he signed. “Go to sleep, Aaron. Get some rest. You’re going to need it.”

I turned the lamp off and shoved my head under the pillow and tried to slow my heartbeat.

Fitzl seemed surprised when I showed up to the office, even though we’d had a scheduled appointment.

“Aaron,” he signed. “It’s good to see you. Come on back.”
It wasn’t cold in here anymore. Actually it was hot but that could have been the anxiety twining in my veins.

“So it looks like we have a lot to talk about,” he signed.

Sweat crawled under my arms. “Please don’t send me back,” I signed. “I’m sorry about walking out. Please don’t send me back.”

“It’s not something I would enjoy doing.” My stomach clenched in anticipation of the “but.”

“I’m going to try,” I signed. “Please.”

“You need to be willing to commit to treatment,” he signed.

“I am,” I signed. “I’m going to tell the truth.” God, let me be able to. “I just don’t think I can handle going back there. I don’t know why I lie.”

“Do you lie, Aaron?”

My head was starting to hurt. “Sometimes it’s so much easier,” I signed.

“What do you lie about?”

“I kept hoping that if I said it enough it would be true. I would be fine. That’s what this is supposed to be about, right? Me convincing myself that it’s going to be okay?” I hugged myself.

“Not quite,” Fitzl signed. “We’re here to help realign your mind, to get you to see when thoughts aren’t logical, to help you be able to understand emotions you haven’t really let yourself explore. That’s the sort of thing that will begin to relieve your symptoms.”

I wanted to want to be better.

“Have you lied to me, Aaron?” Fitzl asked.

“I haven’t told you about things,” I signed. “And I’m trying, but… It’s hard.”
“I know,” he signed. A few minutes passed. He nudged a log burning in the woodstove.

“What’s going on in your head, Aaron?”

I told him about what happened with Charlie, that we’d been sleeping together. Fitzl was the first person I’d ever told about that. Even Saima didn’t know the whole truth. I told him about the fight. As much as I tried to tell him that I’d seen Dmitri, anxiety kept the words from coming. If I told him I was seeing things, I would go back to the hospital for sure.

“It sounds like this Dmitri person really meant a lot to you, if this is how you’re feeling about it,” he signed. “You don’t deserve to be treated like that, Aaron.”

“I just don’t know why he said that,” I signed. “I mean, I know he’s got things going on, but… it’s just not like him.”

“Maybe he’s mad at you,” Fitzl suggested. “Because you tried to take your own life. Or he’s frustrated because he can’t help you, or that you’re in no place to help him.”

These circular therapeutic conversations. I gritted my teeth.

“Do you want to fix your relationship with him?” he asked.

“Charlie’s my best friend,” I signed. “But that… hurt me.”

“Naturally,” Fitzl signed. “Are you able to tell me more about Dmitri?”

I bit my lip.

“Did Dmitri hurt you as well?” he asked.

“He wasn’t… abusive,” I signed at last. I thought back to the night of me and Charlie and the swings. I wondered if I were lying already.

“That’s not what I asked,” Fitzl added. He smiled.

I took a deep breath. My lungs were hurting. I nodded.
“Thank you for telling me that,” he signed. “Our time this week is up. I want to go into this next week. Okay?”

Group therapy was later that afternoon. I couldn’t afford to stay at home, in bed, because then Dr. Wood wouldn’t sign off for me. Maybe I’d just be able to zone out the whole time. But she wanted me to “participate.” If it wasn’t something, it was another.

I sat. My head pounded. I didn’t talk much to Louise, telling her I wasn’t feeling well, which was true, or true enough. I saw motion in my peripheral. Amanda.

“How’s she doing? You look like you’ve got a lot on your mind.”

“Hey. Sorry, long day.”

She looked a little worse for the wear as well. Her bun wasn’t as smooth as usual and she wore sweatpants.

“Where were you last week?” I asked.

She smiled but it was like a door behind her eyes had shut. “Oh, I just had something,” she said.

“I have your book by the way,” I said. “I leaned back in the hard metal chair. “It’s in my car.”

“You didn’t have to rush.”

“I was done, anyway.”

A moment passed in silence.

“It was very good,” I said. “Really good. Sad, though.” I used to be so articulate.
“That’s true for a lot of things,” she said. Her eyes were red and bloodshot. “Hey, I’ll be right back. Bathroom.” I watched her retreat up the church stairs. There were any amount of empty chairs in the circle this week. I had attributed it to flu season, or the weather.

“Small group this week,” Dr. Wood said.

“Danny’s in the hospital,” someone said. Other than Amanda, I knew none of these people. I hadn’t bothered.

“Sometimes we need a little extra help,” Dr. Wood said. She smiled, slow and clinical, like Hana used to in the hospital.

I shook my head instinctively.

“Do you have anything to share, Aaron?” she asked.

“I just know how bad it is,” I said. “If he ended up in the same place I did.”

“And was it helpful to you?”

Group must have been like this previously but my memory was fuzzy and I’d never given it much attention. I swallowed. “Well, it stopped me from dying,” I said. “But other than that, no. No, I thought it was awful.”

Amanda still hadn’t come back. I knew where she’d been last week now.

“It’s hard to be a survivor,” Dr. Wood said.

“Really? I think it’s the easiest thing I’ve ever done,” I said. I could feel my lip trembling. “I get that some textbook taught you how we might feel. I get it. But do you have any idea? Do you really?”

I didn’t need to be able to hear to tell how quiet it was in the room.

“I don’t know how I feel. Do I like that I ate a bottle of pills? Do I like that people talk to me like they’re walking on eggshells? Or that I can’t even look at myself in a mirror?” I shrugged.
She took off her glasses. “I don’t normally share my history because sometimes I don’t think it’s relevant,” she said slowly. “But yes, I was hospitalized in the 1970s, when I was nineteen. It was a different time then. I wanted to try to make things better for people at that age. It’s hard to be taken seriously. It’s hard to take yourself seriously, after all that happens. I know. Moreover, it’s hard to trust yourself again. To be comfortable in your skin. And every moment feels like something’s struggling to get out. I know, Aaron. Thank you for being honest.”

I shook my head. A few other people shared their experiences with attempts, with how they felt, pain bleeding into the air. It didn’t feel like a catharsis. It just felt like confusion, filling the room with a messy, noisy fog that Louise couldn’t entirely translate. I excused myself.

“Bathroom,” I told Louise.

I found Amanda sitting on the wooden bench near the door, twisting the strings on her hoodie. “Couldn’t take it either?” I asked.

“Not today.”

I sat down. “She’s trying to be genuine.”

“I know. That’s the sad thing.”

“You were in the hospital,” I said.

She tried to smile. “That obvious?”

“You look like someone’s hit you over the head with a shovel.”

“It was precautionary,” she said. “Only five days. They’re switching me to a different med and they wanted to make sure it tapered off okay. I got caught up on my reading list, at least.”

“What do you take?” I asked.

“I used to be on Effexor, but it was making me snappish. I’m going on Abilify next.”

“I’ve never had that,” I said. “It’s supposed to be good.”
She shrugged. “You must take something.”

“Prozac. Lexapro. Sometimes Klonopin.”

“I liked Klonopin. But I’m not allowed to have it anymore. I almost got addicted.”

This was what group therapy would ideally be. No uncomfortable moderation. Just like-minded people, talking about life. Or lack thereof. “Wanna stay up here?” I asked. “It’s pretty depressing down there.”

She laughed. “Alright.”

Part 2—Circles and Lines

19.

Artists went on hiatus for a long time when they worked on webcomics. There were a lot of reasons for it. Burnout. A lack of work/life balance. Just no good ideas. Weeks, months, years. It didn’t mean anything bad, usually. Then before you knew it, you checked the page again and they were back, as though they had never gone.

I had my usual haunts where I posted my art. I looked at each of them, expecting—something—maybe a note or a comment or at least a boost towards stats. On Strike there were ten views—I knew most of them were probably from me, checking for new recognition. People didn’t read this much, anymore. It was really kind of terrible. Who needed another superhero comic? The only thing about Strike that was in any way interesting was that everybody in it was gay but other than that none of the characters had anything to make them the least bit compelling. When it was still a collaboration, someone had commented, “Gay” isn’t a personality, which was pretty funny now thinking about it, because they weren’t wrong.
I checked on a few oneshots I’d done and found nothing. Nobody had read anything in months. It didn’t surprise me. Usually I didn’t care. I shouldn’t care. But why bother doing all this if nobody would ever read it?

Blah blah.

I closed my eyes. They were swollen and hurt. I had reached a plane of anxiety where I was so tense I was calm. My vision seemed kind of sheeny. I picked up a red pencil and started twirling it, absently. The ceiling needed to be painted. It was looking dull, and dusty. When Mom left I had painted over everything in an industrial beige, telling myself I would make something beautiful of it, but there was only half of a sketched fox which I had pulled the dresser in front of.

My phone blinked. It was a notification from the service company.

I plugged Charlie’s memory card into the computer.

It took a while to load everything. These were old, embarrassingly so. These were thin imprints of time, shot through an imperfect lens. The focus slipped. Light bled in and out. A lot of them were too dark, interspersed here and there with family photos. The juxtaposition between first attempts at art and the blandness of these photos twisted my breath in me. I only dimly remembered Charlie’s parents and sister. They all looked straight-laced and uncomfortable, even at amusement parks. His sister, a small, bony girl, looked like she had swallowed a lemon. Only Charlie showed any vulnerability, in his eyes. He was gone from a lot of these shots. He must have been the photographer.

My sinuses ached. My nose was bleeding onto my tattered pajama pants. I stoppered the blood. I imagined thick tendrils swirling through those photos and swallowing him whole. The family wouldn’t have missed him. Didn’t miss him. I could smell the loneliness in these photos,
the not-thereness. I couldn’t bring myself to apologize. He was my best friend, he knew the pain we’d all felt, why would he decide to use it against me? Why now? What else had I done wrong?

I picked up the sketchbook next to my computer. It was hard to breathe with these tissues crammed up my nose and they felt sodden. Thin red lines crawled all over the paper; brief, jagged marks. The pencil lead was soft and chipped in places. I was pressing down too hard, but the motion was mechanic. Over and over again, until the sharp pencil point was a nub and the page below it was rough with valleys of indents. I ripped the page out. A few weak, watery drops of blood had seeped through the tissue onto the page.

I couldn’t remember where my lighter was. A brief search of my jean pockets and backpack came up blank. If I wanted to burn this, I’d have to go use the big barbecue lighter, and that just seemed extra.

I put my head between my knees and waited until the bleeding stopped.

Studio art. Three hours of sitting alone with my interpreter. Louise had quickly become versed in a rather impressive display of art signs even I wasn’t totally familiar with yet. She was chewing gum today. I watched her sinewy jaw work, up and down, my pencil poised over my page.

Petra passed from artist to artist, looking over their shoulders at the still life we were supposed to be copying. Her glasses glinted in the light, obscuring her eyes. A smeary red lipstick bled partially onto her teeth. Louise sat down across from me, reading, though I could see her listening for more things worthy of import.

“Do you like it?” I asked her. “Interpreting?”

“I wouldn’t be working towards my license if I didn’t,” she signed. “Aren’t you supposed to be drawing?”
I shrugged. Petra was coming closer. I could smell her, amber lotion and baby powder.

“I want to do theatre interpreting,” she signed. “You know, at shows.”

“That’s really cool,” I signed.

“I suppose,” she added calmly. Her buzz cut was growing out and she scratched at it. “I mean, theatre’s kind of a right. Art’s kind of a right. You know.”

I had a feeling she had said this many times. I glanced quickly at the still life. A cube, a cluster of dusty concord wax grapes, some glass bottles. Positioned so the light reflected on the white table just so. I had done this hundreds of times in high school.

Louise perked up. I felt Petra at my shoulder, hovering, just barely visible in my peripheral vision. “Fifteen minutes to draw a simple still life and you do… nothing,” she said. She bit her lip.

My underarms grew cold and sticky. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m really not feeling well today.”

“Today… and the last class… and the class before…” She shook her head. “Might I have a word with you? After?”

I felt my face burning. The studio, so wide and open, wobbled at the edges. The girl next to me quickly glanced away and kept shading her drawing. I tasted my heartbeat.

“We’ll be starting figure drawing next week,” Petra said after she finished surveilling the room. “As a precursor… four simple portraits. They can be anybody—your roommate, your family, a stranger—as long as you ask permission, of course, we’re not barbarians. Don’t go crazy with detail. I want to see you capture life, not how well you can draw hair. Please, no more than one self-portrait. I know what you lot all look like. And it’s never too soon to start building your midterm portfolio. That is all.”

The class fled, chatting amiably with one another. My stomach writhed.
“Want me to stay? Don’t you have to talk to her?” Louise signed.

“No. I know you have to go. I’ll be fine,” I said through my teeth.

She didn’t look so sure but she took her book and left. The walk up to Petra’s desk felt very long, and the aisle between tables very narrow.

She looked up from her computer. “I know this is an introductory course. But I’ll have you know I take it very seriously, and so should you. This may be a SUNY, but it’s a prestigious program that you had to earn a place in.”

I bit the inside of my lip and said nothing.

“I’ve seen your portfolio. You have talent. More than that, a unique style. See, if you applied yourself, Aaron, you could go so far—”

She thought me lazy. “Look, I am trying.”

Petra sat up and knotted her hands. “Then explain to me your blank sketchbook, and the incompletes I’ve had to give you.”

I could feel tears creeping up into my eyes and prayed she didn’t notice. “I’ve been going through a lot.”

“I’m afraid I need more than that,” she said. “We’re artists. We’re almost all mentally ill.”

I struggled for air and tasted acrid paint thinner. At the door, a student’s face hovered, waiting to come inside.

“If you tell me, I can be lenient,” she continued. “But if not, then I must interpret your silence as a form of petulance.”

I clutched the sketchbook tightly.
Petra frowned. “Very well,” she said, and began gathering her things. “Might I recommend you withdraw, then, before this class affects the rest of your GPA.” She slid her purse over her shoulder and headed towards the door.

“I tried to kill myself a month ago,” I said.

She turned. Her expression was unreadable.

“I’m on like five different medications right now. I know that’s a shitty excuse. You’re right. I shouldn’t be so far behind. I just can’t concentrate. Everything I try to make... looks... flat.”

She parted her lips slightly.

“Sorry,” I said. “I have to go. I’m going to be late. I'll get the work in on time. I mean it.”

Saima found me panicking in my car. I had forgotten that I told her to meet me after class. She tugged at the door handle. Even though it was technically locked, the locks had never functioned well and it didn’t impede her much. For a while, we sat, through the short break and part of our next class.

“Charlie told me what happened,” she signed.

I shook my head.

“I didn’t realize you two were... like that.” She seemed more annoyed than anything. “I knew about the flirting, but not the—”

“All right,” I signed. “I know you don’t approve, but it’s over.”

“I think you did the right thing,” she signed. “I really do.” A pause. She touched the keychain hanging from my rearview mirror. “I’m sure you two can get past this—”

“Do you?” I felt prickly inside and dry. “He brought up Dmitri. Said he could never measure up.”

She flinched at the name.
“It’s stupid. But that really pissed me off.”

“It’s not stupid,” she signed. “It’s a sore spot for all of us.” She paused. “Hey Aaron?”

It was so cold in here. “Yeah?”

“You really loved him, didn’t you? Dmitri?”

Another commuter, in a bright red Hyundai, drove past us. “Of course I did,” I signed.

“I miss him too,” she signed. “He was my best friend.”

Silence. Wind pounded the trees, still weak from winter. I wanted to sleep.

“Do you want to go to class? Or blow it off?” she asked.

I really couldn’t see myself sitting through forty-five minutes of British lit. “Let’s get out of here.”

Saima’s house was, much like mine, a suburban mutation in a commuter neighborhood. Her mother was a pharmacist and her father worked in food science for some corporation. Neither of them were in the house much; I could count on one hand the amount of times I’d met them. But unlike my house it actually felt homey. The little touches—accent walls, an Arabic script poem, pictures of family still in a distant country—didn’t seem so superficial. The coats piled by the door always let you know they were there when you needed them. The thick soft red area rug in the foyer dipped under my feet.

“I’ll put up some coffee,” she signed. The kitchen cabinets were painted a bright sun yellow, with Post-It notes tacked all over saying things like “Have a lovely day” and “Amani appt. 4:00” and “goat milk?” While it was clean, it was cluttered with things; travel mugs in a few different colors, boxes of various herbal teas, and a plastic cartoon lunch box. Saima put a few scoops of espresso into a French press. “Amani’s got track today. I’ve got to get her later, but we can still relax here for a while.”
We sat in the living room. They didn’t have a TV down here. They were a type of family that actually had game night and enjoyed it. I literally couldn’t imagine that. I saw the board games piled by the door, one after the other, in a precarious pile. The couch, pale blue suede, was soft and smelled faintly like oranges. On the wall were more portraits in black and white. “My grandparents,” she explained. She stirred her coffee. “I’ve never met either of them.”

“How are things,” I asked. The coffee was very strong and steadying. My heart still clanged like a firebell.

“Pretty lonely,” she signed. “You would think considering how much I’m around people I wouldn’t be.”

“So the fundraiser for mosque went fine?” Numbness crawled up my spine. I just didn’t know what else to say. There was nothing interesting, only painful, annoying things. Dmitri lingered in the conversation, unspoken, unsummoned.

“Alright. Enough. We’ve got enough to go on the Six Flags trip. Still not great. You know, I did my best with what I had. Considering all that’s been going on, politically, you’ve got to admit that we did pretty well.” She clutched her mug. “But I don’t want to talk about that. How’s work?”

“She’s cut my schedule way down.”

“Probably for the best.”

We both sipped for a while. Their cat, a puffy Calico named Jumbo, wove around our ankles and jumped up on Saima’s lap. It watched me with wide green eyes as it cleaned its forepaw.

“…I applied to Gallaudet again,” Saima signed. She scratched behind the cat’s ears, and it shut its eyes with pleasure. “I know it’s probably really dumb—but—I’m tired of hearing
everything through a filter. I can’t go to a poetry club, or get involved, or really do anything without seeing if I can get Louise to help me, and like, she has a life of her own too, it’s not fair to always impose. I don’t want the only friend I make in college to be our interpreter.”

The cat kept grooming itself. “You’d go? To DC?”

“In a heartbeat,” she signed, face luminous. “There’s so much to do down there, all the museums. The culture. Our culture. Don’t you want to be right in the middle of it all?”

I thought about it. Any considerations of Gallaudet had been completely theoretical. I couldn’t actually see myself there as a living person. My immediate thought, concerning Washington, DC, was that it would be the first target in a nuclear war. “…Can I draw you?” I asked instead. “I have to do portraits for a class.”

“You haven’t done that in ages,” she signed. “Sure—wait—do I look okay?” She checked her reflection in her cell phone.

“It’s a portrait. Not a picture.” I reached for the sketchbook in my bag. Its weight nearly overwhelmed me and the cover was starting to tear off. Spiral-bound books always broke down and tore. I only had a few pencils for writing, none good for drawing. The lead was just too hard.

“Should I put the cat down?” she asked. Jumbo glared at me and hooded its eyes. It rested against its paws.

“Leave it. You know. Petra gave me the biggest asskicking today.”

“That’s rude,” Saima signed. “I was wondering if there was a reason for that attack.”

“No. She’s right.” The pencil in my pouch didn’t have much of an eraser left and the lead was a nub. “She’s right. What excuse do I have? All artists—we’re kind of fucked up, right? So why not keep moving forward.”

“Right. Sure.” She smiled slightly, baring her teeth.
The lighting in here wasn’t ideal and the sun was setting, casting weird shadows onto her face. I stared at the paper, trying to will myself to move. A circle—that’s all I had to start with. I just needed to draw a circle. Kids could do it.

Saima adjusted her glasses. She had always been a squirming person when I’d drawn her, which is why the lines always ended up a bit wobbly. She didn’t believe in staying still. Even as I struggled with my paper, she kept petting the cat.

I slashed the paper with a circle that was much too large for the drawing I would need to do. I searched through my bag for my real eraser and instead had to scrub at the paper with the itty one on the tip of the pencil. Another, smaller circle. That’s all this was, circles and lines. The rest would come later. I only had to put to paper what I saw. She was not abstract.

The planes of her face didn’t want to emerge. I had the thin, incongruous oval, the lines denoting where to draw the eyes. Her shoulders and arms were easier, and concrete, cylinders in a flowy blouse. The cat’s head was clearer. Thin, sleepy slits for eyes. The pattern of its fur was actually quite beautiful, mottled browns and blacks that I couldn’t really convey with one shitty pencil. Saima’s thin, red-polished fingers curved against its spine. She crossed and uncrossed her ankles, shifting the cat slightly in her lap.

I went back to her head. Fabric wasn’t too terribly difficult to draw, in theory, but movement was. I could probably spend hours shading the different folds of her scarf. Petra didn’t want detail, she wanted life, which was silly, because drawings could never be truly alive. They always were an attempt at imitation. No more.

It took almost an hour. I could tell, especially by the end, that she was getting quite bored. The cat slept the whole time and purred.
“Well. That’s it,” I signed. My hands trembled, but strangely the rest of me was still, and empty. Barren. I felt like a pitcher that had been all poured out.

“Oh thank goodness,” she signed. She stood and stretched. “I don’t know how you can just sit still for so long.”

“Almost like you had to occupy yourself, or something.” I looked down at the drawing. It seemed like an alien had done it. My own style was nearly unrecognizable, whatever that was. Loose, with minimal shading, it resembled the first frame in a piece of animation. The eyes were flat and dull, and priggish as she petted the cat, all of which were things Saima never had been.

“Can I see?”

“Er—well—”

She leaned over my shoulder. “It’s cute. Look at Jumbo.”

“Thanks,” I signed.

“You know, I bet you could make a killing, drawing people’s pets,” she signed. She held the sketchbook up to the cat’s face and it pawed at the binding. “Look at those big ol’eyes.” She kissed the cat.

“Of course. The pets look alive, but the people don’t. It figures.”

She studied the drawing. “I look alive,” Saima added. “I don’t really look like me, though.”

“Because you kept squirming.”

She shrugged. “All right. Well. I’ve got a lot of homework, and I know you do too. So, kindly, send me a copy of that and get the fuck out.”

I tried to smile. “All right, fine, I know when I’m not wanted.” The signs fell a little flat.
On the way home I wondered if we would ever talk about anything that happened this summer. Saima didn’t like pain, had never been very good at comforting. She’d rather volunteer or write. I could tell just how much even that simple conversation in the car had sapped her. For a while I hadn’t wanted to talk about it either. But something struggled in me, something small and tight, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to run away from it much longer.

February

Instead of snow, it rained and sleeted instead. Between work and school my days took on a particular rhythm like before I’d gone to the hospital. School. Work. Grocery shopping. Clean the house. Help Jenna with her homework. Do my own work, as much as I could manage. Only now I worked in therapy and group.

One day at work Helen and I were decorating for Valentine’s Day. I made paper chains out of old flyers. It seemed like Helen to decorate ironically but she was focused. “I should send you out for candy,” she signed. “We have nothing left in the back. Do you have anything for this? Even old stuff. Anything, you know, weird and kind of dry.”

“What do you mean?”

“Comics? You used to leave them hanging up on the board. The Thanksgiving one you did was a pisser.”

“Haven’t drawn a whole lot lately.” The stapler had jammed and I pried out the bent bits with a pen.

“Something like… the level of unfunny of the New Yorker,” she continued. “With a sad heart in a pile of trash?”

Living Strange by Allison Giese 199
“Are you being ironic with this, or not? I can’t tell.”

“No, I’m not,” she signed. “My ex has been up my ass about Theresa, and I wanted a laugh.” The baby sat happily on a blanket nearby, gnawing a teething ring.

“Well, he made his decision, didn’t he?” Much like my loving mother, he’d just up and left one day because he felt like it. But unlike her, he wasn’t willing to give any child support. It had made things tight, especially because the store wasn’t exactly doing great.

“Yes, you’re right.” She drew a crooked heart and cut it out. “Really. Nothing’s coming to you?”

“Valentine’s Day just isn’t funny,” I signed.

“That’s a fucking fact.” Helen snorted.

“Well. I can draw something for you, but it won’t be a comic. I need to do portraits for my studio art class. I could do Theresa for you.”

Theresa, at her name, perked up.

Helen snorted. “And make her the black Gerber baby? I don’t think so.” She paused. “Oh, god. That would be kind of cute, wouldn’t it?”

“I could do the two of you together. You could put it up instead of a comic. Love not all being romantic, and all.”

She set down her scissors. “Ugh. Fine. That sounds sickeningly adorable.” She pulled out her phone and checked her reflection and picked something out of her spotless teeth. She reached for the baby, who struggled and threw her toy. It landed on the counter with a nasty splat. “You better give me some royalties when you sell it off.”

“You’re funny. I’ll probably get a C.”

“Better than an F.”
It felt like a visit to the dentist’s office. The baby struggled and wriggled and lay prostrate against her mother’s shoulder. Helen was better at being sentinel than Saima was but she did keep looking at me and then the clock. I tried to draw quickly. I was barely conscious of the motion. The bony white hand didn’t look like mine but truthfully it rarely did.

I showed her the finished sketch. My brow was damp with sweat. “Not sure I even want to do this anymore, to tell you the truth.”

Helen frowned. “Why not?”

“I don’t see the point. Nobody really hardly looks at the comics anymore.” Hiatus—that was a good word, a cessation.

“It’s about the marketing, you know. How you sell it. Word of mouth. You see how hard it is for me.”

“I’ve tried that.”

“So try again,” she signed.

I shrugged. I knew if I really tried I would eventually get somewhere. But thinking of all the energy that would take—the emotional labor—of making these comics, making these posts, sharing on the Internet, outright begging on social media—it made me feel sick. And for what? Only to create an expectation, more pressure on myself, to get somewhere in the black nebula of the art world, eventually. No telling when or how, and once that was done, how quickly it would sink back into obscurity. Nobody needed another story about a white kid with a mental illness.

“This is cute,” Helen told me. “Thanks.”

“Yeah. Don’t mention it.”

Empty empty empty.

_Living Strange_ by Allison Giese 201
The art supplies were gathering dust. I looked at the two sketches, side by side. The lines were blurry and the shading blotchy in places, inconsistent. I needed two more people to sit for me. I had three days.

I flopped back down on the bed. I wished Petra hadn’t been so vague, that she had given us some kind of style to abide by. Something. I flipped through the pictures on my phone. Even these seemed empty and hollow, like someone had sucked the air out of them. Anatomy references. The cat. Memes. More memes. Food I had put on Instagram.

Charlie, hijacking my phone, taking a selfie, taking blurry (unflattering) candids of Ann and I.

He’d let me draw him. He’d enjoy it. He’d make me feel less lonely and less stupid and a little bit more in focus. I knew he would never talk to me first. He wasn’t that kind of person, even if he knew he was wrong.

I booted the old desktop. The fan whined under my fingertips and the screen wobbled slightly. I dug for the tablet, buried deep under various crap in my desk; erases, old papers, pictures of various things and people, old dried up markers. I couldn’t find its pen, either, and riffled for ten minutes before unearthing it from a pile of lint under my bed.

Thick scratches covered the drawing surface. This had been a gift, and not an inexpensive one, and I’d been careless with it.

The computer took a few minutes to load. It advised me to update to the next version of the software—which was already some ten years old. Folders were scattered all over the desktop, partially obscuring an old, pixelated image of my favorite childhood cartoon, Courage the Cowardly Dog. Most of them were named randomly if at all. I tried to open Paint Tool Sai. The monitor flickered and the tiny hourglass spun over and over. When it finally opened some ten
minutes later, I tried to draw a circle. It glitched and jumped all over the place. I recalibrated. Not much better.

“This is u from the future, go back,” I wrote, and then drew some stars. “Love Aaron age 18 xoxo.” I closed out of the program without saving.

I had homework to do. We were supposed to be reading *Gulliver’s Travels* in British literature. Jonathan Swift was a pretty interesting dude. Made me wish that I actually cared.

I had to get out of this house. Not on an adventure, just away, forever. If I had the money, I’d hop a plane to somewhere out of the ordinary, like Newfoundland or Kansas City or Tijuana. Somewhere with a lot of sky and a lot of flat land. Maybe Scotland, we hadn’t visited Gran or Grandad in years. But then I wouldn’t be able to understand them, not through that accent, it was horrible to lipread, they hadn’t had years in America to soften the brogue.

So I went downstairs to the living room. Jenna sat with a book on her lap, the TV on for company. I perched on the other end of the couch.

“You know,” she signed, “Dad says he wants to take me shopping. I think he feels sorry for me.”

She was right but still I signed, “What do you mean?”

“After everything that happened with Mom. You know. Getting abandoned twice does sound kind of the worst.” She marked her place and set the book aside. “I don’t really feel anything. I keep waiting for it to hit me, but it doesn’t. Is that normal?”

I sighed. “Depends on what your definition of “normal” is.”

“I told Dad I’d rather go to a soccer game or something.”

“He’s trying,” I signed.

“I know, but, like, if you hadn’t tried to kill yourself, what would have happened?”
It took me a minute to process that sentence. “What?”

Jenna shrugged. “You know. If you hadn’t ended up in the hospital, what would have happened to us? Would we have just gone on and on, barely aware of each other, just doing… whatever… watching this stupid TV show? While Dad worked and you cooked or drew and I just went on the Internet or did homework or read.”

I thought about it. My brain was running on about ten percent. “I mean… I can give you the big brotherly politically correct answer or I can give you the truth.”

She cracked a smile. “Both.”

“Alright. Well, big brother says that, of course, we all would have gotten along, we would have had quality bonding time and gotten to know each other and moved past this collective instance of trauma no big deal. Dad will totally stop working too much and there will be so much love that my depression and anxiety will cure itself. And you’ll be well adjusted as fuck.” I leaned back against the couch. “But… I mean… Real Adult Aaron says that’s unlikely. Without something big and traumatizing to shake us of our habits… everything probably would have just been the same. Forever.”

She exhaled. “That’s pretty grim.”

“Sometimes it’s true. Not that, you know, me being suicidal is a good thing. It’s fucking awful. Every time I think about it, about you seeing me like that… ugh, I feel frozen inside.” I probed at my stomach.

“Why are people like that,” she asked. She shook her head.

“Depressed?”

“No. So numb to each other.”

Living Strange by Allison Giese 204
“Philosophical debate of the century,” I signed. I looked up at the ceiling. “It’s just easier, honestly, to ignore things. Especially if they’re bad. Like we’re still babies without object permanence. If we ignore it, it goes away.” I could feel myself slipping into white boy nihilism mode and I knew I needed to redirect the conversation. “But we’re not doing that now and that’s a good thing and that’s all I have to say about that. I’m sorry. I mean, I think I am.”

“It’s not your fault.” Jenna stared at the TV. “I love you,” she signed. “Just so you know.”

The frozen bit of me thawed a little. “I love you too.” I sat down next to her on the couch and for a while we did nothing but watch the trashy show. After a while, I got up to make dinner, only to have Jenna beat me to the punch.

“I defrosted some chicken,” she signed. “I wanna try doing it myself. We’re learning in home ec and it seems fun.”

Fun. I bit my lip.

I watched her rinse and cut up the chicken breasts, cuts uneven, coming dangerously close to slicing open one of her fingers. She dumped some breadcrumbs onto a plate.

“Flour and eggs first,” I signed automatically. “Here.” I cracked two eggs into a bowl and scrambled them. “You’ve got to season the breadcrumbs. It’ll be bland.” I grabbed the parmesan and some fresh basil from the fridge and chopped it. I started breading, somewhat on autopilot.

“I wanted to try,” she protested.

“Right. Sorry.” I shook my head. “I’m just so used to doing it alone.”

Watching her handle the chicken—sloppily, turning the pieces in the pan too soon or too late, splashing oil onto the stove—made me anxious. I watched from the island in the kitchen. She made it through in one piece without setting anything on fire, which was more than our
father could usually do. I sliced open one of the chicken pieces and found that, while it was dry, it was white all the way through. “Not too bad,” I told her.

We ate. Dad wasn’t home yet, held up yet again. So much for trying. Jenna retreated to her room and I did the dishes, trying to scrub the burnt bits out of the pan, unsuccessfully. I went back to the couch. Sat reading beginner’s recipes on my phone, for Jenna. I nodded off soon afterwards and woke up disoriented to the door lights flashing, one-two, one-two. It was after midnight. Someone, probably my father, had tucked a blanket around me, and I fought with it for a minute before going to the door.

Nobody visited us in this neighborhood. I had a feeling I knew who it was, and my stomach knotted up. Charlie sat on the doorstep, shivering in a thin navy sweatshirt. His cheeks were phosphorescent with the cold.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Ann brought me,” he said thickly. “Can I—Can I come in?”

Outside of the wood smoke and steely cold I smelled something else. “You’ve been drinking,” I signed.

“Fuck, of course I have, how else would I have come? Can I come in? I’m freezing my balls off.” Before I could respond he pushed past me into the house. His sweatshirt fluttered as he shivered.

I reached for my phone. “I’m texting them now,” I signed. “You should be home.”

Charlie ripped the phone from my hands and pitched it onto the pile of hats and scarves by the door. “No. I want—I want to talk to you.”

“Well. I don’t want to talk to you,” I signed.
He put his hands on my shoulders to steady himself. “I don’t care,” he said. It was hard to read his lips like this. “Look—fuck, I—.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I need to sit down.”

I led him over to the couch. I felt strangely cold, and numb.

“It was stupid,” he said. “Wasn’t it?” He squinted in the semidarkness and I turned the lamp up higher.

“Depends on what you’re referring to,” I signed.

Charlie all but fell onto the couch. “Oh, shit. You’re right,” he said. He lie down and spread his arms out, palpating the fabric of the couch. “You’re right, and I love you. You’re my friend.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I told you. Cause I’m drunk.”

I sighed. My jaw was starting to ache from being clenched so hard. “You can crash on the couch. I have a lot of homework to do and to be frank I don’t feel like dealing with this right now. So sleep it off.”

“I won’t want to talk to you when I wake up.”

“Yes, Charlie, exactly.”

“I was a shitty friend.”

“Okay.”

He squinted into the air and hugged one of the couch pillows against his chest. “You were too, you know. You’re not free and clear.”

“You’re not making a good case for yourself.”

“Case! Hey! Let’s play court! Go wake up your dad. Oh, wait… then I wouldn’t have an attorney.” He laughed. “If you can’t afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you—”

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 207
“Well, if you keep going on like this then you will wake him up.”

Charlie slumped down again. “We’re no fun anymore.”

“I’m sorry. What do you want from me? A party?”

“It’d be better than this, that’s for sure.”

“You’re the one that came,” I reminded him.

“So did you, if I remember right.”

“Now you’re just being vulgar.”

“Maybe I don’t know what else to say.”

“Then don’t say anything, Charlie. We don’t have to say anything.”

He nodded very seriously. His brow knitted and he tucked his face into his hands. He was still shaking. Part of me wanted to offer him a blanket but I didn’t move. He glanced at his phone. I got us some water.

“They want us to talk,” he signed. “So let’s just talk, all right? Nothing weird.”

“About what?”

“Anything. The weather. I don’t care.” He was trying to fill the space between us but there was nothing there. Misty, milky white.

I felt like I was being choked.

“Remember when we were in high school and we used to hang out by the creek?” he asked. “I haven’t been there in a real long while. That neighborhood. It’s like this, only poorer.”

“Charlie, I’ve been to your parents’ house before.” There was a sharp pain behind my eyes the color of rust.
“I used to go there a lot more. To just look at it. Sometimes I’d see my sister in the window, looking out, though there’s nothing to look at. They don’t miss me. Why don’t they miss me?”

“Because they’re shitty.”

“Don’t you have drugs for times like this?” He asked.

“Medication. Not drugs. And you’re too drunk.”

He shook his head over and over again, like a bell jangling, for close to a minute. “I just feel so fucking trapped.”

“I know.”

He slid over and clung to me, and I let him, because through it all now was not the time to be righteously indignant. His clothing was damp with sweat.

“How do you want me to take you to the hospital?” I asked.

“Why?”

“To get help.” I didn’t know what else to do or what to offer him.

“I don’t have health insurance.”

“So we’ll get you on Medicaid.”

“I wasn’t actually going to do it.”

Famous last words, I thought.

“I told Ann to bring me here. That was the compromise. They had to go to work. We have to make our rent—”

“Don’t worry about that right now. Drink some water.” My vision was all floaty.

Charlie sipped. He was starting to sober up. I could see it in his eyes. “I shouldn’t have said that.”
“Said what?”

“You know, about him.”

I sighed. “It’s… whatever.”

“I was mad at you. I wanted to hurt you. Isn’t that fucked up?”

“It’s kind of fucked up,” I admitted. “But I do shit like that too.”

“So,” he signed. He clutched the glass with his other hand, knuckles white against the stippled blue glass.

“So.”

“I guess there’s no point in asking whether or not you’ll let me pretend to forget this tomorrow morning?”

The elastic beige tension in the room eased a little. “Not a chance.”

He smiled. “Do you hate me?”

“No. I couldn’t hate you.”

Charlie considered this. “You don’t love me, either.”

“You’re my best friend,” I signed.

He laughed a little to himself. “All right. Well.”

“Can we go back to the way things were? Before they got messy?” I asked.

“Not really,” he signed. He kissed me once, chastely. “Think I’ll hit the hay. If it’s all the same to you.”

“Okay. There are blankets—”

“In the ottoman. I know.”

I stood up. The room was stretched thin and pale gray between us. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Aaron.”
Charlie was gone the next morning before I woke up. His glass was in the sink, the blankets folded, and a box of bright yellow bland Cheerios gone from the pantry. He’d texted me a meme and I knew this would be something that took time.

I made an omelet, watching the egg pool in the bottom of the steely pan, and coffee so strong it immediately made me dizzy. I picked up one of my father’s strange ergonomic pens, the one with the strange bulky rubbery nib, and doodled on a napkin. The tip of the pen caught in the little whorls in the paper. A face, a human face, blurry from the little imperfections in the paper. Charlie’s face.

Dad entered my peripheral, startling me. “You’re up early.”

“I slept early.” I flipped the napkin over.

“You looked worn out. I was going to let you sleep.” He’d cut himself shaving and a chalky line of stypic stuck out against his jaw, faint and powdery. “What, did you make mud?”

“Sort of.”

He put up some tea. “I could never get my head around coffee.” He glanced at my plate.

“Eggs?”

“Yep.”

He waited. Gold sunlight encroached the kitchen in sinuous lines. “Busy today? I was thinking—you and Jenna could skip school and hop the train with me—we could grab lunch—see a show—do something. I saw a lovely one in the paper about 9/11, apparently it’s very good—”

“I have therapy today,” I signed politely.

He smiled tiredly. “So you’re all right?”
“Oh. I’m fine. Working on an art project.”

“That’s great.” He finished his tea. He always ate absurdly fast, never enjoying it much, always in a hurry.

“You know Jenna made dinner last night,” I signed. “She wants to learn to cook. We left a plate for you in the fridge.”

“I saw that. I would’ve tried it, but we’d ordered takeout for the office. I need to start eating better.” Ironic, because even though he was on the border between middle-aged and older, he still had a British twigginess and thinness to him. “Doctor says I need to watch my cholesterol. I’m getting old.”

“Would probably be better if you stopped smoking.”

He sighed. “Yes, I know you’re right,” he signed. “Once spring comes I’m going to try quitting again. I’ve done it before. Third time’s the charm. Have you two been eating enough?”

“As much as we ever do.”

He stared at his empty plate for a moment before asking, “How is it going? Therapy, I mean?”

I hesitated. Fitzl was going to make me walk a path I’d never really had to and it was going to be hard. Maybe one of the hardest things I’d ever done. I could let this all gloss over, say it’s fine and move on. I made myself fess up. “Hard,” I admitted. “Really, really hard.”

My father knew about my mental illnesses only vaporously. I’d never shared much before, which was part of the problem, part of the awkwardness straining the air between us.

“All the other therapists I’ve had were utter sh**t, but they were the only ones we found that could sign. He’s actually not half bad, and it scares me, because he’s making me go places I
don’t want to go. And I know I have to, or else, basically.” I looked at the coffee sludge inside my mug.

“I should’ve gotten you help sooner,” he signed towards his plate. “I knew… I felt something was deeply wrong, but you told me everything was fine, and I believed you.”

“I was lying.”

“I know. And I’m not blaming you. I’m blaming myself. I’ve… been there, I know how it is. It’s easier to get people off your back. I saw the signs, but I kept telling myself, he’s not that way, it’ll be fine.”

He had a point. And it might have saved me from the attempt but it wouldn’t have made me want to go through with treatment. I probably would have just pushed through, told those half-truths, gotten myself discharged from therapy within a few months. “I’m going to go see someone myself,” he signed. “I figure it’s better late than never. Might help me help you, so to speak. I go Friday.” He stood. “I’ve got to go get ready. Tell me how it goes, okay?” Dad reached out to me, as if to touch me, and patted my shoulder awkwardly. I noticed the thin veins in his hands, sky blue, vulnerable.

I felt like all I did was sit and wait like a clam in its slimy shell. Sit, work, sit, class sit. The world passed around me like cold water. I wanted spring to come so I could be warm. I always got so cold in the winter. My fingers got stiff.

On my lunch break one Saturday I was contemplating the sketch of Helen and her baby, rubbing out the lines with my finger. The shop was quiet, dead quiet, and the sticky gray street was just about empty.

Living Strange by Allison Giese 213
Amanda saw me before I saw her. Her practice bag was slung over one shoulder. The frayed bottom was patched with duct tape, stringy tie-dye duct tape. She pointed to the sketch.

“…Your boss?”

“Oh. Hey. I was worried about you.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry. I was having a bad day at group.”

“It happens. Don’t apologize.” I went to shut the sketchbook but she stopped me.

“So you really are an artist,” she said. I half expected her to ask me to draw her, like strangers tended to do when it came up.

“Well. I guess. Technically.”

“Can I see?”

I’d rather have my teeth pulled out but instead I said, “Sure.”

Amanda flipped through the drawings. This book was mostly empty eggshell white. She lingered on a drawing of my sister, which I’d done from an old photo from last year. Petra never said we needed a live model. “She’s pretty. Looks like you.”

“I look more like my dad. She’s got his eyes, though.” I took it back from her. “I’m not really a fine artist. Mostly I do comics.”

“Really? All this time and you never said.”

I smiled. An involuntary, nervous gesture. “Because they’re kind of stupid.”

“You go to school for art, then?”

“No, I like to think that I shouldn’t hate myself that much. I study writing. Which… is pretty close, actually.”
She smiled back. She wore lipstick pink like spun sugar. “Tell me about it. My mom tells me off for continuing with ballet because she doesn’t see how I’d make it. But working for Harper lets me get paid to do it. Minimum wage, but you know. It’s all she can afford.”

“Yes. Here, too.”

“What kind of comics? Superheroes?”

“Webcomics,” I told her for some reason. “You know, little sketches. And some bigger stuff.”

“About what?”

“Well... it’s about this witch, and she’s an apprentice to another older witch, and she’s not allowed to leave the library she lives in.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’ll die.” I saw the first panels in my head, embarrassing and glimmery. I’d started it just a year ago but already I didn’t like the style. It seemed too juvenile, too sloppy.

“Why?”

“Well, that’s what she’s trying to figure out. I haven’t finished it yet.” Part of it was because I didn’t know myself. I kept waiting for the character to tell me why, but she never would, and instead would go on and on about her girlfriend, the stranger who had come to visit the library one day. As a result the comic didn’t have much plot, per se, and this irritated some of my readers.

“What’s your poison? DeviantArt? Tumblr? Instagram?”

I snorted. “DeviantArt? What is this, 2008?”

Amanda pulled out her phone. “So? What is it?”

“You don’t have to look.”
“I want to,” she said. “You can’t just bait me with a comic and then not deliver.”

“…I’ll type it in.” I gave her the blog, which seemed least intimidating. My heart started beating in anticipation.

Amanda scrolled. “Cute username.” Her smile slipped a little. “Hiatus,” she said. I remembered it clearly; the drawing I’d done in the hospital, on a napkin, of the pills in blue pen.

“I OD’d,” I said. She put the phone down. “I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t be.” She sat in the chair across from me and stared into space. “I like your work. It’s all kind of somber. Kind of empty.”

“…I appreciate it.” Her words made my stomach hurt in a weird, bittersweet way.

“Helen’s… Deaf, right?”

“As a doornail. She won’t overhear us.”

Amanda thought. “When do you get off work?”

“Well—four, but…”

“Meet me next door,” she said firmly. She stood up and adjusted her purse—white pleather on a delicate chain. “I want to talk about this.” She strode off without another word.

About what?

My stomach tightened. I clutched the sketchbook. Now this was going down the rabbit hole. I could stop feeling this for her—bright crackly gold sparks—if I really tried. It would probably end poorly for both of us.

When four came I was a nervous wreck. The barely-contained feverishness of a panic attack crawled through my body and made me sweat under my sweater. Helen gave me a concerned look but didn’t comment. I considered taking my meds or just plain running. I had to get my sister from school. I had to do homework. Any excuse.

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 216
The fifty yards between the doors rolled on and on. A painfully sunny day seared my eyes. The studio was closed and dark and I figured she might have left. A swooping disappointment and a devastating relief flowed through me. But then I saw her face at the door, right, and I sort of paused. She opened the door.

“Closing up shop?” I asked. I hoped my voice didn’t tremble.

“No. We have no classes on weekends. I come here to practice. Come in.”

The studio was tiny. I saw it all as a shoebox diorama. Chairs lined up against the front windows, which were covered by gauzy lace curtains in a gentle foamy yellow. They rendered everything in the street down to a silhouette. I watched the shadows pass on the street for a minute.

Amanda touched my shoulder. “It’s neat, isn’t it?”

“I could watch it all day.”

“Sometimes I do.” She pulled her hand away. “Is it too dark? Can you see okay?”

I got the feeling she’d done a little research on lipreading.

The rest of the space was lit with fluorescents, grating and harsh as they warmed up. She plugged in a string of Christmas lights in pink and blue and orange and shut off the rest. “A little less irritating.”

I nodded. The long bright mirrors reflected everything, including the light, and disoriented me. I saw my own bedraggled face, pale in the glow, and noticed her watching me. Big old eyes kind of nervous.

Amanda sat crosslegged on the floor. After a minute, I joined her. The air smelled like cinnamon and the color red and I noticed scented pinecones hanging from the doorway. “Are you nervous?” She asked.
“No.” I swallowed. “Well. A little. I kind of have chronic anxiety, so it’s a given.”

“I just wanted to talk. It seems more private here.”

“That’s why you asked if Helen’s Deaf.”

She nodded. “I’m still kind of foggy, from the meds. You said you’d been on them before. Is it always like this?”

“Once you get used to it, it clears up. Sometimes it really does help.” It was strange to be on even footing for once. Charlie knew depression but he had never been able to seek treatment and didn’t like to hear me talk about therapy. And Saima assumed everything was a magic cure.

“…I hope so. I hate feeling so… detached. That’s why I’ve been dancing more, but it doesn’t seem to help.” She leaned back against the mirror. I sat next to her. For a moment, neither of us said anything, and I watched thin ephemeral dust motes stir in the ventilation. Finally, she asked, “You said you OD’d?”

“Yes. Before Christmas. Xanax.”

“What was it like?”

I wished I didn’t have to look at her. I wished that I could look down and away like a hearing person could, build a wall. My throat tightened. “Terrifying,” I said. “Cold… floaty… numb and silvery… I couldn’t breathe, I had no idea where I was. I wasn’t like, “I want to live,” or anything. I wasn’t conscious enough.” I could feel my eyes watering.

“Did you mean to—”

“I did. That’s the thing.” A single tear broke free and I felt dazzlingly exposed. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She squeezed my hand. The touch was so unexpected that I kind of froze up.

We stayed there together, not speaking, long enough for it to get dark outside. The silhouettes disappeared and the lighting in the room became lush and soft. She turned to face me.

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 218
My heart wasn’t pounding, was barely beating at all. I felt strangely calm even though I knew what was coming. She kissed me. I could feel the lipstick, cool and tacky, and the softness of her mouth. The kiss stretched on for ages. Her hand tightened in my hair, warm against my scalp. She pulled away too soon. “Sorry,” she said.

“What for?”

“I didn’t want to force you.”

“I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t want to.”

“To be honest,” she admitted, hand still in my hair, “A small reason I didn’t go to group was because I was too nervous to see you.”

“It’s just me.”

We both looked away for a moment. The kiss was starting to catch up with me and I was warm. There was this tense pause where neither of us knew what to do or say. So I reached up and touched her face. She shut her eyes. She was so alive it scared me. We kissed again. She pulled me to her, shaking. Her arm slid up my back. Amanda was small against me and solid and there and something tight in me loosened a little.

But we had to let go eventually. “…My curfew,” Amanda said. “It’s getting late.”

“What time is it?”

“Half past eight.”

I checked my phone. Sure enough, Dad was wondering where the hell I was.

“I’m eighteen and they want me home by nine.” She shook her head. “My curfew used to be dark. That’s like three in the winter. At least I have the car today. Here.” She shoved her phone towards me. “The least I can do is ask for your number.”

“You’re brave.”
“More so too tired to play around.” She smiled. “I got you good. Hang on.” She got up and went into the other room.

“What do you mean?” But I saw it, in the mirror. The lipstick was smeared around my mouth.

She handed me a wet paper towel. “Sorry. If I’d known—well.”

I’d never experienced this before. “You know I’ve never actually kissed a girl?” I dabbed at the lipstick. It didn’t quite want to come off.

“I have. It’s pretty nice.”

“So you’re—”


“No, it’s just that I’m not straight either.”

“I know. You just told me.”

“…Right.” I turned back to the mirror. The worse of the damage had come off, thankfully. Still too pink to be natural. I stood up, a little dizzy. I clutched the towel in my hand.

“So,” I said finally. “I guess I should ask you on an actual date.”

Amanda considered this and nodded a little facetiously. “Not a bad idea. We can talk about it later. I really do have to get home.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

We gathered our things. I was warm, sweating. We stood at the door.

“Home safe,” she said.

“You too. Text me, okay?”

She kissed me quickly. “See you soon.”
I drove home. I felt strange, light, like I was drifting slightly. I realized I didn’t feel anxious. I probed at the sensation. It was like a tooth was missing. I was still caught up in it when I got home. I wondered if they would be able to see it on my face.

Dad sat at the old kitchen table, his hands folded under his chin, listening to something on his phone. His eyes were glazy, shiny, and bloodshot. The dull brown smell of cigarettes flowed off of him. “Where were you?” He asked.

“With a friend. I’m sorry. I should have told you.”

“Charlie? Saima?”

“No. We met at group. Her name is Amanda.”

“Oh. Well, that’s wonderful.” He forced a smile.

“What’s wrong? You look awful.”

Dad shook his head. “Just tired. Long week already and it hasn’t even properly started.” He pulled out his earbuds and wound them around and around his phone. Paused, waited, still as a statue. “One of my clients got deported this afternoon.”

A cold splash shook away my calm. “Oh shit.”

“Lived here half her life. They’re sending her back to a country she has nothing and nobody in, a language she doesn’t speak so well anymore. And her kids. They’re taking her from her kids.” He put his face in his hands. “Every time I think my heart is done being broken for them, I’m wrong.”

I went to the kitchen and put up the kettle.

“It’s not right that people who look like us can come here without a problem, but others can’t. I feel so… helpless, sometimes.”

“You did what you could,” I signed.
“I know. That’s the worst part.” He forced a smile. “I better try to get some rest.”

I handed him the lukewarm, weak tea. He stood and wobbled a little in his striped dressing gown. He’d been drinking, I realized. “Dad?”

He turned.

“You ever want to go home? To Scotland?”

“No,” he signed. “I don’t.”

I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“But I have the choice. Most don’t.” He lifted his cup to me. “But listen to me. You must be tired. Let’s talk about this tomorrow.”

I sat at my desk and drew him with the fading snapshot of memory. The bloody eyes, the tiredness, the heaviness, in a blue pen. Blue ink always seemed so heavy to me, so impersonal, but it suited him. I would ask, later, if I could show this to the professor. I didn’t think he’d be mad. He knew the score, or enough of it.

The finished picture was loose, like it needed tightening. I shoved it into my portfolio and tried not to think about what I didn’t like about it. The shading, the lines came out too light, I wasn’t sure if I had gotten the pattern of his robe right—were the stripes vertical or horizontal—and the eyes, like always, seemed a little hollow and dead, but not in the way they were in real life. I tried to sleep but my mind kept spinning off into space.
In the art class Petra examined us, table by table, pair by pair. My sketches sat resolutely side by side. Saima. Helen and the baby. Jenna. My father. I took deep breaths and tasted air flavored with paint (oil tempera? Acrylic? I couldn’t tell). My hands were folded to prevent shaking.

I was almost last. I didn’t know what she said to anybody else, but some people look squashed and flattened like cardboard. All too soon she reached Louise and I. I forced myself to smile.

“Who are they?” She asked.

I explained.

Petra pulled the drawings towards her. She studied them, mouth tight and pursed. I swallowed. “You’re not one for consistency, are you?”

I blinked.

She pointed to the cat. “Your technique is sloppy, if I can even call it a technique. But it works.” She shook her head. “I hesitate to call it rawness, but I can see something. A feeling. Which is more than half of these people in this room. You pass.”

“Thanks,” I said. I tried to hide how relieved I felt.

She went on to the next table. I put the drawings back into their hard black folder.

“She’s a badass,” Louise signed.

“She has to be,” I signed.

“Well. I liked them.”

“Thanks. That’s nice of you.”

“You have to go now?” She asked.
“Work. You know.” There was ballet today; I wondered if Amanda was there. I felt nervous, something sugary and spun. I didn’t know what I wanted or what I should want. I hadn’t anticipated this. I had never bothered imagining the future. It was still nearly impossible for me.

So I texted her, quickly, like ripping off a BandAid. She didn’t respond. At work, I cleaned up shop, put out books with dull paper covers in cinnamon brown, grass green, onion yellow. Got a papercut. Helped a customer. It was boiling in here and I lowered the thermostat.

Outside, water trickled in the streets, choked and brackish with salt and dirt. A first spring thaw. Spring. Soon it would be March. And I didn’t know what I was going to do, in general, or how to find my way there.

She got back to me. And Charlie did, too.

Yes, I’m working today, she wrote, but I have therapy after. You know. This weekend I think would work better. I’d like to take you up on your offer.

Where and when?

Saturday. Six. Let’s meet here. Surprise me.

Surprise me.

I was so dazzled by that that I barely remember to look at Charlie’s message. It was a simple one.

Party tonight. Small gathering at Phoebe’s. You’re invited. I could barely remember Phoebe. We had never been close, even in the era of Dmitri. All I remembered about her was her heavy, dark hair.

Why now after so long? I asked. They haven’t had a party in months.
Well, they did, we just weren’t invited, he wrote. It’s Phoebe’s birthday. I told her you would bake something nice.

Of course he had. Not like I was busy, or anything. Any allergies? What does she like? I felt the jaws of social obligation clamping down on me.

Nothing. And chocolate, apparently.

Even if I left work at the speed of light, I would barely have enough time to go home and bake. I’m not sure. I have a lot to do.

At least come for a few minutes.

You know I need like 3-5 business days before plans.

Oh come on, cut me some slack. This is me trying to make it up to you. These people are our friends.

Well, they had a funny way of showing it, I thought. No calls, no visits, not since Dmitri died. I’ll probably be late.

All right. Be late. As long as you come.

And I was late but not horribly. I went to the grocery store to get ingredients for Phoebe’s cake. As I was making the cake this springy bitter orange part of me dwelled on the fact that none of them would do this for me. So when I finally arrived at Phoebe’s house I was not in a very good mood.

The house was a mobile home, a modular affair, crammed into some gravelly land off of the Taconic parkway. It was very dark here, penetratingly so. A line of progressively more battered cars framed the road. Ann’s truck—a pine green monster with rust all down the sides—had knocked over a plastic gnome and I righted it before I approached the door.
The birthday girl answered. Phoebe was squat and soft, with a magnificent phoenix tattoo barely visible on her back through a white tank top. She stumbled a little. “Aaron, it’s been forever.” She squeezed me around the waist and pressed a wet kiss into my cheek. “I’ve been meaning to get on over there. Things have been crazy, you know.” She swayed. She smelled like sour red wine.

I offered the cake. “Happy birthday.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet. You were always so sweet. Come in.”

“Are you drunk?”

“Hell, yeah.” She lifted her arms. “And you better get there soon too. Twenty-one, mate.”

“I forget you’re older than us.”

She pointed at me. “Little fetus.”

I went into the house. The dense lavender smell of incense and pot gnawed at me. I used to party here when he was alive. It was very clean, very sparse, with old-fashioned gingham wallpaper in watery colors. The furniture was garage sale and unremarkable. A bead curtain separated the bedrooms from everything else.

Phoebe set the cake down in the kitchen, next to a few bottles of wine and cheap vodka, with soda to cut it. I got some coke and joined the party.

If it could be called that. There were five of us. Ann, Phoebe, Charlie, me, and one person I only remembered by sight.

Charlie nodded stiffly. “We asked Saima, too, but you know, she’s busy.”

“It’s Friday. She’s at mosque,” I signed. I sat on one of the hard wooden chairs. Ann and Phoebe draped over each other like blankets, comfortable, intimate. For some reason, seeing
them made me uncomfortable, and I got a funny cold feeling as I remembered Dmitri’s arms on me.

“Hey,” Ann signed. “Feel like I haven’t talked to you in forever.”

“We haven’t.” The soda was flat. “How’s the job?”

“Interesting,” they signed. “Haunted as shit, boring, but interesting. What’s that you’ve got?”

“Soda.”

“Boo. Live a little.”

“I’m not supposed to drink on my meds.” I hadn’t tried and I wasn’t sure I was feeling up to it.

“Your life.” They shrugged. “Can you get high, though? Matt and I were thinking about it.” Matt was one the stranger, sitting serenely in the corner on his phone. His nails were painted a chipped sparkly holiday red.


“I’m okay. Thanks.” The signs felt hollow and insincere. I would have been better if they hadn’t all abandoned me. “You know, I think I do want to smoke.”

“Your wish is my command,” Ann signed. They picked up a smooth china blue bowl and packed it with pot from a tea tin.

Charlie touched my hand. “You sure?”

“I’ll be fine. Gotta live, right?”

“Well, take it slow.”
We passed it around. I never really liked the way pot made me feel, weak and slow and watery. I preferred the painkillers, the rare times we had them, or alcohol. Even a Klonopin trip could be more fun, if you weren’t taking it for a panic attack. But this was available, so I took it. I used to like the lack of control a lot more but now it made me feel ansty. Pills to reign things in, drugs to pull things out. Where was the middle, the comfortable place? Was there one? I imagined a hollow between two mountains. You fell down one side only to have to climb up the other.


We went to the back porch of the trailer and he lit up. We smoked. Aside from a few pale streetlights, it was dim out here. We stood at Phoebe’s railing and passed the cigarette back and forth until it was a nub and Charlie ground it out on his shoe. “How are you feeling?” he asked.
“All right.” I was not used to the mixture of substances in my body anymore and my stomach was a little upset. “You?”

He exhaled smoke. “All right.”

The air was choked with humidity from the melting snow. You could hold this air in your hands.

He kissed me abruptly but not forcefully. For a second—and not much longer—I felt like I could do this, sink back into the way things were. Then I remembered how warm and safe I felt with Amanda. How I didn’t feel like I was constantly on tenterhooks. “I can’t,” I told him.

“I know.” He shook his head.

“I’m seeing someone,” I signed.

“…Oh.”

“I haven’t told anyone yet. It just happened the other day.”

Charlie bobbed his head. “Must be nice.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m happy for you.” He chuckled. “Just… one last time, is all.” He rubbed at his neck. “Ann and Phoebe. You and whoever. When will it be me?”

“You’re drunk,” I signed.

“Nah. Just enough to say how I feel.”

Everything went harsh and kind of scrabbly. “You’re not—”

“I want to be your friend. I really do.”

“But.”

“But.” He considered. “It’s going to take me a while.”

A silent rope stretched between us.
“So,” I signed.

“So.”

Another elastic pause.

“Who are they?” He asked finally.

“Her name is Amanda. Juice girl.”

“I see. Hearing?”

“Well, yeah.” I hadn’t yet thought of this complication more than absolutely necessary.

“It’s very calm. That’s why.”

He smiled. “Yeah. We never were that way. Weird being back here.”

“I know. I’m still mad.”

“Me too. What do you even say? Why start shit, you know? We have to stick together. We have no one else.” He looked down at the sad little cigarette butt. “Tastes like more.”

“It does.”


We went back inside. Ann was telling a story, their hands flying in watery motions. “…I see him standing there, in the parking lot, big, old creepy guy. It’s the middle of the night and black as pitch. He’s got his thing in his hands, you know, jerking it, and I’m like, okay? And I think about leaving him be and just hiding in the office, but this is a school and they’ve got cameras. I can’t even call the cops because there’s no videophone or anything.”

“So what did you do?” Phoebe pressed.

They laughed. “I filled a compound bucket with ice water. And I go to the room closest to him and throw it on him. And I yell. Nothing like a Deaf dyke yelling in the wild. That got him running. Wish I’d had my pepper spray, that would have showed him, the fuck. That’s the
only concrete weird thing that’s happened so far. Other than the lights flickering, and the TVs turning themselves on, and whatnot.”

“At least it’s not the ghosts of middle schoolers,” Charlie signed. “That would be a lot worse.”

Ghosts, I thought desperately. Was Dmitri visiting Ann too? Did they just not know?

Phoebe rose. “Cake! You took forever! How long does it take to smoke one cigarette?”

Ann smirked.

I sighed. “Do you have candles? I didn’t have any.”

“In the kitchen. Drawer next to the sink.”

I thought about the concept of aging. Time was a fuzzy-stocking thing that got away from you. Really we were all so young, feigning maturity and a whole lot else besides. For the next few hours I felt like I was renting someone else’s life. I was dizzy and wine-drunk, sleepily watching their chatter bubble around me. When I started to sober up and come back into the conversation, it had moved on.

“So why did we lose touch?” Someone was finally drunk enough to ask. “What happened?”

I stared at the water in my plastic cup.

“It doesn’t feel right.” Ann was the speaker. “It’s not what he’d want. I feel like—since the funeral—everything in our lives just fell apart.”

Phoebe squeezed their arm. The room was about to tip into either nonsense or tears. I thought about hiding in the bathroom so I didn’t have to see it happen.

“Especially you,” Ann signed and pointed at me. “Where’d you go?”

“Me?”
“Yeah. You were closest to him.”

I didn’t think anyone was ever that close to Dmitri. That had always been Ann’s thing, insisting they were his best friend. Where did the reversal come from? “You were all the ones who stopped talking.”

“What were we supposed to do? We couldn’t get a hold of you.”

I didn’t know if this was true. My memory from that time was hazy and insubstantial and bled at the edges. I took a deep breath. I didn’t know where to begin and I sure as hell didn’t have enough energy. My heart was rotten, an angry ugly liver color. “It was hard,” I signed. “I felt like it was all my fault. I could have done something.”

“We all feel that way. Survivor’s guilt,” Ann signed. Charlie took a drink.

I hadn’t let myself think about him or that foggy night. The memory was shrouded in a gray mist. It moved slowly, blurrily through my head. Like a VHS tape rewinding, images jumping.

It didn’t rain then. The sky was hot, and still, and sludgy for July. My air conditioner was broken. I sat in my room doing—something—drawing or painting. No, I was experimenting with sculpture, cheap clay, I could smell it on my hands, pungent and plasticine. It was very late, eleven, maybe later. My shirt clung to me.

The door opened and the light flickered; someone wanted my attention. There he was, Genesis shirt, jeans with the ragged cuffs.

“You shouldn’t leave that spare key lying around,” Dmitri signed. He was breathing hard.

“Did you walk all the way here?”

He took off the backpack he was carrying. “Left an hour ago.”

I looked at the pack. “…For the night?” I asked, even though I already knew in my gut.

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 232
“I did what you wanted. I came out.” His eyes were sharp as knives. “I was already done with them anyway.”

“So—” I was exhausted. “They kicked you out?”

“I didn’t stick around long enough to find out.”

I set the sculpture—a bird, it was going to be a pigeon, I remember that much—aside. I wiped my hands on a damp towel. “You have to go back.”

“No back to go to,” he signed thickly.

“Dmitri, you can’t—”


I turned in my chair. “Where will you go?”

He paused and looked down. “Out west,” he signed. “I have a cousin in New Mexico. They’re the only other family I have. I can’t stay with Ann. Everyone else said no. My own friends won’t give me a place to stay.” He waited for me to offer. I couldn’t bring myself to speak.

Finally, he signed, “Come with me, Aaron. We can go together. Start over. Drive across the country, do what we want.”

My heart started to race. “You’re still only seventeen.”

“So?”

“We have no money.”

“Your point?” The color bled into his face, washed out pink.

“I can’t leave my sister.”

“So leave for a few weeks and come back. I don’t want to go alone.”
Silence. He waited.

“I can’t,” I signed. “I just can’t.”

“This is because of what Cora said, isn’t it?” He crossed his arms. “She didn’t mean it. You know that.”

Another murky memory—Cora yelling at me, for some reason, something I had done, something about not being there for Dmitri, not supporting his decision to remain closeted. But I had never forced him to come out. I just didn’t want to deal with the constant pressure that came from pretending. “Then why did you agree?”

“Because I love you and I don’t want you getting hurt. People like us—we don’t get to be safe. The last thing you need is for the people in your community to turn against you.”

I looked at the pigeon. “I can’t believe that. Maybe I’m not who you thought I was.”

He laughed a little. “Maybe not, Aaron. But who are you, then?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Come with me,” he signed again. “Please.”

It was all unraveling, I could feel it. I thought of the nights he’d kept me up with that loneliness, the secrecy, the times he insisted on introducing himself as my friend, nothing more—and then the times he would lead me upstairs, gently, would make love to me, would tell me he loved me. I couldn’t believe that was all people like us got to have.

“I’m going, Aaron,” he signed.

“There’s nothing else you can do?”

He smiled. Sadly. “You’re my only option.”

“I can’t rip another hole in my family.”

“Right.” He nodded. “So that’s it, then?”

_Living Strange_ by Allison Giese 234
The blood in my veins had turned to poison, thick and sticky green. “Will you text me?
Tell me you’re safe?”

He thought about this. “Maybe. Maybe not, who knows. I have to start new.”

“Dmitri—”

He kissed me, tenderly. Picked up his backpack. “Goodbye.”

“Wait—” I signed, but he had already turned away.

He was dead three days later.

23.

Someone was shaking me. Charlie. Dependable, loveable Charlie. I was crying because of course
I was.

“I’m sorry, you guys, I’m so sorry,” I signed. “I can’t—I let this happen—”

“You couldn’t have known,” Charlie signed.

The room was still and nobody else was willing to make eye contact with me.

“I was so tired—I couldn’t—I should have followed him. Stopped him.”

Ann shook their head. “And I should have let him stay with me. But I couldn’t afford to
feed anyone other than myself. I think about that too much.”

Phoebe buried her head in their stomach. She didn’t want to listen to this either. I should
tell them that I’d seen him. Maybe he was haunting them too. I looked out the front window at
the murky sky, half expecting him to be watching. Maybe he was.
Whatever anybody else said this was my fault. Even if I had not followed him, I still could have done something—called the police sooner than I had, found a way to pay for a bus ticket, gone to his parents—or my father the lawyer—

But why hadn’t I? Why had I let this happen? It had made sense at the time. And besides, what would the police do for a Deaf gay kid?

“You have your pills?” Charlie asked.

They would clear my head. I checked the little metal tube. It was empty.

“I might have something,” Matt signed

“No. I’ll be fine. I need to go home.” I stood. I could barely look at these people without feeling sick.

“You shouldn’t drive,” Charlie signed.

“I’m sober.” That wasn’t what he meant but I needed out of this room.

“Then I’ll go with you,” he signed.

“I’m sorry,” I signed again. “I didn’t mean to ruin the party.” Without waiting I left. The cold air outside cleaved my lungs in two. I kept thinking I would see him. It was so dark. I walked past my car, down the street, into the darkness. I needed to keep moving.

There was a streetlight at the corner. And there he was. He wore his old gray parka and a knit hat I’d given him one Christmas.

“Sorry I’m late,” he signed. He adjusted his hat.

“I knew you’d come.”

“Nothing better to do.”

I hesitated. The foggy night made my vision soft. “Is there a point to asking if this is real?”

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 236
“Reality is a social construct,” Dmitri signed.

That was exactly what I expected him to say.

“They’re worried about you. Just say you’re wasted and let it sweep under the rug.”

“Are you dead?”

“Kind of an insensitive thing to ask, don’t you think,” he signed dryly.

“Am I dead?” The pills—maybe the Xanax had worked after all—

“Trust me, it takes a lot of strength to craft an after this detailed. You’re probably fine.”

“What’s the point of this, then?” I asked. “I don’t have time for metaphors—for some literalization of how I feel—”

“That’s just insulting.” He shook his head. “Why do you think this is just for you?”

I could see lights in the distance. They must have followed me. “Why are you here, then?”

“It takes a lot of strength to go, too.”

“When you left, did you mean to—”

“Did I mean to kill myself?” He chuckled. “Did you?”

“But I’m alive. You’re not.”

The light drew closer. When I turned back, he was gone. His knit hat was on the ground. I reached towards it with shaking hands. The snow was wet and weighty and I brushed against wool.

Charlie touched my shoulder. “It happened again, didn’t it?” He asked.

“I saw him. His hat, it was right here.”

Charlie shined the light onto the patch of snow. “I don’t see anything.” He crouched next to me. “I’m wondering if the weed was laced with something. I feel weird, too.”
“I’m losing my fucking mind.” Oh God, it was finally happening.

“Come back inside,” he signed. “You’re shivering.”

I leaned against him. I felt floaty, like I was unraveling again.

When Dad picked me up he wasn’t happy. Charlie took my keys and held onto them until he came. The ride home was awkward, but dark, so I didn’t have to listen to him. I felt like I might be sick.

At home he gave me about ten seconds’ reprieve. “What happened?” He asked. “You smell like weed and you’re sweating bullets. I’m glad you called me, but do you really think you should be doing this right now?”

“What do you believe in ghosts?”

He blinked. “What?”

“You believe in God. Do you believe in ghosts, too?”

He didn’t know what to say. “Well… when one dies… the soul goes on,” he signed. “To Heaven, or Hell, or purgatory, I suppose.”

“Do you think somebody could get trapped on this side?”

He shook his head. “Can’t say I’ve thought about it. Why do you ask?”

I closed my eyes. I was dizzy. “I’m just thinking about what would have happened. If I hadn’t made it.”

I could see the color bleed out of his face. He floundered for words.

“Would I have gotten stuck? Is there somewhere to be stuck in?”

“I… I can’t say,” he signed. “Were you… very afraid?”
It was the first time he’d asked me about my experience, even after all this time. “I couldn’t feel enough to be scared,” I signed. I swallowed down the nausea. “But I’m… scared now.”

His brows scrunched together. I wondered if he would tell me that there was nothing to be afraid of, and if so, if he believed that.

“I’m sorry,” I signed. Thick tears clotted my eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

He hugged me. I breathed in the smell of too many cigarettes and too many long nights and a dense, sticky aftershave. I didn’t feel smothered but I didn’t really feel comforted either. “It’s all right,” he signed at last. “You go to bed. You need some rest. We can talk about this in the morning.”

But in the morning he wasn’t home. Evidently, he’d had to go into the office last minute. In his text, he was perfunctory and used too much punctuation to be casual. I wondered if I’d actually get grounded, and in which case, if he would still expect me to get Jenna from basketball practice.

I was drinking my second cup of coffee when I remembered the date. It seemed indistinct and dreamlike and I was drained. Still, my heart quickened. I’d never been on an actual date before. I didn’t know what sorts of things I should do. The uneven threads of events in my life weren’t overlapping. Ghosts. Death, destruction. A date. I shook my head.

I didn’t even have my car. It was still at Phoebe’s. And if Dad was at the office, I didn’t even know how I would get to it. I could ask Saima, but she was probably busy, or catching up with schoolwork at the very least. Charlie didn’t drive. Which basically left me with one other
person I could ask, and after last night I would almost rather spend the exorbitant amount of money on a cab.

It took a great deal of bribery to get Ann to help me out. I offered them some gas money, and some homemade mac and cheese. The mac and cheese got them.

*U r lucky ur a good cook*, they wrote.

I half expected Charlie or Phoebe to be in their truck cab when they showed up but they were alone. “Thanks again for doing this,” I signed. It was a little after two.

“Got the goods?”

I handed them the Tupperware container. They lifted the cover and sniffed it. “God. Why don’t you cook for us anymore?”

I got into the truck. Despite the lingering weed smell, it was very clean. There was an overnight bag in the back and it was a washed out, cheap turquoise. The velvety upholstery was faded stiff green like the rest of the truck.

As we drove I expected them to rip me a new one but they didn’t say much of anything. They parked at Phoebe’s. And waited. Their strong hands clutched the knobbly old steering wheel.

“Sometimes I think I see him too,” they admitted after a long moment. Their glassy blue eyes reminded me of smoke, soft smoke. “I thought it was because I smoked too much or slept too little. The school being haunted… I had hoped it was him. I see him in the crowd a lot. Or I think I do, but when I turn back, he’s not there. It’s part of the reason why I haven’t quit my job. I think he’ll come. It’s also part of the reason I’ve been avoiding you. Because you and me… we could have done something. But we didn’t.”

Outside, wispy clouds drifted against the sun, setting grayish shadows on everything.
“I like to tell myself that nobody’s at fault. But is that true? You, me. His parents. We’re supposed to take care of him. Or at least make sure he survives. Right?” They tapped on the steering wheel for a minute. “Do you think we were selfish?”

“…I don’t know.” I didn’t want to think about this anymore. More navy blue was threatening to rip open and spill in me. “I needed a break, from the tension. It’s why I said no to him. I was so exhausted. I wanted a little peace. A little break.”

“I know what you mean. Dmitri was even more exhausting to me than you are to Charlie. I mean, the kid had a lot of issues. I’m not a damn therapist. I can only say so much. And I’ve got my own shit, too. I can’t take care of myself if I’m run ragged trying to comfort him. But I still feel like… if I could change the past…” They paused. “If you see him again, will you tell him I’m sorry?”

My heart hurt, a bitter achy goldenrod sort of hurt. “Sure, Ann.”

They shut the truck. “Well, you gave me another excuse to see my girlfriend, anyway.”

They opened the door and took the food with them. “See you around.”

“You too. Thanks again.”

And when I drove home I cried again, but it felt different now, more like a release than a bleeding.

I wanted to come up with a clever idea for the date but as six o’clock drew nearer and nearer I started to panic. There wasn’t a whole lot to do in this town, especially with no money. We couldn’t see a movie—no captioned showings tonight—or a play. I felt like I was in over my head and wondered if I should quit before anything else happened. With my emotions so all over the place I wasn’t sure I could invest in something like this.

Living Strange by Allison Giese 241
I asked Saima if she knew about anything fun going on in town. When she asked why, like an idiot I told her and she spent the next fifteen minutes freaking out and spamming me, demanding to know every last detail about Amanda. And then,

*What are you asking me for? Me, a person who has never been on a date and doesn’t plan on it?*

After that, I actually had to iron a shirt and try to make myself presentable, so by then I had little time to do anything but sit with my sketchbook and draw as fast as was physically possible. I hadn’t even finished the drawing before I was embarrassed by it but it was all I had. I wished it were better.

By the time I reached the store I was on another plane of existence, jittery and shaking. Other than finding some place to eat I had no idea what to do or where to go.

I was early. The sky looked like rain, deep rich blue and swollen. I should have brought an umbrella. I clutched the folder with the drawing closer to my body.

I saw her come around the corner from the parking lot. She wore that worn white coat and a dress the color of something forgotten, hanging at the top of her knees.

“Oh good,” Amanda said when she came into the light. “You made it.”

A pause slightly longer than it should have been. “This is for you.” I held the folder out.

She took it from me as if she weren’t sure what to do with it. She opened it and stared down at the drawing.

“Flowers,” I said desperately. “That’s what people are supposed to give their dates, right? But these won’t die. I had to rush it but I can do it again if you don’t like it. Maybe pastels, I was thinking, that would probably look a lot softer.”
She smiled, her eyes crinkling up at the corners. “I love them,” Amanda said. “Why peonies?”

I had no good answer. It had been the first thing that popped into my head. “They just reminded me of you.”

She slid her hand into mine and squeezed tightly. “So. Where to?”

“I’m afraid I’m not very original. I figured we could just get dinner somewhere.” She hesitated slightly and I remembered that she was still in recovery. “Or if you’d be more comfortable just getting coffee that’s fine too.”

“No, it’s all right. I should probably eat.”

We walked for a while. Her hand was smooth and clammy. I couldn’t get over the surreality of the moment, that she was willing to be seen with me. The street around us was soft at the edges like an old film.

“There’s this ramen place that’s good,” I said. “If that’s all right.”

“It’s fine,” she said. Her expression was unreadable.

“If it’s too hard for you we can do something else.”

Another crinkly little smile. “Trust me, I’m fine. You won’t break me. I want to spend time with you.”

The restaurant was small and dark and the light had the same quality as espresso. The room was busy, dense and the babble of chatter crowded my head. I wondered if this was a bad idea.

“Thanks for the flowers,” she said.

“I wanted to do it.”
A waitress came. Amanda ordered a pot of green tea and it arrived in thin china cups without handles. I traced the fine leaf design with one finger. We ordered our food. And waited.

“So are you from around here?” I asked. My stomach was in tight plaited knots and I wondered if I would even be able to eat.

“I’m from Queens, actually,” she said. “We moved up here a few years ago when my dad started his business. He’s a landscaper. Not as many lawns down there, you know. What about you?”

“I’m from Scarsdale,” I said. “But that was a while ago.” The tea was still too hot to drink but I sipped anyway and burned my tongue. “What does your mom do? Does she live with you?”

“She’s a secretary. They’re still married. Still disgustingly in love. Do you live with your parents?”

It was getting harder to read her lips with all the ambient noise and chatter. “My dad’s an immigration lawyer in the city. My mom’s a trucker. They’re divorced.” I felt a crackleburst of the same orange anger from the road trip, hot, runny like an egg yolk. “I don’t see her much. And there’s my sister, but she’s a kid. She plays basketball. She loves to read, though.”

“Are they deaf like you?”

“My sister and a lot of people on my mom’s side are. My parents aren’t, though.”

“Were you born this way?”

I was used to telling the story and barely had to pay any attention. “No. It happened when I was fourteen. I got sick. Meniere’s disease, it’s this inner ear condition that causes vertigo, migraines, hearing loss, lots of fun stuff. So it took a few years for me to get where I am now.”

The waitress brought out our soup. I could barely taste what I was eating. I was starting to worry. Would the whole night be like this—endless questions, staccato answers, chatter, random crowd noise, awkwardness? “So what do you do? I know you dance.”
“I’m in cosmetology school,” she said. “You know, makeup, skincare, hair cutting. It’ll be a stable income when I’m licensed. I don’t think I could enjoy dancing if I did it professionally. Way too much pressure, you know?”

I did know. That was why I’d picked to do a degree in writing instead of fine art, it was just far more marketable. “Do you like it?”

Amanda smiled but it was genuine this time. “I love it.” She took out her phone and pulled something up. “I need to build a real portfolio, but at least you can see what I do.” She handed me the phone, which was bulky in a periwinkle colored silicone case. It was an Instagram account—the picture quality poor and grainy—but I saw what she was indicating.

“I don’t know how to do a lot of the real intricate stuff yet,” she said. “You know some people can do like Starry Night on an eyelid? I can’t do that.”

Pictures and pictures of her own face in different masks of makeup. There was an artistry in this I hadn’t realized before. There were subtleties. A facial structure made more visible, tone evened, eyes made larger or smaller, features brought out or blurred back. I’d always only worked two-dimensionally and this was new to me.

She worked a lot with color, taking dull shades—browns, grays—and blending them against themselves to create dimension. She made blue and orange work together without creating that neutral muddy brown I was so familiar with. “How did you do that?”

“A blending brush. And really light pressure. It also depends what you use. That shadow palette was really hard to work with.”

“Can you show me sometime?” Blending wasn’t difficult in Photoshop but it was with a brush and real paint. Everything would rather mix and muddy and slip away.

“Sure,” she said. She flushed. “I didn’t think you’d be interested.”
“Why wouldn’t I?” I scrolled through more of the feed. There was some stage makeup here too, with costumes. She’d done *Swan Lake*—thin feathers in white eyeliner—and period piece Victorian makeup. Her Juliet, presumably from a ballet, was naïve and young with eyes ringed in pinks and purples. “How did you learn to do all this?”

“Before I started school, videos, mostly,” she said. “Lots and lots of videos. After I dropped out of high school, I had plenty of time.”

I handed the phone back to her. “You dropped out?”

“When I was sixteen. I was too weak and tired to go. I got my GED instead. You’re in college, right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like it?”

“I don’t know yet.” It was true. “It feels like something I have to do, to get through. Everyone sort of expected me to go because I had good grades.” I sliced one of the noodles in half with my chopsticks. “I like the routine and all, but I’m not sure what school is actually doing for me.”

“Maybe I’ll go someday,” she said. “I’m not in a hurry. I’ve got a while.”

She was technically right. I would probably live another sixty years. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that other than brutally aware of my body. “How are you so at peace with that?”

For a few minutes she ate and considered that. “Therapy, mostly,” she said at last.

We left soon after and walked in silence through town, ducking under streetlights. Even in the light we didn’t speak much and I felt a quiet pressing anxiety. I wondered if I should say something. She seemed content, at least.
Being Saturday it was a party night. I hadn’t been in town at night in a while. Bodies crowded the pavement in all shapes and colors. My eyes caught fabric—sequins, lace, denim, spandex—in the passersby. Some were drunk already and stumbled and bellowed.

Amanda gestured into one of the doors, a pub. “You play pool?”

“I’m terrible at it.” Aunt Kate had a pool table. My cousin Terry and I used to play to avoid everyone else.

“So am I,” she said. “Let’s go in for a little bit. Might be fun.”

The pub was less crowded than the bars but not by much. We had to wait for a pool table and sat in an old wooden booth. Someone had carved “Karl loves May” into the table. I stroked the writing. It was smoothed, like many other people had touched it before.

Amanda and I shared a Shirley Temple, which was almost sickeningly sweet in its frosty mug. The whole room was a warm soft brown like an old coat.

Amanda touched my hands. “Will you teach me how to sign?”

I knew why. We were dealing with it well enough so far but conversation didn’t come as easy or as naturally when I had to read her lips. Not to mention I couldn’t be completely sure what she was saying, which made everything even blurrier.

She frowned. “I don’t want you to have to read my lips all the time. You must be so tired.”

I considered. She was right in a way but teaching her would also be draining. I knew too many people who started to learn and then gave up once it got complicated. Like my father’s parents, for instance. “Maybe not tonight,” I said.

“That’s two dates you owe me, then,” she said. She smiled.

“Keeping a list?”

Amanda winked. “You better watch yourself.”
But the night had to end eventually. She had a curfew to stick to. I got the feeling she hadn’t told her parents, which made me anxious. I didn’t want to do that again.

So after a truly terrible pool game that had bystanders ragging us, we left. The lot where we’d parked was virtually deserted.

“I had a good time,” she said.

“Me too.”

A moment of hesitation that I felt so deeply it scared me.

“Can I kiss you good night?” She asked. Her eyes were fierce and very bright.

For a long moment we did. My head was clearer than it had been in weeks. I held her tightly and tried to place her smell but it didn’t resemble anything else. It was just hers.

“I have to go,” she said and pulled away.

I touched my face. “Did you get me?”

She studied me. “I wore non-transferable lipstick,” she said. “Talk to you soon.”

“Let me know when you get home.”

“Always.”

I sat in my car for a long moment after she’d left. I shut my eyes and watched the pinkish peach of light against my eyelids. I felt strange again, steady, calm now that it was over. Calm. A smooth word like a rock.

I stayed up all night drawing.

24.
For our next date Amanda came over to my house. I spent most of the day before obsessively cleaning everything. If it wasn’t nailed down it was scrubbed. How had there gotten to be so much dust, so much dirt? We were only three people and most of the time we weren’t even home.

When she arrived I was looking through my recipes, trying to find something that would be easy for her to eat. The doorbell lights flickered and my heart about stopped. I opened the door and found her there, carrying a large square black case not unlike the ones I’d seen the art students carrying around.

“Hey,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“My makeup. I brought it so you could look at it. If you were interested.” She smiled. “I almost got lost in your neighborhood. All the houses look the same.”

“Imagine living here,” I said dryly. “Come on in.”

“It smells good. Did you bake something?”

“For dessert.”

“I didn’t know you liked cooking.”

“I have a lot of hidden depths,” I said.

She laughed. “I’m sure you do. Can’t always be a suffering artist.”

“Well, I mean, you’re not wrong.”

She set her case down on the floor and looked around, her eyes wide and inquisitive. Suddenly I was embarrassed. The whole place seemed too big, too nice, fake, almost.

“I’ll… show you around,” I said.

“Shoes on or off?”
“Off. Let me take your coat.” An awkward pause. It had been so long since I’d had someone new over. I hung the coat up.

Living room. Kitchen. The back porch, downstairs bathroom, Dad’s office. I tried to see it as she would. It was exactly what any white middle-class house would be like. Upstairs living space, where we put all the old furniture from Scarsdale. Guest room. Jenna’s room. Our shared bathroom. My own room.

“It’s cute,” she said. She touched my bedspread, the art supplies I’d meticulously rearranged at about four in the morning. “For an artist, you're very… neat.”

“Did you think I was a slob?” I asked and smiled nervously.

“It’s a pretty house, but it feels empty,” she said. “You know?”

“No, I totally agree. I’ve been saying that for years. We should probably just get an apartment, but I think the mortgage is already paid, and the market’s pretty bad right now. Plus Dad wouldn’t have time to deal with it.”

“Will I meet your family today?”

I felt my face burning. “Jenna will be back soon. I have no idea about my dad. He works crazy hours in the city.”

She continued to look around the room, touching the jacket hanging over my desk chair, the pigeon sculpture on my bookshelf.

“I made that a few months ago,” I said. “I don’t really care for it.”

“I think it’s neat,” she said. She stooped to get a better look at it.

“I really like pigeons,” I said. “I know they’re basically flying rats, but I think they’re funny. Just little birds chilling waiting on their next meal. And a lot of their coloration is quite beautiful.”
She smiled. She turned and noticed something else, tucked between my desk and bookshelf, a milk crate full of sketchbooks. “Are these your drawings? Can I look?”

My heart was beating fast again and not in the pleasant way it had been before. “Um… maybe not those—”

But she had picked the first volume up. “Strike Meets the Universe. Is this one of your comics?”

“I… I guess so,” I said breathlessly. “It was a collab with my ex.”

Amanda didn’t open it. “…Oh,” she said.

“I just haven’t gotten rid of it yet,” I said.

“Have you kept in touch with them?” she asked. She put the notebook down. “Do you still work on it?”

“No,” I said. “Not really.”

“I know what you mean,” she said. She perched on the edge of the bed. “That’s like me and Elizabeth. We said we were going to be friends, but… it was too hard. We only broke up because she moved the Michigan. Hard to be girlfriends, hard to be friends. Hard to be anything.”

She smiled.

“I’m sorry,” I said numbly. I tried to drag myself out of the static.

“Oh, I’m totally over her by now,” she said with a shrug. “I mean, it was a big deal at the time, but it’s been long enough that I’ve only held onto the happy things. You know?”

“Sure,” I said. I took a deep breath.

“We were seventeen and in the same dance class. She was so smart. I think she actually went to dance school. I bet she’ll make it, too.” She laughed. “Here I am, a makeup artist. Anyway. Were they an artist too?”

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 251
“He,” I corrected. “He was a writer.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “We don’t have to talk about exes yet if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s okay.” I exhaled. My hands started to shake, not just from the memories, but from a sudden stab of pain. “We haven’t kept in touch because he passed away eight months ago.”

“Oh, my God. Holy shit. Are you okay?” She blinked quickly.

“Kind of,” I said. I sat next to her because I was feeling weak.

“Why didn’t you say anything sooner?”

“Because I didn’t want you to have to deal with the baggage. I like being with you. I don’t want it to be complicated.”

Amanda took my hands. “Aaron. We’re depressed. We don’t get simple.”

She was right but I was still mortified. “I’m trying to get over it,” I said. The night of the party still lingered behind my eyelids.

“You lost someone important to you. That doesn’t just go away.”

“But I’m so tired of it getting in my way.”

“Then you have to deal with it,” she said. She nodded.

I had to face this blisterly sharp pain, to let it out, to let it go. To try and stop seeing the ghost. “Sorry,” I said. He’d hurt me. I’d hurt him. In the end we’d both loved each other. But the love didn’t cancel out everything else. The pain unfolded in me like hands but didn’t strike. It lay. Got comfortable. I found myself telling her the story, everything except for the fact that I’d been seeing him still.

She kissed me. “We’ve got time,” she said. “We don’t have to rush.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”
“For believing me.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

I shook my head.

“Everyone’s got baggage.” She kissed me again, gentle, light. I felt warm and unraveled but the vulnerability was surprisingly freeing. There was no detachment, no remove, no white noise. Just me.

So I kissed her. Drew my arms around her. The room was bright but not sharp and I could breathe for the first time in months. Her hands tightened in my hair. I could feel so much blooming in me, waking up, bearing up against the pain. Something real, shimmery and phosphorescent like want.

I pressed my lips against her neck, the soft skin. She was shaking; laughing, I realized. “What?” I asked.

“You’re too much sometimes.” She touched my mouth.

“I get that a lot.”

She smiled. “I like it.” A quick, timid gesture and she turned, resting her thighs against mine. She was breathing hard. For a moment we stayed there, hesitant and breathless. We kissed again. She was holding me so tightly that it hurt but I wanted to be held still tighter. I clutched the fabric of her skirt. Her hand slipped under my shirt. I felt the inevitable, felt myself get hard, and broke away.

Amanda looked confused. “Why’d you stop?” Her face was flushed, her eyes wild and bright. Something tightened in my stomach.

Suddenly this was hilarious. The first laugh bubbled in my throat. “I just… you know…” I realized she wouldn’t actually know. “Um…”

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 253
She shifted her weight slightly. “Is… is that what I felt?” She grinned convulsively. She laughed too.

For a while I was fine. I could see this, could see myself with her. But when I tried to imagine making love to her things became complicated and not just because I’d never been with a woman. I thought of sleeping with Charlie, how I was always so detached, how I always assumed the sex would bring me back to myself but it did the complete opposite.

I thought of sleeping with Dmitri, that first time, sixteen and decidedly too young, how vulnerable I had to make myself. That was before things hit the rocks with us. The intimacy scratched under my skin. Would I be able to do that with Amanda? Let her see everything, not just physically?

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “It’s fine, Aaron. I don’t mind. This isn’t exactly something you can help.”

“I have to tell you something,” I said. “It’s not fair for you not to know.”

She got off of me and sat down beside me on the bed. “I’m sure it’s not a big deal. After group, there’s not a whole lot that surprises me.”

She was trying to be light and that made things harder. “I… see things,” I said. This wasn’t like telling Charlie, who knew me, knew my flavor of crazy. “Things that aren’t… real. Or at least I think they aren’t.”

She pursed her lips.

“I see ghosts,” I pushed on. “ Mostly… the ghost of one person.”

“It’s him,” she said. “Your boyfriend who died. Isn’t it?”

I nodded. “I’m trying,” I said. “I’m trying to get better.”
She thought for a long moment and squeezed her eyes together. “So you’re saying... there’s no room in your head for me.”

Everything about this hurt. I felt a lump tighten in my throat. “I want there to be,” I said. “I love being with you. I love the way you make me feel, like I’m real, like I can be something else.”

“You need to be able to stop seeing him,” she said slowly. “I... I understand. Thanks for telling me.”

A moment of pronounced silence.

She nodded to herself. “Once you confront... whatever this is, you know where to find me,” she said. “I’ll be your friend for now, all right? But until then... I don’t know if I can put myself through that right now.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“No, don’t be.” Her smile looked pained. “Like I said. Complicated.” She kissed me softly. “I’m going to go now, okay?”

For a while after she’d left I lay in bed, feeling the edges of my body and the edges of a new, achy pain inside me. I could see something slipping into my mind’s eye, feathers, bright red, punch red, blood red.

I sat up. Under my bed I had something that precise color. I’d picked it up for that exact reason. A filmy scarf, torn in places, that I’d found one day with Charlie. He’d wanted to know why I’d take something so dirty. It had been caught stubbornly on nails beneath a bridge. It was still brown-splotched with mud. I unraveled it, breathed it, smelled nothing but detergent and dust. I reached for the X-acto knife on my desk.
It was painstaking work. The fabric was slippery and didn’t want to lie flat and my first attempt to etch out the feather’s oval shape left me with tatters. But the next few tries were more successful. I cut out the little details carelessly, because that was what this seemed to call for.

Then I reached for the lighter.

I half-expected the fabric to catch right away but evidently the scarf had enough plastic in its weave to melt. The edges singled and crumpled backwards. Then I found the Polaroid, the one from the house those weeks ago. Old Polaroids faded; this wouldn’t last. Still, the first slice into the frame seemed to hit me to the core.

I cut away the white frame, then the rest of us, leaving an edgeless crowd with a silhouette. White backing. Thin, clear, watery glue. I put the feathers down first, then the picture of the group of us. On the other board, the frame, his cut out silhouette and all of us replaced with red.

I looked at it and could barely breathe. Something in me had peeled open. And bled.

“…So that’s everything,” I signed to Fitzl.

He held a collage in each hand and studied them. I tried to see them as he would, not the glue stains in the fabric, not where things would eventually fray and fade. “These are beautiful, Aaron,” he signed. His sharp expression told me he meant it. “What do you call it?”

I hadn’t given the title any thought. “It’s just a diptych,” I signed.

“Why did you decide to show me this now?” He handed the boards back to me.

“It seemed right,” I signed. “I don’t even know if I’ll do anything with it.”

“You can if you want to.”

“Yeah. I know.”

Living Strange by Allison Giese 256
And I did. I lined them up on the scanner, touched up the color in Photoshop where the red had inevitably bleached, posted it online. Expected nothing from it. But that wasn’t what happened.

Early the next morning when I picked up Saima for class she wouldn’t get in the car. She beckoned me over to her with one polished nail, her expression unreadable.

“You’re picture,” she signed. She opened her phone. “Look.”

Chagrin swept through me. “I’m sorry—I should have asked your permission—I totally spaced—”

“Look,” she signed again.

Art didn’t go viral the way other things did. Still, rather than the same attention from the same people, there were over a hundred likes and dozens of reposts on my collage. More attention than I’d ever gotten for something. Part of me felt naked and exposed in the early spring air. I had almost been banking on the indifference I normally received. I had put it up mostly for me.

“Oh my God,” I signed. “Well. That’s awkward.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“Yeah, well, I mean, all this attention only came because I said he died. Isn’t that scummy?”


On campus I stalked the notes, the comments, some from lost friends of ours. It was so strange to see people care, the purple-white of it, and something in me twitched.
The idea bloomed in me suddenly, loudly. I sketched all through British lit, missing our utterly uninspiring discussion of *Pride & Prejudice*, my brain on fire. The story spilled from me like water and I could barely contain it. So I didn’t.

[When something traumatic, sudden, and senseless happens people feel the need to question it. I OD’d last winter. This in itself is not significant. People will go above and beyond trying to place meaning in the meaningless.

My life has always been fragmentary, dissociative, a riot of colors I can barely comprehend.

For a while things were so stripped down, so empty, for a while I didn’t know how to survive the delineation.

After the worst thing, there is always something that happens next.]

The words poured into notebooks, keyboards, napkins. I could see it all in my head, how it would grow, the framing, the colors I’d use, the widths of the line. The things I could scan to get the right textures—shirts, stationery, orange rinds, wrapping paper—the effects I could use in Photoshop.

I wasn’t sure I could work fast enough to get it all down. I felt like this spell would break, would pass, that I would go back to being colorless and blank inside.

I did run into some problems eventually.

I never really did like to draw myself. I had done the obligatory self-portraits, of course, but they had never looked right. Seemed blurry, an alternative mirror-image version of myself. I
spent a lot of time with a mirror, trying to capture my own increasingly bewildered and dazed expressions, which was a bizarre and somewhat disturbing experience. I had never paid so much attention to myself before. Had never wanted to, because it brought my attention back to my corporeal, frail, fragile body.

The other thing about drawing from real life was that I needed the consent of all involved to be included. Comics were intimate, itchy, and often showed bias. These were real people and I could hurt them so easily with what I wrote or drew. They were not characters.

I asked Charlie first.

“So what is it? A memoir?” His smile was a little stiff, a little wooden. I hadn’t seen him since the party.

“I don’t know yet,” I told him. “But whatever it is, there’s a lot of it, and I wanted to know if you were okay being in it.”

“Like a character?”

“As you,” I signed. “As I see you.”

His smile became more timid. “I thought there wasn’t much there.”

I squeezed his hand. “There always will be.”

He nodded. “All right. Well. As long as you don’t draw me naked. Or if you do, you better make me hot.” He pursed his lips. “I always wanted to be a model.”

“Well then, muse, get ready, because I need references.” I picked up my pencil.

February wore into March like jeans fraying into a patch. I spent my time sketching and lining and coloring and lettering for hours on end. I stopped taking my sleeping pills because they made

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 259
me lose too much time. I turned in homework late. Forgot to go outside. I drew and drew until my hands cramped up and I had to soak them in ice.

I still hadn’t finished anything since that first piece. I hadn’t asked some people yet if they would be in it—I couldn’t figure out what “it” was.

I decided to ask Petra for some advice.

She looked up from her desk, evidently startled that I’d approached her. I told her about it and then handed her some of the rough drafts.

“I remember seeing some comics in your portfolio,” she said. “I’m afraid I’m not very familiar with the medium. Though every semester, without fail, no matter where I teach, there’s a student who tries to turn me on to them.” She smiled. She flipped through the drawings a bit faster than I’d like. “I guess this time it’s you.”

I shrugged.

“I can’t seem to get consistency into your head, either,” she said.

This I was prepared for. “It’s like that deliberately. For me that’s what everything felt like.”

She handed the folder back to me and considered. “What will you do with it when it’s done?”

“Well—put it online, I guess. I usually do.”

“That’s a lot of work to do for free.”

“What if somebody needs to read it?”

She grinned, as if I were a naïve child. “What if they didn’t? What if they were indifferent to it? What if you were to bare your soul, invest all these hours, and nobody were to care?”

She wasn’t saying that to be cruel, I knew, but still it stung. “I don’t know.” Would failure force me back under the water? Was my ego really so fragile? I was just starting to wake
up again and break through the numbness. The littlest thing could set me off down a dark path again.

I was such a baby.

“If this is a story you need to tell, by all means,” she said. “But realize that this type of work won’t be for everyone.”

“Yes,” I said.

“I do hope you keep me updated. I’m interested, of course.”

“Thank you, Petra.”

Saima held the first proof in her hands, full-color. I’d made color copies on a thick paper. It was strange seeing it finished. Some things still needed tweaking and some things were off-center.

“You really did it,” she signed.

“Yep.”

“Why now?”

“I was tired of it eating me alive.”

“Me, too,” she signed. She bit her lip. “Why do you think I’ve been up to my ass in volunteer work?”

“I thought it was a religious thing?”

She gave me That Look, the one she reserved for when I said something particularly white. “No. Well, sort of. But I thought that if I did something good I could ease the guilt I felt.”

“We all talked about that at Phoebe’s party.”
“I couldn’t bring myself to face them,” she signed.

“I almost couldn’t, either. But it makes sense. Phoebe, Ann… they all care. Not all of our group falling apart is their fault.”

Saima flipped through another proof. “This isn’t just about him, is it?”

“No, but he’s part of it.”

“You know, I tried writing a poem about it, but it made me too upset.” She touched the notebook in her purse.

“I know. But sometimes you have to feel worse to feel better.”

“Okay, Fitzl.”

I smiled.

“Have you seen him?” she asked.

“Fitzl? A few days ago.”

She shook her head. “No. Dmitri.”

I sighed. “At the party,” I admitted. “I don’t know if I’m just making it up or if it’s some side effect of the medicine. You must think I’m crazy.”

She adjusted her glasses with a nervous and pained expression. “Well, for a while there, you kind of were.”

I knew she was right. I exhaled.

“Sometimes I almost believe in it. Ghosts,” she added. I slipped the drawings back into their portfolio. “But how much of the supernatural exists because of us? Because our minds need to tell us something? I believe in energies, in a divine. But ghosts, I think, are a human-made thing.”

I wondered if that were true. “Do you think I’ll stop seeing him?”
“Well, that depends. Do you want to?”

I had no answer.

In Fitzl’s office, rain battered the windows. The power flickered unsteadily. I sipped a cup of bitter tasting tea. It suited my mood.

Without even saying hello I signed, “I see things. I’ve been seeing things for months.”

Over the course of the hour I told him everything. How I met Dmitri, how we fell in love, how we poisoned it, how he ran away, how I let him. I told him how I started seeing him in the psych ward and hadn’t stopped since. I relayed every conversation Dmitri had with me when I was seeing him because I had memorized all of them, heard them in my dreams.

“I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to go back to the hospital,” I signed.

“Thank you for trusting me,” he signed. “I think Saima’s right. You do have to confront this, confront him. This sort of thing is not unheard of in people with anxiety. Sometimes I think we tend to be more receptive to things others aren’t.”

“So do you think it’s real?” I asked.

“I don’t think it matters, in your case,” he signed. “It affects you either way. It’s real to you. How do you feel when you see him?”

“Anxious,” I signed. “Afraid. Mostly just… guilty. Everyone tells me it’s not my fault. But how can I believe that?” I stared down into the mug, into the pinkish water.

“You don’t have to set yourself on fire to keep others warm,” he signed. “You try to take care of the world, Aaron. And you’ve run yourself ragged.”

“But he’s dead,” I signed. “This isn’t over something stupid. He… he killed himself.”

“And you’ve tried to as well,” he asserted.
A few minutes trickled by in silence. The tree outside scraped the window. The hour was almost up.

“I feel like I’m a ghost too,” I signed. “If… if I had died, would that have been me as well? No break from the anxiety even after death? I want to help him. I just don’t know how.”

“You love him still.” It was a statement.

The room seemed to grow colder. “Yes,” I signed. My heart was beating fast and hard. “I miss him.”

“Of course. It’s only natural, especially in these circumstances. These feelings don’t just stop.” He picked some lint off of his yoga pants. “Have you told him how you felt? Have you talked to him?”

“Only once,” I signed.

“Maybe you need to,” he signed. “It might help give you some closure.”

I nodded. I hoped I could find the strength to go through with this.

“Let’s talk about this next session,” Fitzl signed. “I think you’re on the verge of a breakthrough. But for now, we’re out of time.”

Breakthrough?

I felt outside of my body as I drove home. No, it wasn’t a breakthrough. Telling him was supposed to make this all easier but something dark writhed in me, sticky and slimy.

Was my whole life going to be like this? Stolen moments of peace, but always the stress, always the haunting? Always always always. Despite the medicine, despite the therapy. Because I was trying, and here was all it was getting me—panic, fear, stupidity and pain.

Shouldn’t I quit while I was ahead?
I could understand the appeal of a car accident. The Taconic highway was a nightmare of hairpin turns, people flying along at twenty, thirty miles above the speed limit. My car was a piece of shit. It would be easy to make this look unintentional. No wonder he’d stepped in front of a truck.

I knew what I should do; get off at the nearest exit, turn around, go back to Fitzl’s office, wait for him to call the ER or my psychiatrist, wait to go to back to the hospital, get slammed back into the ward. Rinse, repeat. Over and over again. For the rest of my life.

I pulled over on the nearest shoulder and turned on my hazards. Cars whizzed by me, sending shockwaves through my car. It would be easy. I just had to open the door.

I took a deep breath. Closed my eyes. Looked to the empty passenger seat next to me. Come on. Come on, you bastard. Talk to me.

Nothing but wind and rain and cars on the highway shaking mine.

The laughter started deep in my gut, hysterical and giddy and bitter. I laughed until I cried and when that happened I cried until I hurt. And I went home.

The snow on the ground had mostly melted and the grass beneath was dried brown and drowned. I walked down the street near my home. The daylight was bright and sharp through the clouds. Muddy water flooded my old worn sneakers.

Nobody was around at this hour. The moms and dads were all at work. The kids at school or daycare or with nannies. I was alone but I felt exposed.

Maybe this memory would always be like a knife inside me, opening up all the raw things I preferred to keep hidden, things that had hurt me even before his death. I often felt so suffocatingly alone but every time I got close to someone I always did something to ruin it.
Selfishness. Terse words. That didn’t really make me much better than Dmitri at his worst. Or my mother.

I kept walking, past the fence, into the rows of bone-white skeleton houses.

Without snow it was even worse in here. There was still garbage, bottles unveiled in the thaw. The diorama sat in a wet cardboard heap in the center of the structure. The scaffolding looked slick and scummy and had unmistakable signs of rot.

I waited but he didn’t come now that I was ready for him. Maybe he was scared too. Or just busy. Ghosts had a lot of baggage.

“I’ll come back,” I signed to the empty air.

A bunch of letters arrived in the mail lashed together with thick blue rubber bands. Mom. I looked at the postage stamps—Idaho, Florida, Wisconsin—and undid them. There were so many. Two from each place. One for my sister. I put them on her desk. I was still shaking all over from the breakdown, my hands unsteady. I cut open my finger with the letter opener by accident.

Dear Aaron,

I’m sorry for everything that has gone wrong. You deserve to feel the way you do, and I think you don’t have to justify yourself to me. If I were you I would want nothing to do with me either. Since Pennsylvania I couldn’t stop thinking about it. It’s taken me four years to understand. I guess I am a selfish person in that regard.

So I’ll be here. Supporting you from the sidelines.

Ever loving,

Your mom (and Gigi)

The idea struck me all at once. I picked up a pen and a sheet of paper.
Dear Mom,

Do you get to New Mexico much?

Saima’s lips were pursed tightly, the way they always were when she was mad. “You’re what,” she signed.

“Going away with my mother for spring break,” I signed.

Her eyebrows shot up. “Aaron, you hate her.”

I sighed. “That’s the thing. I don’t think I do anymore.”

She shut her eyes and exhaled. “It’s a horrible idea. Why not just drive yourself?”

“I don’t exactly think my car can make it.”

She shifted her glasses on her nose and took the letter from my hand before I could drop it in the slot. “I’ll go with you,” she signed. “I’ll drive.”

It hit me. “You, me, Charlie, Ann,” I signed. “All of us. Maybe we were meant to do this.”

“What about their jobs?”

“…You’re right,” I signed.

“What about yours?”

“I don’t know.” I hadn’t asked Helen yet. I had barely seen her, our shifts opposite one another. “If I can go, I’m going.”

She exhaled. “My parents are going to kill me,” she signed.

“Then don’t worry about it,” I signed.

“No. This feels right. Feels like something he’d want. Let’s work it out. Gosh… it would be so nice to get away. Shake some of this writer’s block I’ve been having.”
I smiled. “Thank you.”

It took a while to juggle the logistics.

Helen gave me her blessing. “If you think you’ll stop seeing ghosts, just go. We’ll be fine here. We always are.”

Ann’s spring break coincided with ours. The school was shut down during the break, so they didn’t have to work. They had some camping stuff they borrowed from Phoebe, who decided to come along. With so many of us, Ann offered to take their truck too.

Charlie’s job had no vacation, paid or unpaid. In order to come with us he had to take a leave of absence. Plus, there was the rent to worry about. I told him he didn’t have to jockey all this if it would make things difficult.

“I have to go too,” he signed. His eyes were so big and sad. “How can I let you guys have fun without me? I’ll figure something out. I’ll borrow money from Ann. It’ll be fine.” He squeezed my hand.

And Saima’s parents were just as hesitant as she thought they’d be. Not only were there boys on what would have to be an overnight trip, she’d never driven so far on her own, and for “completely unnecessary” reasons. I would never get the whole story but apparent she was able to do it by bartering a lot with her sister, who was able to convince her parents. A lot of promises later she told me she had it handled and asked if I wanted cookies for the ride.

My own father wasn’t too keen on the idea. “You’re driving to New Mexico,” he stated dumbly.

“Yes.”

“With your friends.”
“Yes.”

“You’re taking your car?”

“Ann’s truck. And Saima’s.”

“Do you even know where you’re going?”

“Near Albuquerque.” I didn’t know what I’d do once I got there. Find Dmitri’s cousin?

“Aaron—why?”

I settled for the easy version. “Because it’s spring break and we’re all kids.”

“Kids is right. Why not just go upstate? I’m sure you all could rent a cabin or something. No need to go so far away.”

“I just want to go for a little while,” I signed. “We’ll be perfectly safe. I’ll check in every hour. I promise.”

He sighed. “My parents let me go halfway across the world when I was your age. I guess it couldn’t hurt. But I’m holding you to that.”

“Thank you,” I signed. “Really. You have no idea.”

So there we were, the five of us in my driveway. Five people, two cars, everyone’s stuff, plus camping goods, food, etc. The Mazda was tiny and only held a few suitcases. Saima and I were notorious over-packers and it showed.

“Jesus Christ,” Ann signed the Friday we were leaving. “You guys got enough? You know there are stores on the road, right?” They and Phoebe had one small bag each. Charlie had a backpack.

“You’ll be thankful we brought the extra blankets tonight,” Saima signed. “It’s going to be pretty cold.”
“Might have to get pretty friendly with one another,” Phoebe signed. She kissed Ann’s cheek. Saima rolled her eyes.

“If I can’t get laid on this trip, then nobody’s getting laid,” Charlie signed. He winked.

“All right. Squad’s all here. We ready to go?”

I locked the door behind me. Everything had been tended to but I still felt like I’d forgotten something somehow. “Ready as I’ll ever be.” I looked at them, all of my friends, feeling a warm rush of affection. “It’s so good to see you guys all in one place.”

“You’re going to get sick of us in a few hours,” Charlie signed. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“You’ve got the map?” Saima asked.

I held up the book. “Map, compass, GPS. I think we’ll be fine.” I paused. “Thanks for doing this, guys. Really.”

“We wouldn’t be here if it didn’t mean something to us too,” Ann signed. “Now let’s get out of this shithole.”

We cleared New York and Jersey within a few hours. I kept looking out Saima’s rearview mirror, expecting to see Ann’s truck disappear into the abyss but they kept following. Every now and then Phoebe would wave.

Pennsylvania was where things started to hit their stride. We had lunch in one of those massive rest stops with a million places to get fast food. While waiting for the others to finish their bathroom breaks I got two or three post cards on impulse—one for my father and sister, one for my mother, and another one for nobody in particular. The cashier was able to sell me a book of stamps. As the others ordered food I sat at the little table in hot sunlight, my pen hesitating
over the small box on the back of the card. The letter to my father and sister was easy enough but
Mom? I didn’t know what else to say.

Dear Mom,

My friends and I are on a road trip. We’re going West, like pioneers, but there’s not a whole lot
left to discover. I wonder if I travel far enough I’ll understand why you left. But if you still don’t
know, I don’t know if I ever will.

There’s a passage in this novel The Price of Salt where the love interest is telling the lead
that she can’t really be an artist if she’s never seen America. I don’t know how true that is, or if
you can relate in some way, but I did bring a sketchbook. Just in case.

Your kid,

Aaron

When I finished writing I found Saima peeking over my shoulder. “Postcards, that’s a good
idea,” she signed. “Where did you get them? I want to send them to my sister.”

I pointed. I tucked the cards into the mailbox inside the stop and we hit the road.

We got all the way to West Virginia before we had to stop for the night. We found a state
campground with running water and real bathroom facilities. It was a little warmer this far south
but not by much and I knew it would be a pretty miserable night. Saima, Phoebe, and Ann
struggled to set up the tents, Charlie tried to make a fire, and I tried to cook something edible on
the camp stove.
“I haven’t been camping since I was a little kid,” Charlie signed. He crumpled up newspaper to mix with the twigs. We were on a state site, one that had at least running water. “I used to go with my parents every year. Up to Lake George. You remember.”

I had actually gone with him once. The family always rented the same cabin and did the same things but there was a ritual to it, a tradition.

“I miss it sometimes.” He held a match to the kindling and it caught. “I keep wondering… if I should try reaching out to them again. Or if it would hurt too badly.”

“I don’t know,” I signed. “You could always try your sister first.” The water in the pot didn’t really want to boil even though the stove was as hot as it could get.

“Maybe I will,” he signed. “Then again. My family’s kind of right here, isn’t it?”

I smiled. “That was really gay.”

“So sue me.”

Ann and the girls emerged from the tents. Ann pointed to one, a military blue one that had seen better days. “Girls,” they signed. They gestured to the other one, a red and gray one that would barely get two people in it. “Boys and other.”


I sighed. “Pasta al dente.” I looked into the water. “Really al dente.”

I was right about the night being miserable. Despite sleeping in my parka, fully clothed, with a sleeping bag and several blankets, I was freezing. Halfway through the night Charlie, Ann, and I huddled in a pile for warmth. I barely slept three hours. I was the first one who just gave up sleeping and started getting ready for the day, taking a blessedly hot shower and trying to put up some coffee.
A little after dawn Saima emerged, red-eyed and without glasses, her scarf sideways, a prayer mat in her hands.

“Morning,” I signed to her.

“Hot water?” she asked.

“On the stove.”

“You’re the best.”

I looked away as she washed up and prayed. Afterwards we sat in front of the fire, sipping on weak coffee, waiting for the others to get up.

“This feels weird,” she signed.

“What do you mean? Other than freezing our asses off?”

“No. I don’t know. Being all back together again. I thought it would be hard and awkward. But so far everyone’s been really nice.”

“I missed hanging out with you,” I told her.

She smiled and adjusted the blanket on her lap. “Me too. I know I have to stop isolating myself. Friends are supposed to come first and… I just left. I thought I would put myself together first, but I didn’t. I kept pushing the feelings down, and down, and it just hurt worse.”

The sun started peeking through the trees.

“I know what you mean,” I signed.

“I figure if this trip is about you stopping seeing ghosts, maybe it’s about me starting,” Saima signed. “I want to see. To understand. And to apologize. Maybe I can go back to the way things were.”

“Well… we can’t,” I pointed out. “It’s always going to be different and kind of weird. But at least we’re all here in one place, finally working it out.”
“I guess you’re right,” she signed.

For a while it was quiet but I found I didn’t mind the silence.

“I’m going to start breakfast,” I signed. “See if that gets the gremlins up.”

It took a few hours to get ready and break down camp. We didn’t get back on the road until nearly noon. I gave Saima a break and drove for a few hours. I hadn’t driven manual since I’d originally learned and her car was far peppier than mine so for a while the ride was a little bumpier than I’d like to admit.

That second day we drove through the Appalachians on our way West. I had never seen mountains so big before in my entire life, stretching on and on over the horizon. They made the Adirondacks look tiny and weak. The road wove up and down long ribbons. The greenery was just waking up from its winter sleep. It made me wish we had time to stop and go hiking.

The mountains gave way abruptly when we drove through Tennessee, then Mississippi. We didn’t get much more view of these states than from the Interstate or from the insides of rest stops. I picked up a few more postcards, some of them wonderfully cheesy, especially the one that claimed to be from Nashville even though we were miles and miles away.

By then we were in the Deep South and it was growing dark. We struggled to find some place to camp, settling on another state park. The sky was looking icky and cloudy and we had barely set up the tents before the sky opened up and it rained. The five of us huddled in one tiny tent, knee-to-knee, trying to choke down the sandwiches I’d made, watching water patter onto the rain fly above us.

“It’s not camping until it rains,” Phoebe signed. The little lantern gave our faces a weird glow. “That’s what mama always says.”

“You think this tarp will hold?” Ann asked. “It’s pretty old.”
“It looked fine when I pitched it,” Charlie signed.

“I’m not so sure,” I signed.

“It’s made to last,” Phoebe signed. But no sooner than she signed that did a tiny trickle of water break through and drip, resolutely, onto the floor between us.

“Motherfucker,” Charlie signed.

For the next half hour or so he and I struggled to get some duct tape over the leak in the dark. There was another tarp in Ann’s truck which we struggled to dig out and heft over the old one. By the time we were finished he and I were both soaking wet and had to try and change in the cramped space of the other tent.

“For the record,” he signed, teeth chattering, “When I made that joke about getting laid, I did not think this is how I would see you naked.”

The laughter just made me shiver harder.

The next morning, instead of struggling to cook with our sodden campsite, we just hefted everything back into the cars and went to a local diner. There weren’t many people there, so early and during the week. A few long-distance truckers sat at the bar. There was one other family there. We were all feeling a little uncomfortable because there was a truck with a Confederate flag in the parking lot but thankfully nobody did anything other than give us some weird looks.

The breakfast was far more satisfying than anything I could have tried to make and we had enough leftovers for a cold lunch.

That day we got through Arkansas and most of Oklahoma. Trees vanished into oblivion, leaving nothing but miles and miles of the flattest land I’d ever seen, dried grasses and grains and fallow fields from the winter. I sketched some of it as Saima drove. If anything, this trip was
certainly giving me a sense of scale I hadn’t had before, even if the view wasn’t knocking me off of my feet. My world really was so small and always had been.

We made it through Oklahoma and part of Texas. Despite it being only March the air here was stiff hot and unruly and we ended up turning on the AC. I kept sketching the horizon line when it wasn’t my turn to drive, unending and flat, almost everything the same. I figured if we really pushed it we would make it to New Mexico by evening. I had no answers as to what I was looking for. Maybe it was some feeling, some sense of closure or vindication or even release, to be rid of him. To lay him to rest.

As we were setting up camp that night I was starting to feel dizzy, slightly unhinged. I spilled hot water all over my hand when I was cooking and Charlie made me sit and nurse a juice box. I wasn’t used to the air here, the hard ground, the plains stretching into absolutely nowhere. I couldn’t eat and went to bed first, watching their shadows flicker in the firelight as the vertigo worsened and worsened. For the first time I didn’t want the others in the tent with me. I couldn’t stand the thought of their bodies pressing up against mine all night. I felt sick. Woozy. I took my pills but they didn’t seem to want to work. The dirt below me seemed to boil.

Time was stuck in molasses. Every now and again a face poked into the tent to check on me, like I might disappear or vanish into thin air. Saima kept trying to feed me, kept saying I’d feel better with something in my stomach, but I knew from experience that was a bad idea. When I get dizzy like this I need to fast or it’ll just end up all over the floor.

Part of me wondered if this was some sort of fucking sign. But a good omen or a bad one? I couldn’t go forward or back like this, just wait until it was over, in our stupid tent all mottled with dry rot. It smelled like must and sleeping bags between a wash, dirty clothes.
After a while everyone finally went to bed, leaving the fire to burn out. I couldn’t sleep. I was so tired, I needed sleep, needed it to get me out of the vertigo. The attacks were always so inconstant. If I were lucky they would only be a few minutes. Unluckier, a few hours. Once when I was sixteen I was bedridden for two days. I could get them several times a day or go months without one. The medication, too, decided when it wanted to work and when it wouldn’t.

During what felt like the middle of the night I realized I was going to have to move, not just because I was desperate to pee but also because the nausea in me had turned raw and panicky. My body weighed a million pounds and when I propped myself up on an elbow the world threatened to throw me off of it. In his sleep, Charlie turned away from me and towards Ann. It smelled stuffy in here, like too many humans in too small a space, habituated, partially unwashed, and I choked on bile.

For a moment I sat on my knees outside the tent, the still-dying fire casting just enough light to make everything around me kind of sheeny. I was sweating, my hairline crawling. When I stood I almost lost my balance but I caught myself on the camp table.

The vomit was mostly water and while I felt like death itself at least there wasn’t much left in me. I knew I couldn’t get all the way down the windy path to the camp bathroom and hoped that God or nature or the camp rangers were understanding.

I went back to the tent. Slowly. Being dizzy like this was hell even in my own nice soft bed but this was another plane of existence. My vision was all wibbly. Before I knew what was happening everything dropped out from under me and I collapsed.

My head was aching, my body knotted up in a weird way. Reality had clipped, suddenly and concisely, cleaved into two, before and after. My eyes were still unfocused.

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 277
Someone crouched over me. Dazed, I reached up towards them but my fingers didn’t touch anything. I felt tingly and weird like something had come loose. A pale, sweaty face in a cotton T-shirt. A Genesis shirt. After that I passed out again and the next thing I knew I was being shaken by Charlie, a light brighter than God shining in my face. I heaved and spat onto the barren ground.

“Are you okay? Can you see me?” he asked.

I could barely move my hands or my mouth. “I got up to pee and passed out,” I said.

“We should find a ranger,” he signed.

“No,” I told him. “No, I’ll be fine.”

“If you lost consciousness after you hit your head you need an MRI, bro.”

“I just fainted,” I said. He helped me sit up. I probed my scalp automatically, felt no bruising, only a regular headache. “I’m fine, I’ll be fine.”

“Come lay down,” he signed. He slipped an arm under me and brought me back into the tent.

The spell didn’t end until well after noon the next day. Like a fever breaking, afterwards I was shaky and weak and the ground beneath me seemed huge and impossibly solid. I felt tiny. Insignificant. My own mortality closing its jaws around me.

“It lives,” Ann signed. Everyone was sitting at the picnic table at the site, playing some kind of card game. Charlie and Phoebe were the only ones still in it, laying down cards and slapping the table at regular intervals.

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese 278
“Sorry, guys,” I signed. I reached into one of the coolers for a bottle of water. Out here it was dry and warm and I was aware of how acutely I wanted to shower. I turned on the camp stove but my hands were shaking too hard to get around a lighter. Saima swooped in and did it for me.

“Sit,” she signed. “It’s all right.”

I tried to smile. “Thanks, mom.”

“We should probably let you rest for the day,” Saima signed. “I’m afraid we don’t have a lot of food left. Mostly just bread.”

“I would rather die than get back into that tent,” I told her. “No, we have to get moving.”

She gave me a PB&J. Weak coffee. We watched them play the card game, Charlie finally coming in for the win. It felt like the sky had something peeled from it. Everything was very raw and unfinished, like a CGI drawing that was still rendering.

We finally hit the road around two. I was much better but not great so Saima drove, slowly, down the rough hewn highway. Over the course of the afternoon the land gave way nearly to desert, the road choked with sand, orange red thick and choking. Scrub brush dotted the land, interspersed with rich rock and cacti. The Rockies rose to cup the land, cutting the flat monotony, impossibly huge, making the Appalachians look like playthings.

Here we actually stopped at one of those touristy viewpoints. Got out of our cars like little mole people, staring off into the rising mountains in the distance. After a long, long moment, Ann finally signed, “I think I know why he wanted to come here.”

They were right. I’d expected New Mexico to be flat, sandy, bland. There was a complex beauty to this land different than the temperate, controlled greenery of New York. It felt older. Less lived-in. Like if it got hungry it might swallow you.
Charlie pulled out his phone and broke the heady silence. “Come on,” he signed. “Group picture. We’ve hardly taken any this whole trip.” We gathered around, cramming too close to one another, a sudden giddiness filling the air. He took a few shots, phone held up high above our heads, and then turned away from us, grabbing more pictures of an empty horizon.

Phoebe turned to me. “So, what now, Sacagawea?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know,” I signed. “I thought once we got out here I would know. But here we are.”

“Should we go towards the city?” Saima asked.

But that felt wrong, too. “I like it here. Let’s stay a while.”

“I second that notion,” Ann added.

“We should go somewhere to get food, at least,” Phoebe signed. “Or at the very least some booze. I can’t believe I haven’t gotten drunk once so far.”

“I’ll find some place to camp,” Saima signed. “I have a feeling he wants to take some more pictures. Split up and reconvene?”

So I left with Phoebe and Ann in the truck. There was barely enough room for the three of us. Ann left the windows open. Hot, dry air flooded the cab and made me sweat. We found a small town on the miles of highway, got a few easy things to cook and a few gallons of water.

While I was paying in the tiny grocery store I asked the cashier, in a sudden impulse, for a pack of Newports behind the counter. She didn’t even blink, just asked for my ID.

“What’d you get those for?” Ann asked as we waited for Phoebe to return with alcohol.

“I don’t know,” I signed. I turned the teal-striped pack over and over in my hand. “Just in case, I guess.”
Saima found a campsite about an hour from the grocery store. The sun was starting to dip below the mountains, covering everything in warm rosy light and I felt strange. I tried to figure out why. I realized, for the first time in impossibly long, I wasn’t anxious, or sad, or particularly anything. I just felt like me, wedged there between two old friends. I didn’t know who this person was.

Once we’d parked Phoebe took two bottles out of the black liquor bag and held them above her head in a gesture of celebration. Saima and Charlie couldn’t really do a whole lot without all the camping stuff in the truck bed. By then we had our setting-up routine down pat. The stars were starting to peek out by the time I built the fire and for a moment I stood to watch them. Strings and strings and webs and webs flooded the sky, more than I had ever seen in New York. Before today I had never given them much attention. In the suburb outside White Plains where I lived, there was still too much light pollution to really see anything other than the big and little dippers.

Charlie bumped my shoulder and handed me a cup. “Your vodka and soda, sir.”

“Excellent service in this joint,” I signed. He slid his arm around my shoulder and looked up. Raising his drink as though towards the sky.

“I’m getting fucking hammered tonight,” he said.

“Sounds like a plan.”

For a while we did just that, drinking and talking and laughing because we were finally here. There was something liberating in it that we hadn’t let ourselves really feel before now. I let myself drink probably too much until I felt warm all over, tingling.
“I wasn’t sure about coming,” Saima conceded at last. She wasn’t drinking—she never had—but the group’s intoxication was getting to her. “I’m glad I did. I think… I think I do feel him.”

I stared into the fire, the bright colors gathered there, feeling a bit woozy in the best way. I shut my eyes and waited to feel him as she might and didn’t get much of anything but the strange surreal peace I felt.

“I thought so, too,” Ann admitted.


“He is gone,” Phoebe signed. “Beyond all this, you know? At least we got to see this all for him.”

“What next?” I signed, more to myself than anything.

“What do you mean?” Phoebe asked.

“I don’t know. This grand, sweeping gesture. What happens after, when we all go home? Are we still going to be friends?”


“So are you,” I signed.

“You all are,” Saima added. She laughed a little.

“Things are always going to be a little bit weird and a little bit fucked up,” Charlie signed. He shrugged. “I mean, we have to try. He’d want us to still be friends. To not forget him. But not let it totally destroy us.”

“You think?” I asked.

“Well, yeah,” he signed. “Who would wish that on their friends? The kid had a lot that went wrong.”
“He hurt us,” I signed.

“Well, yeah, that’s true.” He had to think about that. “But to be fair we’ve all gotten kind of good at hurting each other. If you don’t try to grow from that, what’s the point? I think he would’ve. I really do.”

I thought back to the night of the swings, how he had been so critical, so dismissive, of everything that Dmitri had done.

“It doesn’t make the bad shit go away. And it doesn’t excuse it. There was some toxic bullshit. But maybe he would have realized that if he’d been able to heal.”

“But he wasn’t. That’s why all this happened,” I signed. Maybe that was why I’d seen him all along. The only way he could leave me for good was if he grew beyond all this. But could someone grow beyond years of neglect and repression? Could some huge epiphany really fix all that?

I wasn’t so sure.

I reached into my pocket and took out the cigarettes. “Anyone want a smoke?”

“Aaron,” Saima signed, scandalized.

“Oh, please, you’ve seen us smoke weed,” Ann signed.

“I don’t usually buy any,” I signed. I offered the pack. Everyone else took one, and when I got to her, she hesitated. But then she snatched it. “You’re going to smoke it?”

“No,” she signed. “For him. Last one. Fair is fair.”

Watching the cigarette burn, unaccompanied, in her slender fingers sent a chill down my spine that had nothing to do with the nicotine.

After it finally burned itself out, Saima tossed the cigarette into the fire. “I got into Gallaudet,” she signed. “I start in August.”

“Yes,” she signed. “I’m studying writing there.”

He got up and squeezed her hard. “I am so proud of you,” he signed.

“Congratulations,” I signed. Some feeling was creeping over me that I couldn’t identify.

“So, hearing you all talk of togetherness… kind of makes me feel shitty,” she signed.

“Oh, don’t pull that crap,” Ann signed. “You’ve always wanted to go there. Of course we’ll visit.”

“You won’t be able to get rid of us,” Phoebe signed. “I have relatives just outside DC in Alexandria. I could always use them as an excuse to see you.”

“We’re still here,” I signed. It was a totally cliché thing to say but I hadn’t realized it until now. It hadn’t hit me. There was an After to all this, to the death, to the depression, that wasn’t just suffering and isolation. I hadn’t killed myself at eighteen. My face was wet; I had started to cry.

“Oh, Aaron,” Saima signed. “It’ll be okay. I’m not going to leave you.”

“That’s not why I’m crying,” I signed. “I’m just… I’m just so happy.” We had survived it all, somehow. We would survive. Even if it killed us. “I love you guys so much.”

“We love you, too,” Charlie signed.

A few hours later everyone dropped off to sleep. I stayed awake, watching the fire, feeling oncoming sobriety deep in my body. I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight. Not because of anxiety. I had a lot to think about.
I went over to Saima’s Mazda and lay on the hood to get a better look at the stars, my head spinning slightly from the alcohol or plain vertigo or maybe just time itself. I saw something in my peripheral. But I was ready for it.

“Hey,” Dmitri signed.

“Hey,” I signed.

“You’re really here,” he signed. “You really came all this way.”

I sat up. He looked a little sheepish, like he was embarrassed. He scuffed at the dirt with his worn sneaker. “I guess so.”

He inhaled deeply. “I’m sorry I didn’t come, that day at the house,” he signed. “Or when you were in the car.”

“It’s okay.”

“I was scared.”

“You’re dead,” I signed. “What do you have to be afraid of?”

“You’d be surprised,” he added dryly. He perched on the edge of the car and I knew if I reached to touch him the spell would break. He inhaled deeply.

We both went to speak at the same time, our hands a jagged tangle.

“You first,” he signed.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you when you tried to run away. Not couldn’t. Didn’t.”

“I was angry for a long time,” he admitted. “Not even so much angry at you as at everything. Everyone. Myself, mostly, for being this way.”

“Being what? Gay?”
“Yes. No. Maybe, I don’t know.” He smiled. “I never had any control over anything. I couldn’t be myself at home. It got pushed deeper and deeper within me. I guess I kind of took to controlling the people in my life to make up for it. To tell you the truth, I was jealous of you. Jealous of you and Ann and Saima because you could all be yourselves, and it made you so beautiful, Aaron.”

“What your parents did to you is not your fault,” I signed.

“I know,” he signed. “But it feels that way, sometimes. I didn’t want to be the weird Deaf gay kid. I didn’t want to make waves. I just wanted to live unobtrusively. But taking myself out of the picture made things so much worse. For everyone.”

He had more to say. I waited.

“You were so beautiful,” he repeated. “You, and your family. I know what happened with your mom and that really sucked but every time I was over there, with you and your dad and your sister, and how they were just so accepting and so helpful, and you never seemed to see that, it made me furious. It made me hate you, a little bit, because you had everything I wanted without doing half of the work that I did. You had your whole life. And what made me angriest, what made me hate you the most, was when you tried to kill yourself.”

“I know what you mean,” I signed. “When you… left, that’s how I felt. It made me hate you. That’s so fucked up.”

“Yeah. It is.” He shook his head.

“I loved you,” I signed. “And I still miss you.”

He laughed a little. “I loved you, too.”

There was a silence but it was comfortable like an old blanket.

“Thanks for bringing me here,” he signed. “All of you. I feel… light.”

_Living Strange_ by Allison Giese 286
“I’m glad.”

Dmitri lay down. “I’m so tired. All of me is tired.”

“You should sleep.” Something tightened in me, an air of finality.

He smiled painfully. He had tears in his eyes. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’ll be okay.”

“Oh thank God,” he signed. “Oh my God. I just wanted… I wanted someone to tell me that. For so long.” The tears broke free, loose and ethereal. “You’ll take care of them?”

“Yes,” I signed.

“They’ll take care of you. They… they love you so much.”

“I know,” I signed. “I’m lucky.”

He looked at the stars. “Do you think… do you think it’ll hurt?”

“No,” I signed. “Then again, I can’t exactly relate.”

He laughed. “I’m so glad I got to meet you.”

“Me, too. Go to sleep. It’s a beautiful night.” My heart was hurting.

“It is,” he agreed. He reached out to touch me and I shut my eyes. I thought I felt a cool breeze stirring from the north. And when I opened my eyes he was gone.

I woke up, curled in a canvas camp chair, a little before dawn. All of me had been stripped for the world to see but this vulnerability was a sharp relief. Like a weight had been lifted from me.

Before the others woke from their drunken sleep I took my sketchbook and headed down the path towards the road. There was a spectacular view here of the vast expanse of the Rockies. The drawing was loose, strange uneven curves of rock, and when the sun rose over the mountains I couldn’t even draw it, the interplay of color erupting over the sky.
I did not draw the sunrise. The horizon lived at the top of the page but below was the second part of the story, my story. Maybe Petra was right and nobody would read it. Still, if someone like him found this story, found it and realized that maybe the worst thing was not necessarily the worst, that it was livable, or could possibly be someday, wouldn’t that make it worth it?

My art wouldn’t change the world. But I could make one person smile, or think, or get through another hard few hours. Even if that one person was me. I owed this story not to myself but to him. And the other people who invariably see ghosts.

EPILOGUE—Color

Summer was hot in the store. The AC was broken and Helen hadn’t been able to get it fixed. The heat here was different than down south, humid like an armpit. The pages of my comic, in Amanda’s hands, looked wet and a little droopy.

Amanda read carefully. I tried not to watch her face too closely mostly because I felt embarrassed. It had taken a lot of strength to ask her to come here. Still more to tell her about the road trip.

She put the drawings back in order. I could tell she was trying to control her expression.

“Is it true?” she asked. “Do you really think he was being held here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it really was just some long drawn out hallucination. At this point, I don’t really want to figure it out. Might make it less meaningful somehow.”

There was a tense pause.
“I still want you in my life,” I said. “I know everything’s been really weird and I’ve been flaky. I just want you to know that I want to be your friend. I still want to talk about comics and how much group sucks.”

She smiled. “I can do that,” she said. “We can work on this, right?”

“Right.”

She squeezed my hand briefly. “You should read *Fun Home,*” she said. “It’s all about grief and loss and how a loved one can really haunt you. I think it would interest you. It could help you tell this story.”

“I’ll check it out,” I said.

“Well, I have to go,” she said. “Work awaits. Talk to you soon.”

“Have a good day.”

“You too.”

I watched her go and traced a thin design onto the folder that held the completed pages of the comic. Helen, having been covertly spying from around one of the bookcases, came back up to the counter. “How’d it go?”

“About as well as I could have hoped,” I told her. “Maybe, maybe not. Only time will tell, right?”

Helen leaned against the counter. “So you didn’t tell her about the city?”

“No. I’m terrified to. Still doesn’t feel real.”

“It’s a big deal.”

“It’s just an interview for a possible unpaid internship for a really small comic company. They have like ten people. I’d be getting their coffee.”

“It’s a start,” Helen signed. “You’ll do fine. Petra knows them, right?”

*Living Strange* by Allison Giese
“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“I think you’ll get it.”

I looked at the drawings and wondered if it were good enough.

July signified a year since Dmitri had been gone. The day snuck up on me. I was just sitting there at home, eating an omelet. Dad came in from behind me and slapped the neighborhood newsletter onto the table.

“They’re finally bulldozing those old houses,” he signed. “The homeowner’s association got through to the city. There was too much rot and water damage to fix them up. They’re going to make a park over there.”

I looked down at the article. It was shoehorned in between someone’s want ad for a babysitter and the celebration of someone’s hundredth birthday. “Great,” I signed.

“It’s sad,” he signed. “What kind of people do you think would have lived there?”

“Probably more middle class white people,” I signed.

“I guess you’re right.” He nursed his cup of tea, restless. “Such a beautiful day. And I have to be in the office all day, if I’m going to be home all weekend for the holiday.”

“Holiday?”

“The fourth?” He raised his eyebrow. “I asked you if you wanted to go up to Aunt Kate’s for the party. You seemed excited.”

“No, I know about that.” The date on the newsletter stood out to me in crisp Times New Roman. “I didn’t realize it was… today.”

“Oh.” He frowned. “What, is it someone’s birthday?”
“Dmitri died a year ago.” I didn’t feel anything other than a dull ache. No fear, no anxiety. Maybe it would always hurt at least a little bit.

“Right.” He tapped his forehead. “God, I had almost made myself forget. It was horrifying.”

I realized I had never gotten his side of the story. Had never asked.

“I remember I was on my way home. I got this call from this random number, and I figured it was just some client of mine, because I give some of them my cell if they’re really on the fritz. But… it was his mother. Sobbing. Devastated. “Had I seen her boy” and all that. I said I would ask you, but you had gone off somewhere, to Charlie’s, I think. By the time she called me back… they had found him. And my heart, it just, it just sank, you know. Because I knew how much you loved him.” He shook his head, eyes wide. “I got this gut-wrenching pain, like what if that were my kid, how would I feel. It’s very visceral. But I wouldn’t really realize how devastating it could be until… you went into the hospital.”

“Until I tried to kill myself, you mean,” I signed.

He hesitated. Set his cup down and crossed his arms.

“We should call it what it is,” I signed in a way that I hoped was gentle.

“You’re… right,” he signed. He shuddered. “I still don’t like it.”

“Me, either,” I signed.

“Anyway, I… I didn’t know what to tell you. Or how to help you through something like that. I just knew… when a kid dies, there’s always this great silence. Especially if there was something we could have done. And there was something we could have done with that one. Not you kids. Us, the parents, the community. In the end, we failed.”

“You didn’t fail me,” I said quietly.
He came over and kissed my forehead, gave me one of those quick strange tight hugs of his, and then let go.

“I wrote a comic about him,” I signed. “Not just him, but what I’ve gone through. I don’t know if you’d want to read it. There’s some stuff in it that doesn’t exactly make me look great.”

“You never show me what you draw.”

I shrugged. “Might as well. I’m trying to tell the truth about things. Stop hiding from them.”

“Yes. I think we all need a little of that.” He smiled. “Well, I’m off. Got to get in, and all.”

“Right.”

“What’ve you got on tap for dinner?”

“Actually, Jenna wants to cook again.”

His smile slipped a bit.

“We’ve all got to start somewhere,” I signed. “Need I remind you that for most of 2013 we lived off of TV dinners and pasta?”

“Not my best moment… or year,” he signed. “Just make sure she doesn’t burn the house down.”

Dear Aaron,

I know what you mean about seeing ghosts. After I started the job at the trucking company, I thought I saw you everywhere in the crowd. In my dreams. Or you’d be the busboy.

Then I’d blink and you’d be gone. Sometimes it was Jenna, her hair red like it was when she was
a baby. Or in her favorite Star Wars shirt. Or there was a basketball team getting off the bus at the diner where I was eating, and I could swear it was her school.

Sometimes I think I still run too much. These people, they leave these imprints in our memories, whether they leave us or we leave them. Sometimes there’s a better reason for things than others. Nevertheless, I still go back and forth on how I feel with my decision. Sometimes the guilt keeps me awake at night. I’m a mother, and I left my children—doesn’t that make me the worst thing alive? Then again, the thought of living my life contained, forever the vision of what someone else wanted it to be… that felt worse. Because I was sure that I would end up resenting all of you for it. I didn’t want that. I wanted my distant love. And I got it. But at what price?

You’re an adult. I have no reason to lie to you. Things are complex. We make bad decisions. A bad decision, at the worst time… well, you understand. Don’t you?

These are just lunatic ramblings of a woman drunk on wine alone in her motel room...

Hopefully you can divine some truth from it.

Love always,

Your mom XOX

“These are great,” I told Charlie. I flipped through more of the pictures he’d taken on the drive back. “You really have an eye for color.”

“Everyone has an eye for color,” he signed. Still, he blushed.

“This has a nice shape.” I touched another shot, this one a silhouette of Saima as a sunrise bloomed over the horizon.
“I had to print them at CVS, so they don’t look great,” he signed. “It’s supposed to be a lot crisper.” He picked up his phone and pulled up the original shot. “She’s supposed to be more out of focus. But the stupid machine changed it. I don’t know what I’m going to do with them.”

“You can submit them to the community gallery.”

“Nah, I don’t know if they’re good enough,” he signed. “Besides, even the community gallery has a submission fee. Art is complete bullshit.”

“I feel you. But for what it’s worth, I think these are beautiful.” I touched another print, one of Phoebe and Ann in a private moment, Ann pressing a kiss against her forehead. “You really know how people are feeling. And that’s so valuable as an artist. Me, I don’t know what the fuck is going on half of the time.”

“It’s the only thing I’m good at,” he signed. “You know, I’m applying to be an EMT. There’s a company that pays to train you. If I pass the state test, it’s like twenty dollars an hour. I’d be able to quit the warehouse. And help people. There aren’t enough EMTs that know ASL.”

“That’s amazing!” I signed. “You’d be so good at that.”

“Yeah, I just don’t know if they’d take me. Won’t they want someone who can hear well?”

“All the more reason to take you,” I signed. “They have to accommodate you. Legally.”

He shrugged. “It’s the first time in a while I’ve really wanted something.”

I squeezed his hand. “Then you’ll make it happen. Right?”

After all that there were still undays, long blank periods of time where I would feel nothing at all, would feel numbness kind of lap at my feet, sucking at me, dragging me down. There were days of lying in bed, days of pills, days of unbearable silence. Days of reminding myself that I was
alive, I was real, and I needed to be here. Recovery was a process of constant learning and of constant undoing and often the unraveling left me frazzled. I knew there would probably be no end to it, at least definitively. The thought of it made me tired but also frustrated because I knew that I couldn’t really afford to give up again. It would be like cheating, somehow.

On those undays I pushed through the muck. I drew, I saw friends, I talked to Fitzl. I held my breath. After a while the fog started to clear and through it I was someone else, a different me, a me who was trying to know better. There would still be mistakes and fuckups and bullshit and a whole lot else besides but maybe some good stuff too.

Like the comic. The whole comic I’d drawn and finished, handbound, heavy card paper. The other ones that didn’t exist yet but would eventually, born into mist. Like Jenna, Dad, Charlie, Saima, Ann, Phoebe. Like Amanda. Like Dmitri or Mom or anybody else who left or had to leave, or tried to leave because the storm inside us got to be too much and we didn’t know how to let it out. In the end all of us were living strangely, quietly, on the fringes in our own way. Nothing would ever come together so neatly. But if we didn’t try, then what else would we do with ourselves?