

The Etymologist
C.J. Boginski

And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back to where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human.

—Kurt Vonnegut

1

Finn Rilks had gone numb and his body rebelled. He watched his father dip outside for another can of beer. He kept the cans cold in the snow on the deck. A tightness, like a clenched fist, formed in his chest and he poured himself a stiff drink.

He ignored the food on the table, the shrimp cocktail, potatoes baked in cream, thick kielbasa, Polish bread, the real pickles he used to adore, sticks of English butter, pierogies, and roast ham. He tried not to think about anything. He missed his wife. For the first time in seven years, she was with her family instead of his during the holidays.

He had been against spending the night at the Fulton house, which was what he called it: "the Fulton house." Not "my childhood home" or "my home" or even "my parents' house," just the neutral term "the Fulton house." On the T ride out, he reasoned his parents would have too much to drink, which meant a long and expensive cab ride back to the station.

"We left out some ornaments for you to finish," his mother called across the room, a suggestion that, if disobeyed, would leave her moody and cold. In the next room, he stood over the box of ornaments. He ignored his hands, which had begun to tingle as he placed a

red apple on the tree. He had the feeling someone else was in the room, but when he turned around he was alone.

He missed his younger brother Thomas. His visits home for the holidays had always been sporadic, but over the past five years had stopped. A month before Christmas, he had flown down to the Florida, Keys where Thomas worked as a fly fishing guide. He wanted to tell his brother something felt wrong, but they ended up talking about trade rumors and drinking beer on the deck of Thomas' boat.

The tingling in his hands spread out across his body and he felt a burning sensation run along his spine. The room became small as if there was no more air and he gasped for breath. In the bathroom, he splashed cold water on his face.

He watched the water drip off his chin in the mirror. He was a handsome man but his face was gaunt now. Turning away from his reflection, he brushed the wet hair from his eyes and sat on the edge of the Victorian tub. The sound of his heart filled his ears, a sense of otherness gathering in his chest.

He had one thought: "Leave."

In the kitchen and living area, he had trouble walking. He feared his legs would buckle under the weight of his body. He could hear voices, but not put together what was being said. Everyone seemed distorted like shards at the end of a kaleidoscope.

"I need to go." He meant to speak softly, but his mother and father and their guests stopped talking and turned to face him.

"Where?" his mother asked.

"I just want to get home."

A cab was called and his mother touched his face. “You’re flush. Must be coming down with something.” She waited for him to say something back but he just stared at her. “Probably just want to get in your own bed,” she said, and returned to her guests.

Over the next week, he burned a slow burn. He tried to prepare his syllabus for the coming semester, but the only things that brought him comfort were lying in bed hugging a pillow or soaking in the tub while he smoked one cigarette after the other. He lost his appetite. He had a single can of Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup in the evenings until he relented and went to see his physician. "This isn't something I can solve," his physician said, and put him in contact with a psychiatrist.

He went into the entry and hit the play button on his answering machine. Dr. Michaels' voice filled the small space again. "Hello Mr. Rilks, I hear you're having some trouble. Please call me as soon as you can."

He paced his apartment and opened his etymology book. He had removed the cover to reveal the pressed silver lettering along the spine. On the inside cover, he had taped a postcard of a young African woman. Colorful beads ran down to her two small breasts, a furtive look on her face. He flipped through the opening pages. Reading the word 'alienate,' he had the sensation he belonged to another person and was nothing more than a reflection of his former self.

alienate v. 1548, verb use of the earlier adjective *alienate* estranged (before 1420); borrowed from Latin *aliēnātus*, past participle of *aliēnāre* to make another's, estrange, from *aliēnus* of or belonging to another person or place, from *alius* (an)other.

He had first picked up the etymology book at a sunny bookstore. He and his estranged wife Eve were still together. She bought the book for him a few weeks later as a birthday present. He'd spend hours inside the pages, never in any particular order. He let the words guide him.

In the book, he found a companion, a shared sense that meanings changed over time but their historic legacies remained.

He checked the clock and, unable to wait any longer, left early for his therapy appointment. He feared and needed someone to talk to. On the T ride out, he felt like everyone was looking at him. The train stopped for a delay and the conductor opened the doors. He got off and paced the platform, a young woman looking at him as if he needed her attention.

Swaying along the T tracks again, he watched the city buildings give way to single family homes. He exited at Riverside Station, the last stop, and walked a firm mile to Dr. Michaels' house. There were several stained glass windows that seemed to follow a staircase inside, the eaves were whimsical, and the north corner of the house rose to a pointed roof.

In the waiting room, he flipped through the magazines. He looked to the dated shag carpet and the dark wood walls and the plants pressed against the sliding glass doors that rose to the ceiling and dropped yellow leaves. He picked up the carving on the windowsill by the door. It was a wood carving of two elephants, one elephant in front pulling a heavy load of felled trees, the other elephant lowering his head to help push the load forward.

Dr. Michaels opened the doors to his office. Both doors were in the same frame, one swinging in and the other out. The two doors ensured no words, even if yelled, could be understood outside his office. Finn took a step inside. The room dominated by sliding glass doors, a view of the surrounding landscape, and the smell of worn leather, old newspapers, and body odor.

Dr. Michaels shuffled in and took his seat. In the wide Eames chair, he adjusted his hearing aid. He was bent with a full head of white hair, a green comb sticking out from the

pocket of his blazer. In the waiting room, Finn had read his diploma from the Neurological Institute of Medicine. It was dated 1948.

He took the seat opposite Dr. Michaels. “Why aren’t you retired?” he asked.

Dr. Michaels tilted his head at the question. “After I served in the war, the military paid for my education. Retirement, lately, feels too much like surrender.” He took up his notepad. “What brings you here?”

It was hard for Finn to imagine Dr. Michaels’ bent frame as a soldier. “I have no one to talk to,” he answered.

“No one?” Dr. Michaels asked, an expression of concern crossing his face.

“My wife left me. I never *really* talk with my parents. My brother moved away.”

Dr. Michaels jotted down a few notes. “If you had someone to talk to, what would you say?”

“I feel lousy and I don’t know why,” Finn said, his attention drawn to the sliding glass doors. The snow from the previous evening was crisp and clean, the top layer of snowflakes orange in the last of the day’s sun. “I don’t know how to move forward. I keep trying to prepare for class, but my mind goes blank.”

“You’re a teacher?”

“English professor for three years now,” Finn answered, and returned his attention to Dr. Michaels. “I dread returning to the classroom. It’s never been easy, but to feel like this. To have to be in front of people.”

“What’s the worst that can happen?”

“I walk out. I scream at them. I don’t know.”

“What would you scream?” Dr. Michaels asked, and leaned forward in his chair.

Finn looked out the sliding glass doors again. “Stop needing me,” he said, the early winter night beginning to fall across the landscape.

“You care for your students?”

“Other professors are cavalier about it,” Finn answered. “Can’t be bothered to remember their students’ names, but they seem happy that way, as if they found a way to make teaching as carefree as possible.”

“Why does teaching make you angry?” Dr. Michaels asked, and jotted down a few more notes.

Finn heard the question, but a memory came to the surface. “I packed a suitcase when I was a kid and threatened to run away. All my mother said was ‘send a letter.’”

“You needed her, perhaps that’s why you resent your students for needing you,” Dr. Michaels said, and crossed the room to turn on the lights. “How far did you get?”

“About a mile. I kept looking over my shoulder. I remember the suitcase kept hitting me in the back of the leg.”

Dr. Michaels turned on the floor lamp. For a moment, his face was caught between light and shadow. “What were you running from?” he asked, and continued across the room.

Finn felt the tightness in his chest return. “My father,” he said. “I try not to think about it, but going to my parents’ house on Christmas Eve always brings the memory back. I was eight. My mother, father, and my brother Thomas had been decorating the tree.” He stopped, the room well-lit now.

Dr. Michaels returned to his chair. “Whatever you’re thinking and feeling, you can say it in here.”

“My father hit me in the chest. I can’t remember what set him off. He knocked me unconscious,” he told Dr. Michaels, suddenly aware that he was speaking the words aloud for the first time. “When I came to I was on my back gasping for breath. I remember staring at the ceiling until I had the strength to get back on my feet.”

Finn rose, his eyes returning to the landscape outside Dr. Michaels’ office. In the distance, there was a river lined with bare trees and then the red and white lights of cars streaming along the Mass Pike. “I shouldn’t have come,” he said. In the waiting room, he picked up several yellow leaves from the floor and dropped them in the wastebasket.

Dr. Michaels stood in the doorway of his office. “You don’t need to keep running.”

Finn hesitated, put on his wool hat and coat, and went out.

On the T ride home, he looked in through the lighted windows of the apartment buildings. There was the flicker of television screens, a child at a kitchen table coloring, and then a man smoking a cigarette by a half open window. In his neighborhood, he walked past his apartment and continued down Beacon Street.

He went up the steps near the capitol building. The university campus filled with energy. Cars were parked along the streets as parents returned their children to the freshman dorms. Their children laden with freshly laundered clothes and boxes of microwavable food. A sense of panic came over him and he hurried forward.

Behind his office door, he spread his old note cards across his desk. He had created hundreds of them filled with quotes and observations about Albert Camus’ life and literary diaries. He searched through the cards until a quote struck him:

“... the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions. How to answer it?”
Explains Camus’ obsession with questions of responsibility, innocence, and guilt. Dig deeper.

He noticed his former handwriting was neat to the point of neurosis, not at all like his scribbling now which many of his students found “unreadable.” A sick feeling came over him and he put his note cards away, his past handwriting and former observations striking him as foreign and written by a stranger.

At his computer, he opened his old syllabus. All he had to do was change the dates and move on, but he refused to withdraw to the safety of the university’s recommended readings. One lesson plan after the next, he chose stories and essays that moved him. Finished, he leaned back and read over the course structure, all the assigned readings centered on youth and the struggle to wrestle meaning out of confusion.

Exhausted but unwilling to return to the solitude of his apartment, he decided he should organize all the books in his office by last name. He pulled hundreds of books from his shelves and began stacking them in alphabetical order. When he came to the thick and hardbound copy of Günter Grass’ *The Tin Drum*, he opened the front cover and read the handwritten inscription.

Matthew, a book that refuses to glorify war and instead leaves us with the insanity of the past. He had no idea who Matthew was or who had written the line on the inside cover. He was drawn to the phrase: “insanity of the past.” He turned a few more pages, pressed his nose against the ink, and inhaled.

Growing up, he’d sit by the hutch in his father’s den and pull out the books inside. There was Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Catch-22*, Grass’ *The Tin Drum*, and a book of photographs taken during the slaughter at Wounded Knee. He used to press his nose inside the pages then, too. If the book was new he could smell the ink

of his father's printing presses. If old, he loved the musty smell, dreamed of the places the book had been and the fingers that had turned the pages.

He cracked the window and lit a smoke, the cold air pouring into his small and warm office. It was past midnight when he finished organizing his books and returned them to the shelves. He turned off his desk lamp. Unsure if he had accomplished anything. Unsure if it was better to find what he was looking for or get lost along the way.

Outside, the campus had grown quiet, nothing more than a group of freshman having cigarettes on the sidewalk. He went down Beacon Street, Boston Commons to his left. He passed the brownstone on the corner of Beacon and Charles where he had been born. As he neared his apartment, he felt the cold air on his face and the solitude of his empty rooms.

He pushed through the heavy doors of his brownstone. The hallways were a mess. The landlord lived on the fourth floor and was a pack rat. There was just enough room to slip past the pieces of wood, old computer equipment, tools, half-used buckets of paint, stacks and stacks of magazines and so on and enter his apartment.

Inside the entry, he locked his front door and placed his belongings in careful order. His book bag hung in the closet and his keys placed in a simple white dish. Despite the dirty exterior and crowded hallways, his studio was clean, sparse, and beautiful. He lived in what was known as "the sun room" before the brownstone had been split up into apartments. His studio had a working marble fireplace, thirteen foot ceilings, eight foot windows, and inlaid wood floors.

Everything in his apartment was where and how he had left it, which was unusual to him after seven years of marriage. There was no crossword left open, used wine glass in the sink, or women's office clothes thrown on the bathroom floor.

On the leather couch, he opened his etymology book. Despite having a PhD, he had a hard time remembering the order of the alphabet. He hummed the rhyme he had learned in grade school until he found the word ‘strange.’

strange *adj.* About 1280 *stoung*e from elsewhere, foreign, unknown, unfamiliar; later *straunge* (probably before 1300); borrowed from Old French *estrange* foreign, alien, from Latin *extrāneus* foreign, external, from *extrā* outside of.

He climbed into bed and stared up at the high ceiling. His mind refused to settle, his need for sleep turning toward his fear of leading a good class and all the things he could and did say wrong. Instinctively, he reached out for his wife’s hip only to be reminded of the cold space beside him. “Tomorrow’s another day,” he told himself, his words sounding hollow in the unfamiliar stillness of his apartment.

At 3:10 in the afternoon, he entered his classroom. “Welcome to freshman English,” he said, and handed each student a syllabus and a reading packet. “If you could introduce yourselves,” he told them. At the front desk, he jotted down a quick description to help remember their names, two students striking him that day: *Sophia, brunette, memories of Eve. Ethan, introverted, your young self.*

After their introductions, he began his first day speech. “I’m a hard grader. You have to earn an A,” he told them. Despite pressure from the English Department to “soften,” Finn rarely gave out A’s. Grade inflation, in his opinion, a disservice to his students and hard work.

“On cellphones,” he went on, “if they go off or you text during class, you’ll be required to lead the next discussion for fifteen minutes,” he said, and paused to let his words sink in. “You get three unexcused absences, after that, your grade drops a full letter for every class you miss. Understood?”

His students nodded, their expressions tense.

“Listen,” he began, and lost his next thought. His new student Sophia stopped scribbling down his every word, Ethan’s attention drifting outside the classroom windows. “I’m not as hard as I sound on the first day,” he said, the words coming back to him. “But you will walk out of this classroom stronger writers and thinkers than when you walked in,” he told them. “Please turn to the second page of your reading packets and begin reading Joyce’s *Araby*.”

His students opened their covers. “Page two?” one of them asked.

“Page two,” he answered. “I’ll be right back, but keep reading while I’m gone.”

He went to the bathroom and bowed his head by the mirror above the sink. He felt his heart in his chest and the familiar burn run up along his spine. Before class, he had nicked his neck badly while shaving. He had watched the blood pool in the hollow space behind his collarbone, the pain a relief against his rising fears. In the university bathroom, he splashed cold water on his face. “You can do this,” he told his reflection.

At the front desk, he returned to his seat, his new students looking up at him. Joyce’s *Araby* remained, in his opinion, one of the most beautiful stories ever written about adolescent angst and desire. He listened to the turning of pages until his students finished reading. “Initial thoughts?” he asked.

Ethan raised his hand. “I like this line. ‘I was thankful I could see so little.’”

“Easier that way, unless your senses leave you no choice but to listen,” Finn said, only to realize he was speaking to himself. He rose and leaned against the edge of his desk. “Why does the narrator consider himself a creature derided by vanity?” he asked the class.

The students flipped through their reading packets. “Because his need for achievement got in the way of what he really wanted,” Ethan answered.

“What does he really want?”

“Love,” Sophia said.

“And why does he need to purchase an object to get it?”

“He promises Mangan’s sister he’ll get her something at the bazaar,” Sophia told him. “So he was hoping she’d love him for buying her a gift.”

“Is love purchased? Or is that vanity?” he asked her.

Sophia lowered her eyes. “Is it so wrong he wanted to buy her something special?”

“Good question,” Finn said. Unsure of what to say next, he turned away from his class and straightened the pens on his desk, an awkward silence gathering in the room. “Why don’t we split into discussion groups,” he told them, and assigned his class to groups of four. “Discuss why Mangan’s sister is never given a first name and what we make of the scene between Mangan’s sister and the narrator on the front steps of her house.”

He listened to his students, the voice in his head cutting through their chatter, *you’re a lousy teacher*, the voice said, and he closed his eyes. Despite his rising self-doubt, he forced himself forward. He joined one group after the next, shaping and helping their conversations, until he ended up at Sophia and Ethan’s group. “Why doesn’t Mangan’s sister have a name?” he asked.

“So we can identify with her,” Sophia told him, and smoothed out the open page of her reading packet.

“How so?”

“So we can give her the name of our failed desires and see ourselves in her,” Ethan answered.

“Astute observation,” Finn said.

Sophia touched the ends of her hair. “We’re not sure about the importance of the scene on the stairs.”

“Read the paragraph aloud,” he told her.

Sophia cleared her throat and Finn followed the movement of her lips.

“While she spoke she turned a silver bracelet round and round her wrist. She could not go, she said, because there would be a retreat that week in her convent. Her brother and two other boys were fighting for their caps and I was alone at the railings. She held one of

the spikes, bowing her head towards me. The light from the lamp opposite our door caught the white curve of her neck, lit up her hair that rested there and, falling, lit up the hand upon the railing. It fell over one side of her dress and caught the white border of her petticoat, just visible as she stood at ease.”

“How does the passage make you feel?” he asked.

“Aroused,” Sophia answered.

The group let out a nervous laugh and nodded in agreement.

“Anyone notice what she’s holding onto?”

“The top of a spike,” Sophia said.

“And what kind of symbol is a spike?”

“A phallic symbol,” Ethan answered.

Sophia looked up at Finn, a defiant look on her face. “I thought it was sweet he wanted to buy her something special,” she told him.

Finn checked his watch and returned to the front desk. “Our time is up for today.” The students packed their belongs, Sophia the last to file out. “Thank you professor,” she called, and waved goodbye. Exhausted, he turned out the classroom lights and left the building.

Despite the cold, he slowed his pace as he walked through the park. The sun set and he realized he was alone, the park empty and the lights of the buildings far away. The moment between day and night grew around him, two opposites existing together. He knew the word ‘twilight’ came from the Low German *Twelecht*, meaning ‘radiant energy,’ and only later came to mean ‘the period just before or after full development.’

On Saturday, he took the T to Riverside station, the last stop. He stood still on the platform, his father's Mercedes idling beside the curb. Less than a week ago, he had exited at the same stop before walking to Dr. Michaels' office. A coincidence he reasoned and looked up at the gray sky. Or, more likely, the unfortunate humor of the gods.

He went down the platform steps and climbed into the passenger seat. "What are we having?" he asked. His father lit an unfiltered smoke and set his squat pack of Pall Malls on the dash, the words *Per Aspera ad Astra*, Latin for *Through Hardships to the Stars*, placed on a crest held by two crowned lions.

"Cold cuts," his father answered, and turned on the windshield wipers, a light snow beginning to fall. "I got more of those pickles you like," he said, and put his Mercedes in gear and drove out of the parking lot. Finn studied his father's face. Age was taking him, but he had preserved well. He had softened, too. Buying Finn his favorite foods, sending him articles about teaching that he cut out from *The New York Times*, and making Finn furniture for his new apartment in Back Bay.

His father's acts of kindness hard to place against the distant, hard-hitting, and nonsense father he had known as a child. A childhood father that was still there, just buried more beneath the surface of age and resignation. Over the summer, the two men had been sharing beers when Finn turned to his father. "You were awfully hard on us growing up."

His father shook the last sip of his beer on the lawn. "You had it easy. You never would have survived my father," he said, and went inside.

Finn watched the snow land on the passenger window. The town of Fulton, with its sprawling landscapes and mix of colonial mansions and newer homes, hidden behind high stone walls and long driveways. After the brick and ivy library, his father took a left.

At sixteen, Finn had driven down the same road, his brother Thomas in the passenger seat. At the bottom of the hill, he had coaxed the car to eighty miles per hour before he lost control. The cop that arrived at the scene of the accident said: *You should both be dead.*

“You ever wonder why Thomas never comes around anymore?” he asked.

His father eased his car around the sharp bend in the road. “No,” he answered.

In the front entry, his father arranged his keys, wallet, and folded list of phone numbers on the table by the door. The Christmas tree had already been removed, the needles swept away, and the boxes of ornaments put up in the attic.

Finn had been against returning to his parents’ house, but Dr. Michaels’ words, *you don’t need to keep running*, kept coming back to him. And there, in the warm entry of his parents’ house, he wanted something from them. Although he was uncertain of what, exactly, he wanted.

“Do you always put the tree away so soon?” he asked.

His father straightened his list of phone numbers. “Not always,” he said. “Your mother wants the house back to normal these days.”

They joined his mother in the kitchen, the cold cuts rolled on a serving platter, the sliced pickles sprinkled with black pepper. She made his father a roast beef sandwich. He leaned forward, put his elbows on the table, and ate. “Finn never puts his elbows on the table,” his mother said, and touched his shoulder. “Like I taught him.”

“Is there any good beer in the fridge?” he asked.

His mother wiped the corners of her mouth. “Toward the back,” she told him.

He opened a bottle of beer at the counter. In the bay window above the kitchen sink, he caught the reflection of his parents as they ate behind him. His mother’s lessons had started early. “Bring your food to your mouth. Sip from the side of your spoon. Don’t slurp. Elbows off the table.” In adolescence, she focused on woman. “Always put on a lady’s coat. Never let her open a door for herself. If she asks you how she looks, always say beautiful.”

Outside the bay window, a pair of tufted titmice took turns at the bird feeder. Small pines and undergrowth had reclaimed the yard, the woods around his parents’ house now dense and wild. He returned to the table. “How come you don’t keep up the yard anymore?” he asked his father.

“The less I have to see and know about my neighbors, the better,” he answered.

After lunch, Finn followed his father down the basement stairs. His legs felt weak and he counted each step beneath him. His father moved ahead, Finn lingering at the bottom of the stairs. In the finished basement, the signs of his adolescent bedroom had been removed except for a few bits of tape left on the walls.

“You coming,” his father called.

Finn crossed the threshold, the old New England cellar made of rocks and boulders pulled from the ground. In the spring, the rain trickled through the cracks and triggered the new sump-pump. He took in the familiar smell of turpentine, stale cigarette smoke, and sawdust.

“How are things without Eve?” his father asked.

“Lonely,” he answered.

His father lit a smoke and sanded the new end table. “I made it out of cherry,” he said, and knocked against the wood. “It’ll look nice next to your couch,” he added, and punched Finn playfully on the shoulder. Finn’s chest tightened and he took a step away from his father, an irrational fear in him that time would snap back and he’d be helpless again. “You come around more now that you’re not with her,” his father said.

“I’m going to check on mom,” Finn told him, and made his way up the stairs.

Behind the detached garage, he lit a smoke. The snow had picked up. His hands became damp and cold, which felt more real to him than the warmth of his parents’ house. He studied the spot where his father spent his evenings alone in the warmer months. The spot now covered by snow.

He finished his smoke and crossed the yard, a single chickadee at the bird feeder. In the front entry, he listened to the whine of the tea kettle and went into his father’s den. Unsure of why he had come, he opened the top drawer of the hutch. He pushed aside his father’s old business documents until he found the box of family photographs.

In the living area by the kitchen, his mother sat on the floor by the fire. He sat beside her and placed the box of family photographs between them. She blew across the rim of her tea cup, her fingers searching through the photographs. “You were such a cute kid,” she said.

“Thought I might put them in order,” he told her.

“I keep meaning to get around to it,” his mother said, and went to the narrow table against the wall. “Have you guys met with the mediator?” she asked, and adjusted the vase of white tulips.

“We sent in forms about assets and things. Eve set up a meeting, but I forgot.”

“She was a hard woman to love,” his mother said, and studied the back of her hands.

“I always think about the way they were when I was younger.”

“They’re beautiful,” he said.

She took out one of the tulips and placed it at the back of the vase. “Do you remember this table?” she asked.

He joined his mother and ran his finger along the gouge on the corner of the table. The gouge had been sanded and shellacked, but the scar was still evident.

“I remember,” he said.

At the age of twelve, he had come home to an empty house after school. It had been a winter night and the light faded early. He cut himself slices of apple with peanut butter and looked through the cabinets before calling his mother at the local pediatrician’s office where she worked as a receptionist. “Is there any more food in the house?” he had asked.

“Finn I’m busy, I won’t be home until after six,” she told him.

The paring knife in hand, he had gouged the corner of the table, an antique his parents had bought a month or two earlier. When his father got home, and after his mother begged him to go easy, his father chased him into his bedroom. “What were you thinking!?!” he called through the door. Finn wasn’t sure what he thought. But there by the fire with his mother, he realized he was tired of being alone, tired of the early dark nights, tired of longing for a connection to his parents that never came.

He buried his hands in his coat pockets, sensations coming back to him as he climbed the rise toward Dr. Michaels' house. The scent of his mother's perfume, the feeling of the cellar steps beneath his feet, and the sound of his father's voice outside his bedroom door.

He found Dr. Michaels waiting for him and took his seat. "Why'd you come back?" he asked. "Not sure," Finn answered, and looked out the sliding glass doors. Afraid to move forward, he fell into silence until the shadows lengthened. "I don't know how ..." he began, and stopped.

Dr. Michaels' eyes were closed. His chin pressed against his chest. After several minutes, he tapped his finger against his leg, the simple act stirring him awake. "I haven't been sleeping much," he said, and took up his notepad. "And you remind me of someone."

"Your finger, you were tapping it," Finn told him.

"I trained myself to do that when I was in my residency. Over-worked, my body would just decide it needed sleep. Guess it still works." Dr. Michaels extended his hand. "Whatever comes."

"There are six steps to get into your waiting room," Finn said. "I always count stairs, irrational, but I can't help it."

"Why stairs?" Dr. Michaels asked.

"On Saturday, I went to visit my parents. After lunch, I followed my father down the cellar stairs. My legs felt weak, as if they refused to move forward," he answered. "Most of the time, I don't even realize I'm counting."

Outside the sliding glass doors, the sun set. Dr. Michaels shuffled across the room and turned on the lights. “Tell me about the cellar stairs.”

“They’re just stairs,” Finn told him, and another image came to him. “But they’re new. Before my parents put the addition on, there had been a steep staircase leading down off the kitchen.”

Dr. Michaels returned to his chair. “What do you remember about *those* stairs, the old ones?” he asked.

“Falling down,” Finn said, the memory flooding back to him. “I was around four. My father left the cellar door open and my curiosity got the better of me. I remember a bare bulb, then my parents’ figures. In my mind they’re just shadows. I had the wind knocked out of me and then my father carried me back up the stairs.” For the first time, he noticed there was a box of Kleenex and a simple clay bowl on the table beside him. “A few months later, I made him a plate of my favorite food.”

“Which was?”

“Buttered saltines,” he answered. “I didn’t want my mother to take them down so I did it myself. Put my bum on the top stair, swung my feet over, one step after the next until I got to the bottom.”

“He must have been happy for a snack.”

“He didn’t eat any,” Finn told him.

“At the very least, he could have acknowledged the bravery of your four year old self,” Dr. Michaels said, and jotted down a few notes.

Finn studied the wooden sailboat. It sat on a long bookcase filled with slanted folders and old tape recorders. “Bravery?” he asked.

“You had just fallen down those stairs and, for him, you tackled them again at a very young age, and he couldn’t be *bothered* to eat a single one?”

“It’s not that important,” Finn said.

“I don’t believe you,” Dr. Michaels told him, the tension in his voice giving way to an expression of regret. “You call counting stairs irrational, but maybe it’s a way for your past to make itself known. Only, after so many years of hiding from yourself, you refuse to listen.”

“What if all you hear hurts?” he asked, and stroked the top of his left arm.

Dr. Michaels followed the movement of his hand. “Tell me what you hear,” he said.

“I should get going,” Finn told him, and made his way toward the doors. In the waiting room, he put on his winter coat. “Did you hurt your arm recently?” He turned to find Dr. Michaels standing beside him. Terrified of saying too much about himself, he left the waiting room and shut the door behind him.

In his apartment, he sat on his leather couch. He ran his fingers over the scars on his coffee table, the scars left behind by drill bits and screws. The table was made from an old door that another carpenter, like his father, had once used as a workbench.

He lit a smoke and opened the box of his family photographs. There was a picture of him in his father's lap, back when his father still wore a mustache; another of him and his brother standing beside the house on a winter day, Thomas with a smile on his face and Finn crying about some slight outside the frame; and a black and white photograph of his father in printing class.

At sixteen, Finn learned there were four primary colors in printing. Cyan, Blue, Magenta, and Yellow. Every other color was derived, based on exposure to light, from the four primary colors. He opened his etymology book and scanned through the pages, the meaning of hidden and concealed surprising him.

color *n.* About 1225 *colur* skin color, complexion; later, visible color, color of an object (probably before 1300); probably borrowed from Old French *colour*, from Latin *color* (accusative *colōrem*), color, hue, related to *cēlāre* to hide, conceal.

In the early years, his father had worked late at his print shop. Finn would refuse to go to bed and his mother would let him sit with her on the couch until they heard the front door. He always hoped his father would take him to his knee. His desire for his father's love hidden until, reluctantly, he gave himself a chance to listen.

His cellphone chimed. Happy for the distraction, he read the message. It was from his new student, Sophia. "Did I miss something?" she asked. "Shouldn't there be an assignment for tomorrow?"

“There are no assignments for tomorrow,” he answered.

“Good. I would *hate* to get in any kind of trouble with you,” she texted back, and added a smile at the end of her message.

He placed his etymology book back on the mantel. In the galley kitchen, he poured himself a drink. He had tacked up a poster of Camus by the stove. In a simple gray suit, Camus smoked an unfiltered cigarette, deep bags, like his, under his eyes. Camus had been an only child. His father was killed in the Battle of Marne. It was rumored he visited the grave of his father often and asked the stone: “Who am I?”

Finn’s father was an only child. His family had no running hot water and, in order to take hot showers, his father played sports. Baseball and hockey were his favorites. He was named after Saint Joseph, which would have come from the Slavic form of the name: *Iosifu*. His grandfather’s name was Jacob, which is where Finn got his middle name.

He picked up his cellphone and read over the brief exchange with Sophia. “She’s your student,” he told himself. A part of him exhilarated by her desire to please him, a feeling he had not felt in years. Unwilling to return to his family photographs, he poured another drink and kept drinking until the memories of his past dulled and then faded.

He arrived to class early the next afternoon, his students filing in, one after the other, and taking their seats. At the front desk, he took a note card from the inside pocket of his corduroy jacket. *When the soul suffers too much, it develops a taste for misfortune.* He read Camus' words again and looked out the windows. The classroom was at basement level, the pleated pants and hemlines of men and women going by.

"I like your jacket," Sophia said.

"I don't know why I keep wearing it," he told her, and adjusted his cuffs. "Seems tragically predictable for an English professor."

A student raised her hand. "Did we miss something?" she asked.

"There were no assignments for today," he answered. For the first time in his teaching career, he had decided to leave the last Friday of every month open and see what happened.

Sophia leaned forward and crossed her legs. "So we can go?" she asked.

Finn traced the edge of his note card with his finger. "You can do whatever you want as long as you stay here," he told the class, and regretted his decision to deviate from his old course structure and readings. His students turned their attention to their cellphones. After a few minutes, they turned their attention back to Finn.

"What were you like as a freshman?" Sophia asked.

"Confused," he said, and put his note card away. "Who knows the myth of Echo and Narcissus?"

"Narcissus represents selfishness," a student answered.

“In a way,” Finn said, “but he came to be associated with that later. After Freud used the myth as a central concept for his theory on human behavior. What Narcissus represented, and what Freud picked up on later, was self-love to the point where nothing else matters until you wither away staring at your own reflection. Who knows Echo?”

Ethan raised his hand. “Was she a god?”

“A water nymph,” Finn answered. At the whiteboard, he wrote down the names: *Narcissus, Echo, Zeus, and Hera*. “Echo was cursed by Hera, Zeus’ wife,” he told them. “Zeus liked to frolic and have affairs with water nymphs, many of them Echo’s friends. When Hera came looking for her husband, Echo would warn her friends so they wouldn’t get caught and incur Hera’s vengeful wrath. By the way, all nymphs frolicked in Greek myths and all gods had affairs, and it always, without question, led to disaster,” he said, and the class laughed.

“Eventually,” he went on, “Hera caught on to Echo’s warnings and cursed Echo to repeat only what had been said to her by someone else. One day the beautiful youth Narcissus was wandering and hunting in the woods. When Echo saw him she immediately fell in love. So she approached Narcissus, but could speak no words to him, until Narcissus, frightened by her silence, asked: ‘Who are you?’ to which Echo responded: ‘Who are you?’”

Finn turned to the whiteboard. He studied the names he had written and no longer felt like finishing the story. Most Greek tragedies ending too early, no lessons offered on everyday family tragedies that kept going until they became a way of life.

“Don’t keep us waiting,” Sophia said. “What happened next?”

He returned to his chair. “Narcissus became increasingly alarmed. ‘What do you want?!?’ he yelled, Echo yelling back ‘What do you want?!?’ In fear, the young Narcissus

fled back into the woods. Echo was so distraught that she wandered into the canyons and withered away from starvation, her bones becoming part of the very rock so today, when you call into any canyon, it isn't your own voice coming back, but the voice of Echo," he told them, and dismissed the class.

At the front desk, Sophia waited as the other students filed out. He took in her straight brown hair and the way she held the strap of her backpack. "Echo reminds me of something inside myself," she said, and looked at the floor. "I'm nervous about the first assignment."

For a moment, Finn let himself dream of how jealous Eve would be if she saw the two of them holding hands and walking down the street on a sunny and mild spring day, the type of day he longed for against the winter's early dark nights and depressing cold.

"I'll hand out the guidelines next class," he told her.

"I'd like to get started soon," Sophia said. "I didn't do so well my first semester."

"How bad?" he asked.

"Academic probation," she answered, and adjusted the strap of her backpack.

"They'll ask me to leave if I don't do better."

"I can't do the work for you, but I'll help where I can," he said, and packed the rest of his belongings. At the door, he turned back to Sophia. She remained rooted by the front desk.

"Come on," he told her.

In the cold, they hurried down the sidewalk together and entered his warm office.

He opened his filing cabinet and handed Sophia a sheet of paper. "I haven't had a chance to correct the dates, but the assignment remains the same."

"What do I have to do exactly?" she asked.

“Pick one theme or idea you see repeated throughout a novel and write an essay on how the theme evolves,” he said, and sat behind his desk.

She studied the books on his shelves. “Is there a novel you’d recommend?”

“Camus is one I never lost faith in.”

“Which one?” she asked.

“*The Stranger*,” he told her. “They’re in alphabetical order by last name.”

At his bookshelf, she tilted her head. “You read a lot. No wait, you read a great deal. Wasn’t that one of the things you said in class?”

“Sounds right, ‘a lot’ never sounds academic or professional and how do you know I read a lot? Maybe I just buy books to appear well-read,” he said, and watched as Sophia ran her finger along the spines of his books.

She opened the front cover of *The Stranger*. “Do you mind if I borrow your copy?” she asked.

He never loaned out his books, but the idea of Sophia having something of his, something she’d have to return, pleased him. “Just promise you’ll bring it back.”

She placed the book inside her backpack. “I promise.” At his office door, she hesitated, her hand on the door frame. “You seem lonely,” she said over her shoulder, and left.

Finn studied the wooden sailboat on the top shelf of Dr. Michaels' bookcase. He had woken with the image of Sophia turning back to him as she left his office. "A student, Sophia, needs my help," he began, his words hesitant. "But she reminds me of the past."

"Who does she remind you of?" Dr. Michaels asked.

Finn looked out the sliding glass doors, his eyes drawn to the low branches of the oak. "She reminds me of Eve. Before that, the first girl I slept with, Sylvia. Something about their eyes and the way their straight brown hair falls around their shoulders."

"Sylvia is a similar name to Sophia," Dr. Michaels said.

"I feel out of order," Finn told him. "Like there are missing pieces. I'll go into the entry, the kitchen, and my mind goes blank and I have no idea why I got up in the first place."

Dr. Michaels tapped his pen against his notepad. "How's your dysphoria been?"

"It's always there now," Finn said. "Like a weight I can't put down." He straightened the box of Kleenex on the end table. "Sylvia and I used to drive out to the reservoir. We'd make love in the passenger seat of my car. I can still remember the feeling of her in my hands." He had never talked about Sylvia, as if their time together had ceased to exist. "I hate it when it gets dark early," he said, and checked his watch. "She demanded we have sex in my parents' bedroom."

"How old were you?" Dr. Michaels asked.

“Sixteen,” Finn answered. “It happened around four in the afternoon. My parents were still at work. It was already starting to show signs of darkness. I didn’t know why she wanted to have sex there. I kept saying ‘no’ but she kept saying ‘come on’ and I gave in.”

“How’d it feel?”

“Lousy,” Finn said. “She did it for her ex-boyfriend. I learned later he and a friend were hiding in the woods and looking in through the windows. I hated myself.”

“Instead of hating her?” Dr. Michaels asked.

Finn had first noticed Sylvia or she had first noticed him in the waiting room of the Vice-Principal’s Office. She transferred in from another school and, like Finn, had already received detentions for cutting class. The other girls at Fulton High, the rich girls who were the only girls in those days, whispered “slut,” the word coming off their tongues with a strange envy. Sylvia wore skintight jeans, low cut blouses, and a large over-sized black purse with tassels. The same purse she was forever digging around for her lighter and pack of Parliaments.

They’d start cutting classes together and drive to Sylvia’s house. One afternoon, after making out on the couch, Sylvia pushed him away. He followed her through the large house and past the constant renovations, the big sheets of plastic swaying as Sylvia made her way upstairs. In the unfinished bathroom, she applied a thick layer of foundation to hide her acne. “Did I do something?” he asked. Sylvia looked back at him in the mirror, applied lipstick, and gave him a wicked smile, little dots of her foundation sprinkled on the sink.

“I keep thinking Sylvia was the only passionate relationship I’ve ever had,” he said. “We’d make out on the couch in her living room. She’d climb into my lap and everything stopped but us.”

Dr. Michaels turned on his desk lamp. “She betrayed you, is that passion?”

“I loved the way she smelled,” Finn said. “She cheated on me. I know that, but I kept coming back for more, even though her rejections became more frequent.”

“Because?” Dr. Michaels asked.

“Because I thought I could make her want me, only me,” Finn answered, and looked down into the worn carpet beneath his feet. “Because I’d fail to get what I wanted. It’s strange, but I knew it then, too.”

Dr. Michaels set his notes aside, awareness drawing across his face. “Your mother had straight brown hair and, as you told me, a certain look in her eyes,” he said, and shifted in his seat. “The same features you chose to emphasize when describing Sylvia.”

Finn regretted telling Dr. Michaels about the scene with his mother. At thirteen, he went to the master bedroom. His mother sat on the edge of the bed in nylons, her blouse unbuttoned, her straight brown hair falling around her shoulders as she leaned forward to unclasp her heel. He had stood rigid in the doorway. His mother looked up, her blue eyes blinking back at him until he turned away and left without a word.

“If you have a point,” he said, “I’d suggest you make it now.”

“Is it so strange you’d chose damaged women in the hope of correcting the past?” Dr. Michaels asked, and continued without waiting for an answer. “You were desperate for more of your mother’s love, more of her intervention against your father. But she betrayed you, too. Maybe you hope, this time, you can make the women in your life want you and only you. To prove you’re worth fighting for,” he said, and flipped back through his notes. “Your father always ate alone? Your mother never, not even once, demanded he eat dinner with his family?” he asked.

During dinner, Finn would look to the bottom of the valley, the lake sparkling with a thousand points of reflected light, his father at the edge of the property alone. “My father always ate right before bed,” he answered. “And always at the kitchen counter standing.” The image of his mother bending in front of the stove, setting the dial on warm, and placing a plate of food inside for his father returning to him. “I try not to think about it,” he said.

“Because you’re too terrified of facing the past,” Dr. Michaels told him. “But you don’t need a psychiatrist to tell you dinner, in your family, was a sad affair. Your mother should, at the very least, have insisted he be present for the evening meal.”

Finn turned inward. Unconsciously, he rubbed the top of his left arm. “I looked up the word ‘scar’ the other night,” he said, and stood in the center of the room. “If you trace the history, the word has its origin in the Greek *eshórā*, which means the scab formed after a burn, hearth, or fireplace.”

“Mothers are associated with warmth, a hearth,” Dr. Michaels told him.

Uncertain why he had got up, he went to the bookshelf and took down the wooden sailboat. “I feel like we keep going in circles,” he said. Turning back, he saw the rigidity in Dr. Michaels’ body, a bracing against something to come that Finn couldn’t place. “What is it?” he asked.

“You’re the second patient to take that sailboat down in thirteen years,” Dr. Michaels answered.

He placed the sailboat back on the shelf. “I didn’t mean to disturb it,” he said, and returned to his seat. “You said last session that I remind you of someone.”

“We’re out of time,” Dr. Michaels told him.

Walking past his chair, Finn looked down at the notes he had taken. The notes were in code and he only had time to make out the last line: *Sylvia/ Sophia damage < Eve/ mother damage < re: love → re: pain: keeps touching left arm, wounded stroking, what began at 16?*

Eve said two things the day she moved out: “You stole my youth;” and “no one will ever love you.” And there she was on the steps of his brownstone eight months after their separation. He had always loved her eyes. They reminded him of ancient Egyptian paintings. “You’re smoking again?” he asked, and leaned against the railing.

“You’re an hour late,” she told him.

The cats circled in their carriers and made low guttural meows. A week ago, she had called him. “My place isn’t that big. I’ve got the dog, too. Please, Finn.” He had agreed and they made a date to drop off the cats, January 31st, a date he had forgotten.

“Not doing well?” she asked, and stamped out her cigarette with a turn of her ankle. “You never used to forget anything.”

He had spent the afternoon reading his etymology book. The clean type, the neat lined entries, even the weight of the book had a calming effect on his nerves. He craved order and routine. And, like every other day that week, he went out at exactly five fifteen to an Irish pub around the corner for a few pints of beer and a bowl of clam chowder, the combination having an odd settling effect on his stomach.

He opened the heavy doors of his brownstone. Inside his apartment, they placed the carriers on the floor and Eve looked around. “You found this place on your own?” He listened to the sound of her heels on the wood floors. She unbuttoned her coat, her blouse more open and revealing than when they had been together.

“Surprised?” he asked.

“For some reason, I imagined you in a tiny basement apartment,” she said, and touched the ends of her hair. A habit she had when nervous or excited.

“You look good,” he told her.

“Don’t,” she said, and narrowed her eyes, daring him to say more.

“You used to accept my compliments.”

“I used to accept a lot of things,” she told him, and scrutinized a split end. “Are you going to offer me a drink?”

In the galley kitchen, he opened a bottle of red wine. “I just realized,” Eve called. “I’m late meeting friends.” He found her at the front door buttoning her coat. She took one last look around, her mascara accentuating her blue eyes. “Maybe some other time,” she said, and left without another word. Finn opened the carriers, both cats disappearing under the bed. The same bed he and Eve had slept in as man and wife.

He poured the bottle of red wine down the drain and fixed himself a drink. At his desk, he smoked and watched the women in high heels clip down the sidewalk and toward the bars and restaurants on Newbury Street. A young woman passed in knee-high leather boots.

A few months before their separation, he had driven Eve to dinner, the lights above the highway sweeping across her legs in a short skirt and knee-high leather boots. Eve’s cellphone rang and, after a brief conversation, she opened the passenger window and threw her cellphone out on the highway.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“My mother,” she said. “She found a dress that would look perfect on me. But they were sold out of anything above a size four, so she bought one for herself instead.”

During dinner, Eve pushed her food around her plate and had four glasses of red wine.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

She forced a smile. “I ruin everything.”

Outside his apartment windows, the women continued to walk toward Newbury street. He wished Eve had stayed. He wished they had too much to drink together. That they’d made love and he could feel her again. That sharing a cigarette afterward, they both said “sorry” and meant it.

Eliza emerged from under the bed. She was fourteen and big for a female cat. She had gracious long hair, tufted ears, and looked like a lynx. He had picked her out as a kitten from a box outside a grocery store and brought her back to the apartment he and Eve shared as students.

During their sophomore year, they had found a cramped studio in the big sunny state of Colorado. They were married at the age of twenty-six and Finn went on to pursue his masters and then doctorate. After accepting a teaching position, they moved east, Finn regretting a return to where he had grown up.

On his leather couch, he clicked his tongue and George emerged. He climbed into Finn’s lap and wagged his bobcat tail. He had been born that way and, when he wagged his tail, there was something obscene about the movement. Finn liked to think he was Oscar Wilde reincarnated. George liked to lie between Eve’s breasts when she stretched out to watch television. Something she did with more and more frequency, especially in the later years of their marriage.

His cellphone chimed and he read the message. It was a text from Sophia: “Meursault makes me think about you.” She had been reading the book he’d lent her from his office. He imagined her falling asleep with the book open and pressed over her breasts. The book’s pages now infused with the scent of youth, hand lotion, and perfume.

Despite his better judgment, he returned Sophia’s text: “What do you make of the character of Marie?” he asked.

“I want to be her,” Sophia wrote back.

At his mantle, he took down his hardbound edition of *The Stranger* and flipped through the pages. It didn’t take him long to find the lines about Marie as they had been underlined in pencil. “I wanted her so bad when I saw her in that pretty red-and-white striped dress and leather sandals. You could make out the shape of her firm breasts, and her tan made her face look like a flower.”

Late Saturday night, he drew himself a bath, a beer and ashtray on the tiled floor beside him. He blew smoke toward the ceiling. The hot water easing his nerves, he closed his eyes and rested his left arm on the edge of the tub. The neat row of scars along his forearm caught beneath the overhead light.

His cellphone rang and he stood, the hot water slipping down his body. He took his phone from the glass shelf above the sink. "I've had too much to drink," Sophia told him. "I'm just around the corner at the Lemon Drop."

"What are you doing at a bar?" he asked.

"I have a fake id," she said. "Can you come get me?"

He dressed and found Sophia waiting for him by the stairs outside the Lemon Drop. She shivered in her short skirt and thin coat, her hair curled and her makeup more allowing than he remembered.

Inside the bar, men and women in their late twenties and early thirties made pronounced gestures, their loud voices silent behind the windows. "What are you doing in my neighborhood?" he asked.

"I don't want to be alone," she said. "Do you?"

She stumbled in her heels and took his left arm. Two men exited the bar and looked at her without shame. "It's freezing," he told her. "Let me get you inside." He took in the feeling of her hand and remembered the lessons from his mother. "You should be on my other side when we're walking together."

She moved to his right arm. "Why?" she asked.

“A man should always be closest to the street,” he answered. “How’d you get my address?”

She pushed against his shoulder, her breath hot with alcohol. “It’s written on the inside cover of the book you lent me. So is your cell number.”

“I do that with all my books,” he said, the fact having slipped his mind.

They walked down the sidewalk toward his apartment. “I wonder if people think we’re a couple,” she said, and tightened her hand around his arm. He opened the doors of his brownstone and led her inside. Afraid of being seen by another tenant, he hurried Sophia past the cluttered hallway. In the entry, he took her thin coat, her hand brushing against his. “I imagined you lived in a place like this,” she said.

She moved into the main room. He listened to the sound of her heels across the wood floors, her presence lifting the emptiness in the room. “It gets lonely,” he told her.

Sophia sat on the leather couch and rubbed her shoulders. “I’m still freezing.”

He made them a fire against the cold and brought her a glass of water and two aspirin. “Let me call you a cab,” he said. “It’s a long walk back to campus.” She patted the empty seat beside her. “Sit with me,” she told him, and tucked her hair behind her ears. “*Please.*” He joined her on the couch and she kissed him.

“You’ve had too much to drink,” he said. Sophia wrapped her hand around his and kissed him again. “I’ve wanted to kiss you before tonight.” He traced the edge of her skirt and felt the warmth of her skin, a slight shiver at his touch. “You’re my student,” he whispered, and pulled back. “Not tonight,” Sophia told him, and took off her sweater.

He ran his fingers along the strap of her bra and the space between her breasts. She hiked her skirt around her waist and he caressed her inner thigh. “Just a minute,” she told him, and finished undressing by the bed, her body illuminated by the light from the fire.

He stood beside her and she undid his belt buckle. He noticed she had faint freckles between her breasts, but the mood was over. Looking at her, he could no longer distinguish Sophia from his past. And, in the short distance between them, he realized he was taking something that wasn't his to take. He took her hands and placed them by her side. “I can't,” he said.

She scrambled into her clothes. At the front door, she turned back. Her bottom lip trembled but no words came out. She hesitated for a moment, her mascara smeared, and pushed her way out into the night, the front door left open behind her.

Finn pulled on his wool coat and hat. He walked down Beacon Street, the earth rotating toward the sun. He turned up his collar against the bitter cold and made his way to the edge of the Boston Garden. The moment between night and day lasted for only a few minutes, the feeling that he was unnecessary, even unwanted, coming over him.

He had spent the night awake, the smell of Sophia's perfume lingering in his studio. Sometime around five in the morning, he turned on a lamp against the darkness and stoked the fire. He turned to the notes Camus made before his death at the age of forty-six. Many of the notes were just snippets of ideas, a brief phrase catching his attention: "... her body conceals her."

He watched the sun light up the equestrian statue of George Washington and went back the way he had come. At a convenience store, he entered the small and warm entry. A group of teenagers pushed past him. "Excuse me," one of them said.

"Sorry," he told them, and moved to the rack of magazines to give himself a destination. In the corner, there was a stack of spiral notebooks. They were the same notebooks his students brought to class, some of his female students adding hearts, stars, and smiley faces on their covers. He picked out a dark green notebook and paid the clerk.

Back at his studio, he opened his new journal and stared at the blank page. Since adolescence, he kept journals only to abandon them after a few pages. He had the vague memory of candlelight and the image of a pencil with the tip broken off. Deep down, he hated the act of writing about himself. But terrified of the objects in his studio, as if he had

never seen them before, he tried to find the words to echo, at the very least, what was in his head.

February 5th, 7:48 a.m.

After Sophia left, I began research in the early hours. My etymology book had no entry for the word 'uncanny,' the word holding a sense of otherness for me. I was drawn to the word again because of what happened between us last night, which I can't explain in full. Only that I feel a sense of being other and a stranger in my own home.

In my etymology book, 'canny' has nothing more than a reference to the word's date of origin, 1637, and the old meaning of 'to know, know how.' Not even a mention of the German root of the word. It's as if the editors were afraid, too scared of uncanny's history, its power, the way it holds simultaneous and contradictory meanings.

The German root of 'canny' begins with the word 'heimliche,' which means 'home-like.' Although the word 'heimliche' has another meaning 'to be secretive' and also the colloquial meaning of 'quietly.' 'Unheimliche' means 'un-home-like,' but also means 'frightening or sinister.'

For me, the words, despite some opposite meanings, share similar concepts. As if to be home-like is to remain quietly secretive and to be un-home-like is to catch on to this necessity, to catch on to the quiet and sinister nature of all homes and to be frightened by this truth. To learn that the concept of home, of warmth and security, is maintained by lying. Growing up, my father told us never to tell anyone outside the family what went on under his roof or we would betray the whole. The secrets of my home enforced by my father's lies.

In English, Canny has many meanings: 'knowing, lucky, cunning, endowed with the occult, tidy and good.' The word uncanny means: 'occult, careless, strange or unfamiliar, and seemingly supernatural.' Look at the overlap on occult references between two words that are, by the negation of 'un-', supposed to be opposite words. Amazing and shows the legacy that all languages and their history, regardless of tongue, share in common.

I need to uncover the history of my family and the secrets we keep from ourselves. The English language a historical accident, the accidental coming together of Old and Middle French, Latin, Greek, with the infusion of Scandinavian. The old meanings and roots buried, but not lost.

Ever since Sophia left, I can't shake this feeling, as if every object in my apartment were unfamiliar to me and yet the last thing I want to do is go back outside. The uncanny leading to ennui, to the absurd desire for a wish. Who am I? What do I really want?

He arrived to class late, his students waiting for him. A nauseous haze settled in as he unpacked his belongings at the front desk. He looked out across their faces, Sophia absent, and addressed his class: “What happens after the story ends?”

“After the story ends?” a student asked.

“Yes,” Finn said, and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“I’m not even sure what happened in the story,” another student told him.

He turned to Hemingway’s *Hills Like White Elephants*. “It’s not really an operation at all,” he read. “A few lines later the American says to the girl. ‘I’ll go with you and I’ll stay with you the whole time. They just let the air in and then it’s all perfectly natural.’”

Ethan raised his hand. “They’re talking about an abortion,” he said.

Finn flipped forward in the story and kept reading. “The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees. ‘And we could have all this,’ she said. ‘And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible.’ What happens after the story ends?” he asked again.

“She leaves the American,” a female student said.

“Or he leaves her,” Ethan countered.

“Either way, they are not staying together,” Finn told them. “And yet we are never told directly, in the context of the story, what will happen to them. And I have never, having

taught this story many times, had anyone argue that these two ‘lovers’ will end up anything but apart.”

“Why are you so interested in what happens after the story ends?” Ethan asked.

“Because the stories worth reading are the ones that don’t end,” Finn answered. “The words on the page might stop, but we keep listening, because we want to fill in what comes next with our own disappointments, hopes, limitations, and desires.” He checked his watch. “You can go early,” he told his class. Before his students left the room, they placed their first essay assignments on his desk.

Ethan hesitated and handed Finn a second folder. “Sophia asked me to turn in her essay,” he said, and pulled at the strings of his hoodie. “See you next class?” he asked, a puzzled look on his face.

“Next class,” Finn said, and stuffed his students’ essays inside his book bag.

He walked to the station and boarded the outbound train, the green line making its slow and halting way toward the suburbs. “Nothing ends,” he said to himself, his mind fixed on the image of Sophia’s empty seat. At the last stop, he kept his eyes on the ground, his pace quick beneath him, until he was inside Dr. Michaels’ waiting room.

He tried leafing through the dated magazines on the end table. Unable to sit still, he rose and paced the room. In the yard, the oak held its place. He was angry at himself. Angry he couldn’t find his own way forward without Dr. Michaels’ help. As if, on some level, he had failed to live his own life.

Dr. Michaels opened the doors to his office and took his seat. His eyes were clear, his body alert and present.

“Sleeping better?” Finn asked.

“I lie down for an hour, every four or five hours, whether I feel like sleeping or not. Reminds me of the war,” Dr. Michaels said, and took up his notepad. “But it helps.”

Finn looked out the sliding glass doors. “Everything feels open here,” he said.

“Worried about who is looking in or your constant need to look out?” Dr. Michaels asked.

“Sophia came by Saturday night,” Finn said, and adjusted the strap of his watch. “I should have known better. But it’s like I don’t know myself anymore.”

Dr. Michaels let his eyes drop to the floor. “What happened?” he asked in a low voice.

“We fooled around,” Finn told him. “Then it wasn’t her I was seeing. She reminded me of the past, like I was reaching out for someone else, so I stopped.”

Outside, night fell and the room became dark, but Dr. Michaels remained seated. Only the desk lamp by his side lit the room. “You should have stopped,” he said, “but why create this mess in the first place?”

“It’s like the women I’ve known get mixed up in my mind,” Finn answered.

“All Sophia will see is her want and your rejection,” Dr. Michaels told him, his face illuminated beneath the desk lamp. “As long as you keep hiding from yourself, you’ll hurt those around you.” He turned back through his notes. “Tell me about your left arm?”

“Sophia missed class today,” Finn said, and avoided the question. “I dread my office hours. I keep expecting a knock from university officials. For some reason, I picture a short man and a woman with a severe bun and a clipboard.”

“But she hasn’t told anyone?”

“As far as I can tell, no,” Finn answered. “After she left, I couldn’t sleep so I re-read *The First Man*.”

“I haven’t read it,” Dr. Michaels said.

“It was Camus’ last manuscript,” Finn told him. “There’s a scene where Jacques smiles at a young woman on a platform as the train departs, the movement in opposite directions a symbol for lost love.” He crossed the room to turn on the lights. “I hadn’t thought about it until now, but when I was looking at Sophia, I saw the image of Cassie, my babysitter.”

“Curious how your babysitter comes to mind now that you’ve rejected Sophia,” Dr. Michaels said. “Did you desire Cassie?” he asked.

“I spent an entire summer dreaming about the right moment to kiss her, but I was too terrified.” Finn went to the bookshelf and straightened the stacks of folders and old newspapers on the shelves. “Last night after dinner, I washed the dishes. I dried the chef’s knife and put it away in the drawer, like I always do.”

“Rather than leave it on the rack to dry?” Dr. Michaels asked.

“I kept going back and checking the drawer over and over and over again. I couldn’t stop. I’d say ‘Finn the drawer is closed,’ but it didn’t help.”

“Do you talk to yourself often?”

“I can’t stand it when sharp objects are left out,” Finn said. “But I couldn’t convince myself the drawer was closed. Eve asked me about it once. I told her why, but she didn’t want to listen.”

“Listen to what?” Dr. Michaels asked. Finn approached him and pulled back the sleeve of his sweater. Dr. Michaels studied the neat row of scars that ran along his forearm.

“Always your left arm? Nowhere else?” he asked.

“Always my left arm,” Finn answered.

Dr. Michaels scanned through his notes, the room silent as he put the pieces together.

“You started at sixteen, the same age you began seeing Sylvia,” he said. “What did you use?”

“Razor blades,” Finn told him, and returned to his seat. Having let out the words, he felt, for the first time, he might be able to rest in Dr. Michaels office. “You mind if I stay here for a while?”

“Stay as long as you want,” Dr. Michaels told him.

“You don’t have other patients?” Finn asked.

“Only you,” Dr. Michaels answered, and shuffled across the room. “Your physician is a good friend. He said one of his patients needed help. So I decided to come out of retirement.” At the doors leading into his house, he turned back to Finn. “I’ll see you next session,” he said, and shut the doors behind him. Finn closed his eyes in the empty room, but no rest came. Unsure of what was to come, he turned out the lights and made his way home.

For the next twenty-four hours, he sat alone in the stillness of his apartment. The curtains drawn and the lights out until, late Saturday night, he woke up stiff on his leather couch. He rubbed his eyes and searched through the box of family photographs on his coffee table.

As if by accident, he was drawn to the central women in his life. He pushed the photographs of his mother, Cassie, Sylvia, and Eve together. Each woman had straight brown hair and a sadness in their eyes. A quality they shared with Sophia.

He took up the photograph of his babysitter. Cassie was thirteen at the time, her big brown eyes looking back at the camera. She used to watch him and Thomas bathe as boys. She'd sit on the closed toilet lid like their mother and tap her foot absentmindedly on the floor, her hand moving the warm water between them. Later, she'd teach Finn to smoke on the Nickerson's weathered dock. In a black bikini, she'd slip into the lake, Finn watching the trail of her bubbles until she surfaced.

In the photograph, Cassie had been standing in front of his house before his father had the addition put on. She stood in front of that old screened-in porch where Finn, as an adult, wished he could have one more evening to sit and watch the summer breeze. Over time, even when not babysitting, Cassie began spending most of her time with his family. He traced his finger along the edge of her picture.

It had happened in August. The family gathered on the porch, an hour of late summer light left until dusk. His maternal grandmother, who they called "Barnstable Nana," drank her Old Fashioneds. Roxbury Grandma, his father's mother, hummed to herself in the little green kitchen, the hems of her four skirts at her thick calves, her obese Beagle Dickie and

Finn's dog Helena at her heels waiting for the scraps she'd drop and coo: "Who's a good mutters? Who's a good babushka?"

That night, Cassie had been with them. She lay back on the foldout couch on the porch, her shorts riding up to reveal the inner white of her thighs. In the wicker chairs, his mother and Barnstable Nana wore neatly pressed slacks and short sleeve blouses, their hair styled, colored and neat, their makeup, nails, and eyebrows done with care. The way they always were, even on a lazy summer evening.

He had pushed Cassie aside to make room for him on the couch. She moved an inch to the right, their bodies pressed against each other. He studied the soft brown hairs on her forearms, the rise of her small breasts, and the way she squinted even when thinking about things in her own head. "You ever hear what the guy said after he felt up the young virgin?" she asked.

She made a big production of pretending to pull a single hair from her head and then held it tight between her fingers. "Go on, run your finger over it," she said. Finn tried and gave up. "There's no hair there," he told her. Cassie laughed and laughed. At the time, he only guessed something sexual had happened.

"You want to play scouts?" she asked.

Finn, Cassie, and his brother Thomas filed out of the porch and snuck around the side of the house. "The enemy is just over there," she told them. "We need to see if they intend to harm the queen." The three moved in single file across the lawn, climbed the oak by the side of the garage, and scrambled toward the apex. At the top of the roof, they peered over the edge and Cassie, in a flash, fell headlong down. She landed on the railroad tie of the flower bed. Finn and Thomas watched her wriggle around in agony and gasp for breath.

Finn went to the windows of his studio apartment. He could feel the cold air pour through the gaps. When Cassie fell off the roof, he had been confused. She had been the one to teach him how to climb trees, how to scramble up a roof, and how to jump from a high spot and roll to lessen the fall. She never faltered in that regard.

Outside his apartment window, he watched the snow come down. He remembered the look on Cassie's face before she went over. As a child, he thought the look was one of panic. But standing in front of the high window, it was as if she were asking him to reach out and stop her from wanting to fall.

He and Thomas had cried out for their parents. Their father scooped Cassie up and brought her inside. At the kitchen table, Roxbury Grandma poured her a glass of water and their mother brought her two aspirin. "You okay?" Finn asked, sensing, even then, that something inside Cassie had broken. "I think so," she said back.

He walked her down the driveway and waved goodbye. That night, he and Thomas pulled out the foldout couch on the porch and climbed in together. Finn listened to the rustling of the leaves, a fight broke out between opossums, and Thomas turned over for sleep, Finn lying awake and blinking up into the darkness.

Outside his apartment windows, the snow continued to collect on the trees. He turned away and flipped through the pages of his etymology book for the word 'self,' surprised to find the word had no Latin or Greek origin. The word developed instead out of the Scandinavian origin *sjālf*, before it evolved into the Old English, *self*, *seolf*, *sylf*, meaning 'one's own person, not another, same (about 725, in *Beowulf*).'

He lit a smoke and turned back for the word 'inflicted.' The word had the Latin origin of *īnflīctiōndm*, meaning a 'striking back against.' He pushed the meanings of the words

together until, in his mind, self-inflicted became ‘a striking against one’s own person.’ He couldn’t say if Cassie had fallen off the roof on purpose. But he recognized a shared hurt, the damage burrowing inward until it could only be expressed by a striking out against what they had become.

He tried to forget the rest. During high school, Cassie became promiscuous, the lanky men pulling into the drive, the slipping grades, the empty bottles of vodka. She’d manage to get off to college, but she’d have a nervous breakdown during her freshman year, her roommate finding her in the fetal position and unresponsive.

After a brief stay in a mental institution, she’d come home again and drink stale coffee in her room and smoke cigarettes. Between drags, she’d tell Finn about her new desire to travel across the country hitch-hiking, that her father used to beat her, and that she never felt, no matter how hard she tried, that her father ever loved her.