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## This sleep of reason.

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THIS SLEEP OF REASON

By

Brit Thompson  
B.A., University of Louisville, 2013

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
in English

Department of English  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2016

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THIS SLEEP OF REASON

By

Brit Thompson  
B.A., University of Louisville, 2013

A Thesis Approved on

April 7, 2016

by the following Thesis Committee:

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Ian Stansel

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Karen Hadley

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John Gibson

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my project director, Ian Stansel, for his invaluable guidance, mentorship, and lessons on the craft of creative writing. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Karen Hadley and John Gibson, for their comments, direction, and assistance given during my time in graduate school. I would also like to thank my grandparents, Larry and Sharon Davis, who have been pillars of support throughout my time spent in the academy. I would also like to thank any friends who listened to me talk about this project at every waking moment.

## ABSTRACT

### THIS SLEEP OF REASON

Brit Thompson

April 7, 2016

This creative thesis encompasses two features: 1) a critical component that contextualizes and supports the second component, 2) a short Southern Gothic novella. Critical analyses of Flannery O'Connor's fiction and discourse about the genre illustrate where inspiration was drawn, and how the project's creative component contributes to this genre. The project explores anxieties of displacement, isolation, and a stuck-in-the-past-temporality, as shown through the vessel of characters' houses. The novella is decentralized in form and point-of-view—fragmentary excerpts of technological communications are utilized to illustrate how the protagonist's problems are literally always on hand. The project argues that because the south remains a liminal space, it chooses to be haunted by the past, as past traumas are tied to homes and bodies—the past remains inescapable and harmful unless one forgives trespasses, thus becoming unstuck in the past, able to move forward, and carve out a less toxic future.



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## INTRODUCTION

This *Sleep of Reason* is a novella that explores the concept of the fragmented family through two family units: the Ripleys and the Mathesons. Owen Ripley is the story's protagonist who has isolated himself from his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky by pursuing multiple higher education degrees at out-of-state schools. The novella shows him coming home during the winter holiday break. In an attempt to further divorce himself from his own family, Owen visits with the Mathesons—a brother and sister who own an antiques shop that he discovers by happenstance. From there, Owen develops an obsession with the house and the mysterious brother who is never home. It is later revealed that the Mathesons have their own dysfunctional past. The novella is concerned with the past and how it is inescapable, as it is apparent in many works penned by Southern authors. This updated version of a southern gothic tale suggests that characters' pasts are totally inescapable because they confine themselves within the walls of homes that not only collect items from the past, but are haunted by whatever legacies that get left behind. This creative component also argues that regardless of how decentralized and fragmented a family can become, that there must always be something redemptive, particularly forgiveness, for if not, it is a family's inability to reconcile that brings chaos, tragedy, or doom to characters and forgiveness is a way of not only making amends, but becoming unstuck in the past, able to move forward, and to carve out a less toxic future.

Specifically, 'This Sleep of Reason' is set in the southern end of Louisville. Because Kentucky culture is massively dependent upon its regions, it's hard to identify all of the state as completely Southern or Midwest. Louisville itself takes on more progressive or liberal characteristics, similar to Cincinnati or larger cities, but there are still spaces even in the city that are deemed more southern and conservative. Kentucky also shares aspects with the states that are typically tied to the Southern Gothic genre (Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia). Perhaps most notably is architecture, which is crucial for this thesis's creative component. The houses presented figuratively function as bodies and as extensions of the families represented in the text. These old homes full of colorful histories insist and perpetuate the notion that the south is a site that continues to be haunted by the past.

The Ripley and Matheson houses represented in the thesis's creative component aren't supernaturally haunted, but because they are situated as trappings that hold items belonging to the past or items belonging to those that have passed, are sites that haunt the individuals inhabiting them. The home in 'This Sleep of Reason' also functions as the one last marketable item an individual or family owns, but it comes with a catch. For the Ripleys, they live in an area where the circulation and consumption of heroin is an issue. Heroin addiction is now a national epidemic. It is entirely problematic in Louisville and is considered to have contributed to its slight urban decay, particularly in the part of town that Owen is from where it is not unusual to hear about familiar people at very young dying from an overdose.

The Ripleys have not changed Owen's younger brother, Quinn's, room since he died from a heroin overdose. And Ella, with all her wealth and assets tied to the

Matheson family home, is stuck in a farmhouse full of bad memories and familial violence both enacted upon her and of which she has enacted upon her brother. The houses are not glamorous, yet the Ripleys have prestige because they own their home, unlike a good deal of people from their part of town who are in profound debt, who live in trailer parks or apartments and are degraded for now owning homes. And the Mathesons' home functions as an antiques shop/business.

This piece, through its representation of the Matheson house, strives to deromanticize the old curio shop trope. Though the Mathesons seem like eccentric characters and though their jumbled house could have been portrayed as quirky, in reality, it is sad. And it is sad to think that Ella never really got to leave, either. Irving Malin in his book *New American Gothic*, discusses the (southern) gothic genre and claims that its characters, "often they enjoy the imprisonment" (80) of their own homes. In old Gothic with Romantic themes, one gets the notion that characters enjoy their misery and melancholy, finding something not only beautiful, but True, in their suffering. However, in American Gothic (and particularly Southern Gothic), suffering characters is visceral, uncomfortable, and oftentimes infuriating or sickening.

Recent American Gothic suggests it is not the house that is haunted, but instead its past, and the violence and crimes that have been enacted upon it. Often, these are places of imprisonment—characters cannot escape these places because of how their livelihood is so entrenched and tied into them. Owen is imprisoned in the Matheson house the first night that he's there—the bad winter weather is what traps him. And he finds himself again entrapped within his parents' house the next night out of obligation more than anything else. It isn't until speaking with his mother in the bathroom while she

is getting ready for work (an intimate space and an intimate and personal act to witness) that he is actually looking forward to seeing her when she comes home and when he comes back home that night after finishing Christmas shopping. We also know that the Matheson house acts as a tomb or mausoleum for the past. Ella tells Owen that the house has an attic and basement—the places of which everything on the show room are from, indicating that the attic and basement are tombs heaped with junk and the past.

An anxiety explored in ‘This Sleep of Reason’ through the vessel of Ella concerns suffering and the kind of space she is allowed to take up as a woman. That she owns the Matheson house—she, not her brother, inherited it—allots her capital and power. However, she is still very limited, and has become bitter because of her immobility. I am anxious about women’s places in certain parts of Louisville and how like going back home is like going back in time concerning gender roles, which are still staunchly traditional. Most women are in the workforce, but their lives are very much still wrapped around the home and their identities are strongly tied to their family. Ella’s mother instilled in her that it was George destined to go on a journey to school and do great things and that Ella must stay in the home like her mother—a cyclical, suffocating domesticity.

Owen’s mother’s independence is derived from her going where she wants on her own and buying things that she wants for the house or for herself. Though her freedom is tied up in participating in consumerism, it is one of the few activities in which she is able to divorce herself from catering to her husband. If reason is noted as being asleep, then that allows unreasonable things to happen—violence, trauma, and obsessions, hence familial drama and Owen obsessing over another family.

To continue with haunted sites in the south, it is important to note how Malin also asserts in *New American Gothic* that, “the body itself is haunted” (97), indicating that the body is an extension of the house and families that characters come from. They always carry dreadful aspects of their identities through the vessel of their bodies. It also suggests that because of how visible bodies are (especially non-normative or grotesque bodies), that normative characters wind up intrigued by or fearful of them. Mark Boren, in his article ‘Flannery O'Connor, Laughter, and the Word Made Flesh,’ indicates that though O’Connor’s disfigured and grotesque characters suffer, they are the product of acceptance (120). The obvious haunted body in ‘This Sleep of Reason’ is Ella’s brother, George. Once Owen sees George’s disfigured face, the attraction is unmistakable. Owen and George have a conversation about how George finally accepted his now non-normative face. Not only that, but George finally understands that his exterior is not as monstrous as his interior. George’s acceptance for what he has become and awareness of his internal workings illustrates change in him, as well as his ability to forgive his sister from taking away what he considered to be the best thing about himself—his physical attractiveness.

George is not treated as an abject character and that may have to do with his male privilege. Owen sees a photo of young George Matheson and is instantly smitten. It is the enigmatic aura surrounding George that keeps bringing Owen back to the Matheson house, as well as the need to find material for his dissertation proposal. When Owen finally meets George, there is nothing about his deformity that disgusts Owen. In fact, he is even more intrigued and attracted to the older man. George jokingly asks Owen if he would take him on a date and Owen hesitates because he doesn’t know how George

would react to his response in the affirmative. There is nothing about George that should indicate homophobia—in fact, he seems a queer character himself—however, Owen remembers that he is in the south and that even though it is 2015, he could potentially be in a dangerous space, especially concerning how isolated they are in this house.

Boren asserts in his article that we must look beyond O'Connor's grotesque or othered characters as literary devices, "What is important is the freak, him or herself—that is, how he or she appears in the text. The image of the freak is a legacy of Southern literature," (121). He cites the 'freak' as a legacy to Southern literature, however, in recent iterations of the genre, the 'freak' (or others who could be considered freakish) has been presented in less exploitative ways and instead serves as a mirror for the reader to reflect on biases about Others and to recognize humanity in these figures.

And we really must stop looking beyond the 'freak' in O'Connor's work. However, I do not prefer the term 'freak' as it has an offensive (and abelist) connotation, but I will use it because of that is what he uses. When writing about a 'grotesque' body, it is important to keep in mind to not be exploitative or use abelist terminology. O'Connor avoids doing this with how she presents Joy/Hulga in 'Good Country People'. It is only through other characters and their perceptions of her where abelism or pity comes out, particularly with her mother who infantilizes her. Hulga lost her leg in a hunting accident as a child (page) and her mother always sees her as a child regardless of her being in her thirties as well as holding a PhD degree in philosophy. "It was hard for Mrs. Hopewell to realize that her child was thirty-two now and that for more than twenty years she had only one leg" (274) and then she laments that Hulga has, "never danced a step or had any *normal* good times" (274), forcing gendered normativity onto her daughter.

When examining ‘Good Country People’, it is easy to assume that Hulga is being set up the monstrous character because of how her mother perceives her—she even changes her name to an arguably uglier-sounding one. The women in the text judge her for letting herself go in a way—her mother constantly ruminates upon Joy not being *totally* ugly or anything, but she doesn’t do what she can to make her more pleasing to look at. Too, upon reading Mrs. Hopewell’s perceptions against the grain, O’Connor does a fantastic job at showing us that it is not Hulga’s non-normative body that is monstrous, but those around her, particularly Mrs. Freeman’s obsession with gruesome stories. ‘Good Country People’s other monster is Manley Pointer, who collects bits of people, as it is initially noted when he takes Hulga’s glasses (287). He instantly fetishizes Hulga because of her leg that he inevitably takes from her, which relinquishes her power. Too, Hulga is punished for not being like the good country people celebrated in the story, as her atheism and worldviews challenges the way that things are ‘supposed’ to be in the world she lives in. Owen does something similar with George in ‘This Sleep of Reason’—George becomes even more handsome and exotic to Owen because of his grotesque face. However, instead of collecting a body part from him, he becomes intrigued with George’s mystery and wants to find and collect items that belong to George to better understand him.

The characters are flawed by the awful things they’ve done to one another and by their strange habits (Owen’s Adderall abuse when there are people who actually need it and he does not; George’s collection of students; Owen’s father not appreciating the son that is still alive; Ella’s cutting her brother’s face), but their saving graces have to do with how they are still able to love the people they have these relationships with. Both the



Ripley and Matheson family units are fractured. And Owen is able to love the idea of George. There is something captivating about this man, as Ella states, “everyone loved him.”

In the second chapter of his book, Malin discusses the destruction of the family unit by the hand of the protagonist. We can examine O’Connor’s heroine in ‘Good Country People’ as doing this. Hulga changes her name from Joy, rejecting everything her mother wants her to be,. Hulga holds a PhD in philosophy, which her mother does not understand, thus combined with Joy’s atheism, along with her inability or lack of desire to be like these ‘good country people’ and is rendered deviant. Hulga’s non-normative body disrupts normalcy with regards to O’Connor’s description of the sounds Hulga makes when walking with her ‘fake’ leg. Hulga embraces her body and her different mind and acts as a subversive agent, telling the other women of the house, “If you want me, here I am—LIKE I AM” (274). However, she cannot escape exploitation or being a spectacle by Mrs. Freeman, as Mrs. Freeman has, “a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children” (275) and never tires of hearing how Hulga lost her leg (275).

The fractured family unit, as represented in the Southern Gothic genre, moves beyond just harmful judgments made about individuals in the family, as Malin in his book cites “wars in the family” (79) as perhaps the most toxic aspect about the broken family unit. One can see this in the contentions between generation regarding children and their parents. In ‘Good Country People’ and ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’, these differences usually arise from children moving away from the family and receiving higher education degrees. They then come home and are frustrated by what they see and

how not much has changed. These stories begin with these characters being unemployed and thus driven back home against their will and these stories end with these educated characters being punished. One of the biggest family wars presented in 'This Sleep of Reason' with Owen is his staying in school for so many years, so far away, and not returning for his brother's funeral.

Flannery O'Connor explores the divide between generations within families regarding education by writing from Mrs. Hopewell's impression of her daughter's experience in the academy in 'Good Country People'. Mrs. Hopewell is sure that, "it would have been better if the child had not taken the Ph.D....She was brilliant but she didn't have a grain of sense" (276). This shows how Mrs. Hopewell not only understands how much work Hulga has put into her higher education experience, but she belittles it, and does not *want* to understand. Owen in 'This Sleep of Reason' uses his higher education as a means of escapism. It's easy to wonder if he even cares about higher education at all or that he simply keeps going so that he always has an excuse to not be home, especially when considering the string of emails he receives at the story's start that show how he's not doing well. His father thinks Owen is wasting time in a PhD program; otherwise he would be a real doctor at this point. Owen decentralizes common or traditional understandings and conceptions of the hero-family relationship as once he comes home, he is not actively seeking to dismantle his family unit, but finding reasons to stay. The change in Owen at the end of this story results in him realizing how much he misses his mother and how he can write about his brother and home instead of his dissertation.

The creative component of this thesis considers the haunted traditional Southern literature alongside more contemporary iterations of the genre. Edgar Cantero's 2014 novel, *The Supernatural Enhancements* features protagonist, A. A. is left a huge Virginian home by a distant and now-deceased relative that he never knew. Once he's moved in, he inherits and becomes responsible for the emotional baggage and trauma left behind. The house is set up to be haunted, but Cantero utilizes dark family history as the main proponent of terror, eventually showing that it is actually haunted by the past and reality. Cantero's novel is epistolary in form, utilizing letters, diary entries, and even transcribed security camera footage as major ways of telling the story. This novel inspired the form for 'This Sleep of Reason', as slight epistolary aspects are added to its structure.

Regarding craft (and keeping the above inspiration in mind) the creative component of this thesis focalizes upon form, dialogue, place/setting, and characters above all else. This is because these are the elements that best compliment the (southern) gothic (and horror) genre. It is through the implementation of the above craft elements that tension, immediacy, mystery, and intrigue are fashioned. Jerome Stern in his book *Making Shapely Fiction* discusses the most critical aspects of creative writing craft and asserts that the, "success of [a] story lies in immediacy" (19) and what supports immediacy is tension. Stern cites a story about a visitation as having natural tension because it includes a "character [that] has been invaded" (38). A visitation is a, "shape of intrusion" and disrupts ordinary life (37). The thesis's creative component strives to utilize the aforementioned craft elements and the concept of the visitation in order to construct and maintain tension throughout the narrative.

It is valuable to note with regards to form that the epistolary form is going through a somewhat experimental phase right now because of the different kind of forms being incorporated into texts: emails, blog entries, social media messaging apps, receipts, transcriptions of videos and interviews, as well as more traditional forms (letters, diary entries, etc.). The point of using this kind of form is to offer some intimate insight into characters' internal lives and, therefore, secrets. These forms often reveal information that characters won't reveal to other characters. They can also be sprinkled in as asides. The fragments of emails in 'This Sleep of Reason' are meant to note the change in Owen by the end of the story, particularly concerning where he finally makes a decision about school and finally writes back to his academic advisor.

Though the creative component of this thesis incorporates the types of forms expected to see within the epistolary genre, this is not a true epistolary piece in terms of traditional understandings of the form and possible genre. It is only understandable that it is this type of genre in fiction that these fragmented modes of communication are incorporated. The point of choosing to include emails and blog entries as epistolary artifacts in 'This Sleep of Reason' is to illustrate how pervasive technology and social media is in our lives today. They also to show how cellphones can do so much—it is through his cellphone that Owen stays connected to his anxieties outside of the family unit. He cannot truly enjoy having this innovative device because anytime he looks at it, there are many email notifications in which he needs to respond to. He is avoiding his responsibilities, issues, and anxieties that are literally on hand at all times.

An important facet about his phone relates to how he uses it to update his blog. The interesting thing about his blog is how it keeps him connected to his deceased

younger brother, Quinn. Social media websites have very interestingly become memorial (web)sites and spaces. Much like one would go to a cemetery to visit with a deceased loved one or perhaps even talk with them, people's presences remain on their social media sites and their loved ones may visit it at any time to look at photos and leave comments or messages. Owen and Quinn used to speak all the time vis-à-vis their blogs. When Owen moved away, he would take photos of these new places and post them on his blog so that his brother would be able to see them and comment on them. His brother is the only person who reads his blog and Owen still posts on his blog every now and again as a means of reaching out to his brother.

Owen updating his blog throughout the stories implies that he has an awareness of audience, which adds another layer of character or character persona. His personal blog and emails also allows the reader to look over his shoulder the entire time they are reading the story because they have access to his private information and internal life. The only documented communication Owen has with other entities (apart from dialogue in the third-person narrative) in the text are faceless ones via email, and even then, these are professional and academic relationships—not personal. He is an outsider and is looking for somewhere to belong. It only makes sense that the first people he spends a significant amount of time with, and is intrigued by, are the adult Matheson siblings and that he would want to write about them.

The story is structured in the third person present to show us what Owen is doing, where he is going, and who he is interacting with. The fact that this story is set in 'real time' is meant to add to immediacy and tension. And the fact that Owen has a very new and very advanced cellphone makes it easy to know that his social media activity and

emails are constantly on his mind, which is why the narrative switches back and forth. Owen is also an insomniac, fuelled by his Adderall and caffeine addiction, so he spends most of the time he should be using to sleep on his phone. His habit of squinting is significant because it shows that he unfocused picture of what reality is, and it is also using the bright screen on the cellphone in a dark room on a ritualistic basis every night is helping deteriorate the quality of his sight.

‘This Sleep of Reason’ is constructed in a third-person, present-tense point of view so that the reader can keep a close eye on Owen at all times and watch him in ‘real-time’. For instance, when he goes to look at his phone, we are watching him do things on it. When he spends the night at the Matheson house, we watch him get in bed in the couch and we watch him take out his phone and we watch him compose his blog post. The second time he’s composing is we watch him bring his computer to the Matheson house and he and Ella are interacting and then he starts typing up the conversation they’re having. The reader is constantly looking over his shoulder. The reader knows what Owen is doing and thinking at all times, much like Flannery O’Connor’s omniscient third person narrator. Even though the audience is showed intimate details of Owen’s personal life, they are still fragmented forms of communication, for the blog in its entirety is never shown, nor are the saved messages and conversations held with Quinn.

Technology allows narrative to be fragmented enough to allow these shifts between sections to section so as to decentralize the narrative. Another reason why I chose technological forms because even though we are so sure that technology is intended to make our lives better and easier and while it certainly has its merits because of this it is still a very problematic entity in our contemporary society. Technology is

disruptive and our cellphones and other devices are certainly disruptive sites. Not only that but they are entirely disruptive to the family unit. It is now jokingly implied that children are born knowing how to use cellphones, and events like family dinners are ruined if people are on their cellphones the entire time.

‘This Sleep of Reason’ functions as an updated version of Southern Gothic literature in that its content and issues are akin to traditional stories within the genre, but utilizes an updated style of form by incorporating technology into its narrative structure. What this creative component does is attempt to place Louisville, Kentucky within the realm of the Southern Gothic despite it being ascribed Midwestern characteristics and culture. What this creative piece also does is show that though spaces in the south continue to be haunted by its past, it doesn’t have to remain there, as is evident through how families allow themselves to pick up the fragmented pieces of their unit and move forward with one another. This piece also avoids punishing the educated protagonist, unlike works that come before it within the genre. What this work does for the reader is give them a sense of what a couple of families look like in Louisville as their struggles mirror struggles families in this city face in reality. Finally, though this piece presents characters who have suffered plenty, it breaks out of tropes of endless suffering or suffering for the sake of it, and offers a slightly optimistic ending for all.

THE EMAILS. THE STORM. THE HOUSE. AND THE YOUNG-OLD WOMAN.

From: [paul.radcliffe@history.umass.edu](mailto:paul.radcliffe@history.umass.edu)  
<[paul.radcliffe@umass.edu](mailto:paul.radcliffe@umass.edu)>  
Date: Tuesday, December 1 2015 at 03:49 PM  
To: [owen.ripley@history.umass.edu](mailto:owen.ripley@history.umass.edu)  
<[owen.ripley@history.umass.edu](mailto:owen.ripley@history.umass.edu)>

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Dissertation Prospectus Questions

Owen—just get it to me before I leave for break (the 19<sup>th</sup>). I will be out of town and won't be checking emails then. This is the last break I give you. Please do not miss any future deadlines.

-PR

-----  
From: [gregory.bowles@history.umass.edu](mailto:gregory.bowles@history.umass.edu)  
<[gregory.bowles@umass.edu](mailto:gregory.bowles@umass.edu)>  
Date: Tuesday, December 1 2015 at 07:31PM  
To: [owen.ripley@history.umass.edu](mailto:owen.ripley@history.umass.edu)  
<[owen.ripley@history.umass.edu](mailto:owen.ripley@history.umass.edu)>

Subject: Re: Final Portfolio Question

Hi Owen,

As I've said before (and state on the syllabus), I cannot discuss grades over email. I would be more than happy to meet with you during my office hours before the semester's end.

As for your requested extension, I cannot allow that. Your final portfolio was turned in and incomplete. I'm sorry, but I cannot allow you to make corrections as I have already submitted final grades for the entire class.

If you are worried about your grades affecting your funding, I suggest you visit with your academic advisor to check or discuss the status of your PhD candidacy.



Let me know if you have any questions or if there's anything else you think I may be able to help you with.

Best,

Greg

-----

From: [bursar@umass.edu](mailto:bursar@umass.edu)  
<[bursar@umass.edu](mailto:bursar@umass.edu)>  
Date: Thursday, December 10 2015 at 09:07AM  
To: [owen.ripley@history.umass.edu](mailto:owen.ripley@history.umass.edu)  
<[owen.ripley@history.umass.edu](mailto:owen.ripley@history.umass.edu)>

Subject: Re: Doctoral Funding for Spring 2016 Semester

Dear Mr. Ripley,

Unfortunately, we are unable to share any documentation regarding your account via email. We would be more than happy to assist you with this situation should you make an appointment at the Financial Aid office with a representative there.

We understand the frustration of needing to have your account balance corrected, however, we are unable to adjust the numbers and amounts until the January disbursement date. We apologize for any inconveniences.

Please note that until we receive notification that you are in Good Academic Standing with your academic department (HISTORY) that no academic awards will be dispersed onto your account.

Please contact us once you have been in touch with your Dean. We would be happy to discuss any "next steps" you may need to take.

Thank you,

Bursar's Office  
UMass Amherst

-----

From: [registrar@umass.edu](mailto:registrar@umass.edu)  
<[registrar@umass.edu](mailto:registrar@umass.edu)>  
Date: Friday, December 11 2015 at 12:31PM  
To: [owen.ripley@history.umass.edu](mailto:owen.ripley@history.umass.edu)  
<[owen.ripley@history.umass.edu](mailto:owen.ripley@history.umass.edu)>

Subject: Re: Registration hold question

Mr. Ripley:

A “Happy Friday” to you, as well.

Unfortunately, we cannot lift the registration hold from your account until you have:

- I. Scheduled an appointment to meet with your academic advisor about your next semester’s plan concerning your desired Guided Research course prior to starting your dissertation;
- II. Paid any total amount due to the Bursar’s Office.

We appreciate you reaching out to our office during this difficult time, but there’s nothing we can do until you have assumed your responsibilities to the other offices.

Registrar’s Office  
UMass Amherst

-----

Owen Ripley is driving home for the first time in years.

The sky’s whiteness cracked long ago in Kentucky and let the snow come. In clumps, in blankets. He’s not seen another car for hours. They must’ve disappeared off the expressway. Or maybe busted through guardrails and tumbled down the mountain’s ravine.

Owen breathes, “Oh, Kentucky.” And breathes out again.

His breath is a cloud of fog. He keeps his squinted eyes trained on the amount of road ahead and waves his hand in front of his delicate VW’s wide-open vents. No heat. He glances down quick to find the temperature knobs and then goes back to the road. His thumb and index finger find the small, plastic nub and pushes. But no good—its already as hot and as high as it can go.

The Kentucky Mountains have always frightened him. Their jagged walls may as well be grinning teeth waiting to eat him. The constant fog wrapping around them and the trees is a void or veil waiting to swallow him into a strange and rural Bermuda Triangle.

He's never allowed himself to forget that if it really wanted to, the wilderness here would kill him. He remembers taking trips through the mountains as a boy. His younger brother, Quinn, would stick his head out an unrolled window and try to spot any dead bodies that the close-knit trees may have caught. Owen would slump down in his seat as low as he could go, eyes shut tight, and his index fingers shoved in his ears.

When they were teenagers, Quinn would hang out a window with a digital camera slung around his neck, snapping wildly at the wilderness. When they would get closer to Louisville Metro, he would snap photos of the barns and farmhouses seen from the highway. He would call them ghost farms or ghost towns—most of them no longer had animals grazing the land. Quinn would snap photos of Owen still slumped in his seat, trying to dull his senses.

Owen shivers and snaps shut the last button on his coat. How long ago did the heater go out? Before the storm and he wasn't paying attention. When did the storm start? He kinda just drove straight into it. So, now, should he pull off at the next exit, find a place to bunker down for the night? Go to his parents' in the morning? Or should he brave the storm?

He glances at the bottle of Adderall with the scratched off name label rolling around in the passenger seat. Last one was eight hours ago. One more wouldn't hurt him. His knees take over the steering wheel. He pops the white lid off and fists a pill. He

secures the lid, dry swallows the pill, and grips the steering wheel with slightly numb fingers.

It is silent. The windshield wipers' erratic and rubbery *thwumps* kicks into overdrive. They're struggling to keep a space clear enough for him to see all the way. Scarce streetlights line this two-lane way that wraps a path around and downward from the mountain. Their light is like a candle behind a house's frosted Christmas window.

The snow is thickening on the road without traffic to keep any drivable tracks of slush open. His bad tires crush the snow, but he slides sideways. He corrects himself, heart thudding in his chest. He's never driven long distances in the snow. Amherst does a good job clearing the roads—better than any childhood memories of blizzards or basic snowstorms in Louisville.

He glances at his phone charging in a cup holder. If he could just check the weather app to see how long this was going to last.

His knees take over the steering wheel once more. He slides his finger across the screen. He presses into the app. He glances up at the road. He's coming up on a fork: continue on the highway or get off on this random exit? He waits for the app to refresh. Notices he's still on the Massachusetts page and that he needs to add one for Louisville. He searches for it. Glances back up. He's about to hit the guardrail at the fork in the expressway. He drops his phone, jerks the wheel right, towards to exit ramp. He pumps his breaks, but his locked-up tires slide him down the slick exit.

His heart is thumping hard against his chest and he cannot pull his white-knuckled fingers from the steering wheel. He realizes he's stopped at the base of this exit ramp, but

would be amazed if someone showed up behind him. He checks the rearview mirror. Nothing.

His windshield wipers have stopped straight-up. He clicks them back on and waits for the snow to come off the windshield. There's a sign here at the end of the exit. He cuts his steering wheel towards it. It's unlike the typical ones advertising gas or food or lodging because it's made of wood. Its thick, uneven posts have been belted into the ground. The blizzard has covered its face. Owen fights his way out of his seatbelt, leaves his car door open, and hikes through the snow. He pulls his sleeve over his hand to punch the snow off the sign and reads its crooked face. Its stenciled letters are colored in an aged bone white, stark against the weathered brown wood: Matheson Antiques, 15 mi. A shaky arrow points lazily in the direction of this place.

Owen hops back to his car, beating his sleeves together before getting in to get rid of the snow he plunged into. Some blew into his seat and now his ass is wet. He cannot wait to get on his blog later and bitch about this.

The fifteen-mile drive feels longer than the drive from Massachusetts. The drive takes him off the highway and onto a gravel path and into the woods. The snow isn't thick on the ground here—the trees serve as a canopy to catch the bulk of it. The drive through the woods is the longest part and when he is out of them, there's the house, neatly in the middle of it all. Woods surrounding it on every side, like God just dropped this house from the sky and let it land here.

Owen parks a good distance from the house. He crosses his arms and looks every which way. The hills out behind the woods curve and bend forward. The trees' arthritic fingers threaten to crush he and his car. He gets out of his car to look at the house.

Though the house is beautiful, surely nobody lives there. It's more of a prop than anything by this point. Whoever owned it before hadn't taken the proper measures to preserve it and now it's unfit. The roof has shouldered the burden of holding the bulk of the storm's snow. It sags. The wind blows a chill and the house groans as it settles again and there is a lingering chattering—shingles are breathing with the wind.

Owen frowns and hugs himself. It's a shame the Mathesons were not aware of how trendy farmhouses and rural home aesthetics have become. They could potentially be sitting on money, had they taken better care of it. Or, perhaps they are aware and rugged dereliction is more their style.

Owen climbs the porch steps two at a time and notices the generic OPEN sign hanging behind the storm door before opening that door and knocking. It only says OPEN and doesn't list hours of any kind. He cranes his neck around. Nobody is here. Owen tries the heavy front door's brass knob and it turns loosely in his hand.

He lets himself in, "Hello? It says you're open out here?" He points his thumb in the direction behind his back.

Nothing.

Compared to the glaring whiteness outside, inside is dim. It's tight in here, too. The house looks much bigger outside. Inside, the wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling amount of shelves and just pure *junk* litter the place. Is this a storage unit? Do people on long drives stop here to throw out all the shit in their car? He treads careful and dodges the junk scattered across the wooden floor. He squints at knickknacks and books and clothes.

"Hello?" He turns a corner and finds a small sitting room with a closed off fireplace. In front of the fireplace is a large desk rife with loose papers, receipts, and a

nameplate at the front, touching a cash register. He grabs its corner and tilts it upward enough to read two names in a strict and narrow hand-painted calligraphy script: Ella & George Matheson.

Mismatched chairs wrap around the red-brown table and next to it is a small island with a coffeepot and biscuits.

“Help you?”

He jumps hard and knocks the names off the desk. He turns around to find the voice’s owner. “I got lost, driving. I saw your house. I’m Owen. Ripley.” He offers the tall woman his hand and smiles.

She smiles back. “Well, hello to you Mr. Ripley. I’m Ella, as you probably read there,” she points at the nameplate on the ground.

He stoops to pick it up. He looks it over—no damage done. He places it back on the desk.

Ella is tall and with excellent posture. Her eyes are not like a hawk, but an old schoolmarm as she stares at him. Her tall, thin frame is wrapped in a housedress. She looks sickly or fragile, even old, but she isn’t. She finally shakes his hand.

“George is my brother,” she says, referring to the nameplate. “But he’s not here right now.”

“Oh.” Owen doesn’t know what else to say. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything?”

She waves her hand, dismissing the statement and gestures for him to sit with her in this room. She lowers herself down into a chair by the desk, gripping the armrests like an arthritic woman of over seventy. She can’t be more than fifty. “Oh, no. The sign says I’m open.”

He sits across from her. “And I’m so glad you are. For my sake.”

“Me, too. Be awful to be stuck out in all that mess.”

“Yeah and my heater just kicked out, too.”

“Oh, no. You poor thing.” She pours him a cup of coffee from the island and passes it to him. “I’m afraid coffee is all I have.”

“No, this is wonderful, thank you.” His heart is still racing from the slight accident and from the Adderall. He doesn’t need caffeine, but he wants it. And the coffee is hot and good.

After a few minutes of sitting around and looking at each other, she tells him, “You should have a look around if you like, Mr. Ripley. Might even find something you’d like.”

“I *should* have a look around,” He agrees and stands. “You know, I haven’t been to one of these places since I was a kid? My mother loves them. Always able to find the jewelry right off the bat.”

Ella smiles like she knows what he means.

He wanders into the room with the shelves and sees that this room expands into another and that all of the shelves were probably bought from Target and assembled by hand. He picks up a small, jade elephant. Probably not real jade. But he thinks his mother would like it, anyway. Anything that looks like precious stones and jewelry. Maybe he can come back with cash tomorrow and finish up Christmas shopping.

“What’re your hours today, Miss Matheson?”

“We close up kindly around seven.”

He nods. “Where do you get these things from?” He shows her the elephant he’s



cupping in his palm.

She sighs, but there's still a smile ghosting her face. "My brother would probably tell you he brought it back from *the mystic Orient*. He's just a big storyteller, is all. For him, every little thing in this house has its own story, but I'll tell you the truth. All the rubbish out here is from the attic or basement. Attic or basement, Mr. Ripley. Maybe even the barn or garage." She pauses for a beat. "The only story you need to know about out here, by this house, is that there's a sadness in these woods. Just look at the poor tree out front and the pitiful shape of this house."

He goes to sit the elephant down. Where its feet rest on the shelf are four little circles not covered in dust. "It sounds like you don't like it too much out here."

"I do. It's just. *Smothering*."

He doesn't have anything to say to that, so he walks on, tracing the line of shelves until he sees something that strikes his fancy.

"You from the city, Mr. Ripley?"

"Yes, ma'am. Louisville. Out over around Valley Station."

She chuckles. "That's hardly part of the city, Mr. Ripley. That's almost same as here."

"We have a Fazoli's". He says this like Fazoli's is the pinnacle of civilization.

"You got a Fazoli's out here, Miss Matheson?"

"No, sir, we do not." Her mouth is amused and she's still watching him.

"And I do think me of the city." She doesn't see his blush. "I don't live there anymore. I'm up at school in Massachusetts."

She raises an eyebrow at him. "You a little too old to be in school?"

“I’m getting my doctorate.”

“What’re you gonna be a doctor of?”

He cringes at how much she sounds like his mother. “History.”

She hums in approval. “That’s nice. There’s a lotta history in this country.” She pauses a beat, wrapping her arms around herself. “Too bad George isn’t here. He could give you some history. Maybe even sell you some of this shit, too.” She laughs and they come up on a table full of Christmas figurines, village houses, and ornaments.

“Do you like Christmas, Mr. Ripley? It always comes up real quick.”

“I guess I’m one of those folks who can’t wait for holidays to be over.”

She hums in agreement. “It’s just as well. Especially now. They just keep taking Jesus out of Christmas these days. With those red devil cups at that coffee store.”

He smiles, but there’s nothing here he wants. Ella follows him around for a good while, talking about how *old* these ornaments were and just how *long* they’ve been in the family. He really digs some of them, but his family doesn’t even do a tree.

“You remind me of my brother when he was younger. Tell you what. You can stay the night. There’s no driving in all this now. None of the rooms look as good as they did back when my father put people up, but there’s a pullout couch somewhere. All of this’s supposed to let up in the morning. I expect to see you gone by then if that’s fair. I know the expressway will be cleared, first thing.”

Later in the night, she’s handed him a rolled up quilt. He tucks it under his arm and watches her fluff up the couch, getting it ready for him to sleep on.

“Hey, Ella? May I ask you a question?”

“Of course.” She beats up the pillows.

“I run this blog online and my fans, they love houses like this and love to hear about antique collectors. Would you mind if I interviewed you? We’d only talk about the house and business.”

“Well, if anything, it would pass the time, I suppose. How many people you think’ll see all that?” She raises an eyebrow and goes back to having her arms crossed.

“I’m not sure. I’ve lost a lot of readers throughout the years. I don’t really update as much as I used to. I post things because I’d like to think that my brother would like to see this kind of stuff.”

“That’s sweet,” she sniffs. “Maybe you could use some of this for your schoolwork, too. Bird in hand and all that. Why don’t you come back tomorrow and we’ll do that? And you can pick up a present or anything for your folks.”

He stays, but he doesn’t sleep because of the Adderall and coffee. Instead, when the rooms are dead with only the sound of the grandfather clock trying its best to chug along, he lay on the couch, his face bathed in the sterile glow of his cellphone’s light while he uses too much data posting on social media.

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### **Preservation Fixation**

*One PhD student's ramblings about all things historical*

Owen Ripley

Mobile post on: December 13, 2015 at 4:22 AM

so i crash-landed at this lady's house. its neat but she hasn't taken care of it. id say its been around since the civil war kind of old. almost like. maybe i can pitch this to radcliffe for my prospectus. **RURAL ARCHITECTURE AND ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT.** i have until the 19th, he said. it close, but i have time.maybe ella can help me. she seems lonely and that shed like the company anyway

okay so the snow kept up all night and she let me stay so i wouldn't die on the way to mom's. I'm kipped out on this awful couch and its not until the clock strikes three or four that I'm able to doze off. but then i wake up again because someone is walking around. the walk is stumpy. Like a staggered race to something close. i pulled the heavy blanket the old lady (??) gave me over my head. i kill my phone;s backlight. i hold my breath and lay still, flattening myself almost.

the thumping walk is getting closer. i strain my eyes in the direction it sounds like its coming from, from under the blanket. As it gets closer, the thump is loud, sturdy is it ella? is she moving something? should i come out of the covers to help? keep pretending to sleep? Is she really moving something so heavy and so late at night? the thumping stops at the couch. i'm shitting my pants at this point. my eyes go wide under the blanket.i clench and grind my teeth, bracing himself for the inevitable moment that the blanket will be ripped away from me

But the moment doesn't come and the thumping retreats towards the kitchen. The fridge door opens and then slams shut. There's more thumping, but its distant, and then the house falls silent.

I'm leaving in the morning, but ill definitely be back.

**#owenripleyphd #historicalpreservation #dissertationthoughts #antiques**

## OWEN'S RETURN. QUINN.

His parents are still in the same ranch-style house. He doesn't need to be here every summer to know his mother decorates it: old, wooden porch swing out front with the same four ferns and the same purple Wandering Jew hanging basket.

But for now, all that's out front is a tacky wreath with candy canes and a stuffed fat Santa shoved in the middle.

"It's handmade," she tells him. She pulls a kitchen table chair out for him to sit in.

Owen sits. "Oh, it's nice," he says. He knows she's spent too much on it and exaggerated its price to something laughably low when his father, Bill, asked her about it.

"So where you been all day, son?" His dad has his tackle box on the table. It's the layered one he and Quinn saved up their allowance for and gave to him on Father's Day too many years ago. Each compartment is stuffed with lures, bobbers, and line. His dad is repairing one of his fly-fishing lures. It's an old one, too.

"I had to stop over somewhere for the storm. I texted Mom." Owen smiles.

"Yeah, she told me. But I just thought you'd make it here earlier, is all. Where did you stop? Hotel?"

"No, I was actually close to town."

His father looks up from his lure and squints his eyes at him. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." He looks around for his mother.

She brings a bottle of eggnog and a bottle of Jack over to the large kitchen table.

“Yeah. Ya’ll ever hear about the Matheson house?”

“Your Mom and I been out there a few times when we used to go on rides for the weekends. We got you that Kennedy mug there, remember?”

“Did you really? Well I think I found a few things I wanna get you both. Might head out that way tomorrow.”

His father nods. “It’s not that far out. Is that where you stayed?”

“Yeah. Then waited til I thought they had the expressway all cleared up.” Owen is wringing his hands under their kitchen table.

The table’s still cluttered with stacks of old newspaper at the end. The ones at the bottom probably date from his high school days. His mother hasn’t given up trying to make it look good—the stacks are neat and there’s a nice vase with an orchid in it next to a fat Angel with a Bible quote etched into it. He remembers helping her put the table leaf in and out, spreading new lace placemats from the Family Dollar—she boasts how clean it still it—and scooting it around the room to see if any of that helped. It never did, but it always made her feel better.

“Spicy egg nog?” She asks.

“Yeah, but lemme do it, ma.”

He pours the drinks and gets up to find the nutmeg in the kitchen.

“Was your brother’s anniversary coupla weeks ago.” Quinn was nineteen when he died from a heroin overdose. This was already five years ago.

“Yeah, I know,” Owen calls from the kitchen. He’s pulling drawers out and rooting around. They never kept any sense of organization in the kitchen—every drawer is a junk drawer and they never had a spice rack.

“We thought you mighta come back to come see him, son.”

“Found it,” Owen says. He comes back to the kitchen table. His mom has already started drinking. She offers her his glass and he tops her off with the spice.

“You know it?” His dad prompts him again. It’s his catchphrase. Owen hates it. And him.

“Yeah, I do. Did ya’ll do anything for it?”

His mother nods and grabs his forearm when his father goes back to his lure.

“Yes, I got the cutest floral arrangement from Holly Lolly.”

“Hobby Lobby.”

“Yes, that.”

“Your mom got his grave looking real good. Ya’ll ought to go out and see him while you’re down here. Just thought you woulda come sooner.”

Owen would have come back sooner. How many hours had he spent on the phone with his little brother when he found out how much trouble he was in? How long did he spend begging Quinn to bite the bullet and hop on a bus to come live with him? Telling him he didn’t have much, but they could take turns sleeping on the bed and the couch and Quinn could beat his addiction. And every time Owen would wire the bus money to his brother, there was always an excuse a month later about how he needed to spend it on this, that, or the other, and maybe *next time* he could make it.

Quinn would read Owen’s blog with fervor and like the photos he posted about his time spent in school. Bennington, New York, Pennsylvania. They would talk often in the blog’s comment sections and email each other. And Owen always signed off with, “*I promise I will get you out of there, man.*”



More than anything, Quinn wanted to take a trip to Boston to see Fenway. Owen has at least five saved text messages that say the same thing: Will ride the bus. Will meet you in Boston. Will see the Sox.

Quinn even wanted to see the library that Owen spent too much of his time in.

*“All of your friends are in books, brother. It’s harder when they’re real. I can’t say no to mine.”*

*“So get different friends,”* Owen told him. *“Library ain’t much. I just hide here when I get nervous about everything.”*

*“Get some Adderall. You won’t feel like that no more.”*

Owen had been too chicken shit to take even an aspirin that was more than a month expired. Then he started buying from the undergrads and hasn’t stopped. And hasn’t slept.

Quinn wanted to see anything. He always Owen to put pictures on his blog. One of Quinn’s last comments was under a picture of Owen’s current neighborhood of too-close-together houses and hills and beautiful changing foliage, *“That’s what home is supposed to make you feel like when you look at photos like this.”*

He loved Quinn more than anything in the world. He would’ve had a come-apart at the funeral.

His father starts up again, “The amount of time you’ve been in school, you could’ve been a doctor by now.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Owen agrees, sipping his own drink.

“Leave him alone. At least he’s doing what he wants to,” his mother is drowsy and pushes herself away from the table.

“He’s *always* done that.”

His mother walks around the table and stands behind his chair, hands on his shoulders. “What kind of degree will you have now?”

“Doctorate.” He grabs both of her hands and squeezes. She could never remember, but she always listened when he talked about it.

“Which ones do you already have?”

“Bachelors and Masters.”

“Our son is a genius, Bill,” his mother says. “Maybe he could teach you something about something.”

Bill doesn’t balk. “Quinn could’ve played ball for the NBA. But we’ll never know because he never got a scholarship.” He glances over to the last team photo Quinn was in. It hangs up next to the kitchen table, where the Last Supper would be if they were more religious. Quinn is front and center, ball under his arm, shit-eating grin on his face.

Absolutely. Quinn was so tall and lanky and bird-like. Fast and graceful on the court in high school. “Quinn did not like school. He would have flunked out playing college ball. He barely graduated from PRP.”

“You coulda helped him with school. Told him to get it together.” The old man’s eyes are old and desperate. “Where were you when all of this was happening?”

“I was there. When you weren’t.”

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He hears his father griping about him through the bedroom walls until the old man turns in. Sleep doesn’t come that night and Owen’s staring up at the yellowing ceiling

until the morning light comes in. He's never been able to sleep in this house. Quinn was the one who could sleep all day on their top bunk.

Owen rolls out of the bed and plants his feet on the gritty carpet. He shuffles over to the desk next to the closet and dresser. He grips the drawer's knob in his hand and lifts up so that it doesn't screech open. Light spilling in from outside illuminates peeling Led Zeppelin and David Bowie posters.

The drawer is still full of whatever junk Quinn shoved in it—mostly crap from his pants pockets. Owen digs around the drawer, moving old receipts around. He crumbles a McDonald's one from 2009 in his fist. The drawer is not deep. He digs to the bottom and finds what Quinn had written in Sharpie with his steady hand so long ago: Most of us don't end up being anything at all. He meant it in an optimistic way, he told Owen. That it was important to understand most people's dreams don't pan out, and that's okay. And that he wanted their father to know that, and that he didn't want to always be a basketball star.

Owen thinks about what his brother would look like now and feels his eyes burn. He walks over to the outlet his phone is plugged into and checks his mail.

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From: [paul.radcliffe@history.umass.edu](mailto:paul.radcliffe@history.umass.edu)  
<[paul.radcliffe@umass.edu](mailto:paul.radcliffe@umass.edu)>  
Date: Tuesday, December 16 2015 at 06:49 PM  
To: [owen.ripley@history.umass.edu](mailto:owen.ripley@history.umass.edu)  
<[owen.ripley@history.umass.edu](mailto:owen.ripley@history.umass.edu)>  
  
Subject: Dissertation Prospectus REMINDER

Owen—  
Just checking in to remind you I expect your prospectus by the 19<sup>th</sup>.  
Thanks,  
-PR

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Owen sees in his mind the jade elephant sitting on Ella Matheson's dusty shelf meant for books. He thinks of his mother's love for any precious stone. Its imitation jade if anything, but his mother would appreciate it all the same. Maybe one of those out of state spoons, too. Maybe even a back story about the house that he can finagle into a prospectus to send Radcliffe.

"Sorry I can't buy you a house or a trip to the Hamptons, but here's a spoon from New York," he will say.

And his dad's gift. Maybe a nice buck knife? Sure. In fact, he's sure he saw one sitting on a stand on one of the shelves.

He wakes in the morning after a two hour nap. His father is already gone for work, as the case always was for as long as he can remember. The old man always gone before six. He shuffles to the bathroom and finds it cracked and a dull yellow-red light spilling out. He taps the thin door with a knuckle, hears his mother stirring behind it, and mutters that he'll come back later.

"You can come in," she says, Pushing the door open. "I'll be out in a minute."

Owen stands behind her and watches her put mascara on. Her reflection tells him good morning. "You look good, Mom."

"Yeah, right."

"Please. You do."

She ignores this and asks, "Are you going to be around on Friday? We are going to see the catlicks." The Catholics. "They're having a dinner."

"I might be around still."

“I wish you could stay longer. Been so long since you been home.” She pulls her lower eyelid down and draws on black eyeliner. She does it quickly, roughly, and Owen winces. “Be good to have you home longer. For the summer, even.”

“I don’t think Dad—”

“Don’t you pay any attention to him. You just stick with me.” She puts the eyeliner back in the mug that holds all her makeup—much like the mug that Owen has on his desk with pens. “We’ll have wine and watch Robert Redford.”

Owen smiles and his eyes crinkle.

“You shouldn’t squint so much. You’ll have bags worse than mine.”

“It’s just dark in here is all.”

She snorts lightly, and turns to face him. “I worry you ruined your eyes reading in the dark like you used to. You still do that?”

“No.”

They’re close enough for their fronts to touch. She grabs his chin and turns his face. She looks into his eyes to ask, *may I?*

He smiles and nods and she puts a light amount of eyeliner on him, not unlike the first time she taught him how. It was one morning when she got he and his brother up for school. Their dad already left for work. He remembers Quinn peeking over the tops of their heads to watch in the mirror. Owen still loves how Quinn was an honorary member of the *Don’t Tell Dad About This* club.

Owen and his mother leave together so she can lock the house. She kisses him goodbye at his car and he watches her drive away in her’s.

Once he's out of the neighborhood and sputtering towards Dixie Highway, he's worried he's lost the house.

"Son of a bitch."

He didn't make note of anything about the house when he left it yesterday morning. By now, most of the snow has melted and only tops some evergreen trees. Christmas trees?

"The Matheson house has been around since the Civil War. That's what she said. Right?" He looks in his rearview mirror at nobody but the pickup behind him at the red light. He meets his reflection's eyes.

"Right." He answers himself when the light changes to green.

## OWEN'S RETURN TO ELLA. THE GRAVEYARD. THE SCHOOL ANNUALS.

Sometimes, happenstances like these are called 'happy accidents'. A chance encounter that, in retrospect, you would be sick if it never happened. But the more he thinks about it, the more he's sure there's a reason that he's met Ella Matheson. Why else would he be coming back to her during the holidays? But then again, he's not really coming back to *her*, but the house.

When he goes back to the Matheson House the next day, he swears its missing one of the front, once-regal columns. He didn't take a photo of the house the day before. He now wishes that he had—if only to post it on the blog to show his readers and followers. Instead, he kills his car's engine and shuts the door gingerly, otherwise the metal springs whine in a way that makes his teeth hurt. He pulls his collar up against the wind and squints his eyes. The cold air freezes the watery streaks leaking from the corners of his eyes. He climbs the porch steps two at a time and jostles the door handle. Its so loose that he worries he's pulled it from the doorjamb and would be standing stock-still with the knob in his hand until someone slapped it out, and him back to reality. But it doesn't and he nudges his way inside past the stack of sagging and over-stuffed cardboard boxes.

"Back again, Mr. Ripley?" Ella calls from the sitting room.

"Yes, ma'am, it is I. I'm actually going to buy something today."

He hears movement from the other room and she makes an appearance. “Oh, how wonderful. Do you know what it is you want, or will you be browsing again today?”

He goes back to the shelf that he remembers sitting the elephant on, but it isn't there. “I think I know what I want. But. You move stuff around since I was here last, Miss. Matheson?”

“Why no,” she makes an appearance being him. “And don't be calling me that. It's just Ella, I'll have you know. And how old do you think I am with all this 'miss' business, anyway?”

For whatever reason, Ella seems too old today with the way she cradles herself in her soft pink shawl.

“Fine. Ella. Is George around today? You still here alone?”

“Still in Cincinnati.” Only she calls it Sin-suh-natta.

“Aren't you lonely with him being gone during the holidays and all?”

She doesn't say anything for a minute. “I have you right now.”

He smiles. “Yes, but they say family's most important during this time of year.”

He meanders to another shelf full of Precious Moments angels and children, looking for the elephant and something for his dad.

A Neil Diamond record is playing quietly in the background, but it is warbling. The vinyl must be warped. Owen wants to know if Ella ever saw old Neil and his bare chest live in concert with thousands of sexually repressed housewives swaying, drunk off 'Cracklin Rose' and over-priced roscato in small plastic cups.



“Do you have any other record players in here? I may buy one if you do.” he just wants to have something to say rather than standing there all dumb. He’s trying to break her attention away from him dumbly playing with the fleece tassels on his scarf.

“No.”

“Just the one going now?” His finger points into empty space.

“There’s not one on right now. We don’t have anything like that. We do have this wired system that George put up years ago. Hooked up to a satellite thing, I think.”

And when she shuts up, there is silence. The song is gone. He shoves his hands into his fatigued jacket searching for his iPod to see if maybe, just maybe, that was playing loudly and muffled. He stops when he can see it in his mind’s eye, still hooked up to his car’s stereo, secured in place by a pink and frayed auxiliary cord.

“My mistake,” he mumbles and shuffles away, pretending to peruse a nearby bookshelf full of multiple copies of Twain and *Moby Dick*. Next to it are rows and rows of small silver collector’s spoons. These are the kind that can be found in any roadside gas station and even overpriced gift boutique (where was the difference, really?). The kind that had a small painted scene for whatever state it represented, usually the state’s flag or state bird. Several here were from New England and the Midwest.

“You got some family from up north?”

“What do you mean?” She coughs from behind him.

He chuckles weakly. “Most of these’re from away. I guess I was just trying to ask where you make the time to travel.”

“No. Most of those are from George. When he’s on a trip. Or they’re from back when he traveled after dropping out of college.”

They have nothing but the silence and the grandfather clock. The wind howls outside and he shivers.

“Although,” she continues. “These things are just here. And that’s the way it’s always been.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Are you *sure* you’re ever gonna buy anything, Mr. Ripley?”

He’s blushing to the roots of his auburn hair and murmurs in the affirmative that yes, he will. Eventually. “I *do* want to buy something. I just don’t want to make the wrong purchase.”

“The wrong purchase,” she echoes. “What does that mean?”

“It means you have so much stuff in here that I’m worried whatever I get won’t be as good as what I’m destined to have. What it was that moved me to come here in the first place.”

“You think that a trinket or something called you—hailed you, even—from the expressway, into coming here and that’s why you found this house.”

When she puts it like that, he better say no of course not.

“You are mistaken Mr. Ripley. The only thing that can talk here is the house itself.”

He doesn’t know what she means.

“I mean that,” she trails off for so long that he almost says something or rudely snaps his fingers in order to break her out of her reverie. “The house. There’s still a sign for the house when you got off the interstate, is that not true?”

“Why, sure.” The grandfather clock chimes distantly, distantly. Quarter ‘til the new hour, but he doesn’t know what that new hour is.

“Well, there you go then.” And it was like she clapped her hands together, as though dusting them dry, only she did that with her voice. That is that.

But he wasn’t moved enough to be happy with that response. “That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“Look, Mrs. Matheson.”

“I told you. Ella.”

“Clearly there are some very old things in this house.” Not to mention, odd. Like the million suitcases just stacked up and lining the walls where the bookshelves end.

“I couldn’t even begin to tell you all the things we have in this house. Most of it was here before I was born. Most of it will be here after George and I die and the state comes to take everything away for whatever reason it is that they do that.”

“Maybe you could tell me a little bit about the things in this house.” He pushes.

“Then I guess what I must ask you next, Mr. Ripley, is if you’re sure that you want to know.”

Owen knows he can’t go back now. “Yes.”

“It isn’t glamorous and it isn’t uncommon. This used to be a boarding place before George and I were born. Strangers were still living here when we were very young. My grandfather let travellers—mostly blacks—work on the farm, but he was never cruel to them. He let them inside and even let them eat at the table. When he died, my father took over and he let just regular people stay.”

“When was all that?”

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**Preservation Fixation**

*One PhD student's ramblings about all things historical*

Owen Ripley

**Posted on:** December 14, 2015 at 7:38 PM

ELLA: My grandfather had it running in the late forties, but the house was built long before that and he was living here when the house was still young.

ME: Where did all the stuff come from? And so much of it?

ELLA: People started leaving belongings behind. Things they forgot about and things they never came back to get. Daddy didn't want to throw none of it away, especially if he could find use for it or if someone else could find use for it. So all this stuff out here started out as a Lost and Found. Anyone could have it. Then he started selling it when people stopped coming to stay. They built up some hotels off the highway, you see.

ME: I do.

ELLA: My mother and I tried our best to make a library upstairs. Just a room of shelves, really. Surprise, surprise. Just a place to keep all the family photo albums and things like that. Would you like to see them? I also keep books for sale up there. If you find something you like, just take it. I usually try to sell them four for a dollar, but they've not moved for years now.

She lets me walk in first and it's a nice enough room. But the bookshelves aren't even, they're falling apart, and it looks like she uses them for everything else along with housing books. There's junk stacked on top of books crammed so tightly together. There are half-used rolls of toilet paper gathering dust, ripped open envelopes shoved in between books, opened packs of batteries. The arrangement is identical to downstairs, only it looks like an actual junk drawer was opened and dumped. At least the stuff downstairs was still real stuff. All of this needed to be thrown away. When she wasn't looking, I yank a receipt from in between two back to back copies of *Moby Dick* and noted the date **05/23/02**. Most of the shelves' backs are caved in. I see small stacks of volumes slipped out the back and onto the next shelf.

She pulls a volume from one of the shelves.

ELLA: This is one of the annuals from the school that George taught."

ME: He doesn't teach no more?

ELLA: No. [She flips to the back of the book to the page labeled *FACULTY* at the top and thumbs a line down the page looking for the M's. She frowns and turns a page. She turns the book upside down to her, cradling it against his chest] This is George.

My stomach falls. George is a beautiful man, but in an obscure way. Obviously bookish, obviously pretentious. There's a sadness in his eyes and lines around them. His round

glasses are falling down the bridge of his nose in the photo. I take the yearbook. Her grip tightens around it, but she relents.

ELLA: My brother was a handsome man.

He's wearing a Triumph motorcycle t-shirt a la Bob Dylan's Highway 61 Revisited album, and a navy blazer over it. I murmur in agreement and Ella gives me a look raising an eyebrow, continues.

ELLA: George loved being a schoolteacher.

ME: What were his subjects?

ELLA: Language Arts and English. More than anything, he loved poetry and tried to influence the kids to be partial towards it.

ME: Did he write poetry? [I close the annual and notice the academic year on the front: 1986-1987].

ELLA: Why, sure. [She takes the annual from me].

ME: Do you have any of it?

ELLA: [Gesturing towards the shelves] Any place you find a pocket composition notebook in these walls, that's his stuff. He takes those with him everywhere he goes.

ME: May I?

I'm not a fan of poetry, but I want to see something he's written.

ELLA: Those little composition books were also his way of... To tell you the truth. I'm not sure *what* they are, Mr. Ripley. He talks about the students some pages. [ She opens one to a random page where a single sentence is written in fading pencil: *They're all reading the Great Gatsby or Fahrenheit 451 and listening to the Who.*]

I've transcribed pages of the book I took:

*Class of '88*

*They gave me things before the last day.*

*Wayne → copy of Moby Dick*

*Jessie → Rubik's cube*

*Anna → letter opener*

*Greg → fountain pen*

*Toni → Frost poetry book*

*Leah → Bee Gees record (???)*

*John --? Neil Diamond cassette*

*A lot came back with cards. I'll list them later. The above have applications in at colleges or universities. Only Leah has applied out of state.*

And then on the back of that page:

*Wayne stopped by on his way home and dropped off a second gift. Strangest damn thing. Says it's for hunting and fishing. The hell do I look like? Calls it a you-loo. I can't find it in the dictionary. Probably spelling it wrong. He said he won't be visiting me any longer. Ella says it's always been improper.*

Some other entries:

*12/09/87*

*wayne came in this afternoon and said he needed to speak to me. We talked about proust of all things and he's told me I remind him of david lynch. Apparently theres a photo of him in one of the magazines they all read. The children consider me 'bitchin' now. wayne has invited himself to dinner tonight*

*2/17/88*

*wayne needed a ride home from school today. Told me his mother said 'all right. Mr Matheson is all right'. We listened to a goddamn Merle Haggard tape. Wayne asked to stop at super America for cigarettes. He says hes reading Vonnegut. They start so young now, dammit.*

*4/3/88*

*Wayne is failing English IV. 'A' for effort, right? I know he does his work. Can't have him failing senior year. He's always done well. Right?*



ELLA: [Closes the notebook] He talks about what they're doing in class. He writes down things they tell him in private. He loved those kids and they loved him. You wouldn't believe all the signatures in his annual. All of them, really.

ME: Didn't he get in trouble? When I was in school, teachers weren't even allowed to stand too close to us.

ELLA: No. I guess you could say it was a different time. I don't know. But when that boy he used to teach died...[She stops here, like she's living the moment again]. That's when George wanted to leave.

We go back downstairs and she makes coffee in the small two or three cup pot that's hooked up to an outlet at the front desk with the old cash register. She offers my cup black.

ELLA: George always thought I was dumb because I wasn't like him. But I wanted to go to college. I really did. I wanted to study about France or Italy. Maybe even see if I could learn the language. It always just looks so fancy and rich over there. George worried that I would go off to college and wouldn't last long. That I just wanted to go and meet boys and get married. Well, how else is someone supposed to meet someone else when you live out here like this?

ME: Did you ever go to school?

ELLA: No. Our mother said it wasn't a good idea. She was getting on in age and needed someone to take care of the house with her. Especially after father passed.

ME: Did your father run this place after your grandfather passed?

ELLA Yes. They're both buried out back in the family plot behind the barn. More than family's out there, too. People who stayed here got sick or hurt working and passed. For a long time, if my grandfather couldn't get a hold of a tenant's or worker's next of kin, he and some boys would bury them out back with the rest of the family.

ME: Oh, wow. Is the cemetery part of any tours that you may give?

ELLA: No. I won't go out there. Most of the graves are unmarked. Sometimes at night, when I was a child, I would hide behind the sitting room's picture window curtains. I'd just stand and watch out there, making sure my father wasn't walking the field or trying to come inside. Sometimes, I was so sure that he was out there.

ME: Why would you think something like that?

ELLA: George said that even though our father was dead, he could still do what he wanted because he was still our father. One time George told me the only safe place to stay—the only place our father couldn't get me—is the basement. I ran down the stairs and George locked me in there for a whole weekend that our mother was away.

ME: Oh, my God.

ELLA: He was always doing something like that to me. I'd tell our mother, but she'd always say: boys will be boys. And she let him be one.

## GEORGE MATHESON. THE COMING STORM.

Owen goes to the Matheson house one last time in search of the gift that George talks about in one of his journal entries. The hunting and fishing thing. Its description sounds like the only his father would like from this place.

He lets himself in, as he's done every time and goes into the main showroom. The ulu is still there.. The blade's gleaming silver is caught in the dull light, like the face of a new watch catching the sunlight. Yes, this is exactly what the old man would love for him to bring home as a gift. It could probably even buy him more holidays to miss in the coming years. Owen is tracing his finger along the ulu's wooden handle. The word ALASKA is charred and stamped into it. It's smooth, like it was just shaved up today. He goes to lift it out of the equally smooth basin that the blade is balanced in.

"You be careful with that, now. Sharp enough to damn near cut a man's face off." The deep voice seems to lull easily out of its speaker's throat.

Owen fights a shiver. He knows whose standing behind him. The wind rustles the house. The wood groans. "It looks like it would. I won't argue with you there." Owen is not ready to turn around, but knows that he must, and soon.

The man behind him snuffles. It breaks the silence of the house and is louder than the whistling wind. "You looking to buy it?"

"I was thinking of picking it up for my dad. He cares about all that hunting and

fishing stuff. But, I guess I'm just browsing, anyway." Owen pulls the blade out of its wooden stand. A polar bear is etched into the blade.

"Fine craftsmanship, that is."

Owen nods and finally turns to see a man standing opposite him. His legs are rubbery and he wants to sit.

George is leaning against a wall with a sort of coolness that Owen's angular body would never be able to exude. Owen's stomach falls when George comes into the light. George is holding a dainty teacup on a saucer. He's in socked feet. His trousers fit him well. His blazer's sleeves are rolled up and is around another t-shirt. This one being beige with a Camaro from the '70s printed on it. It's the same navy blazer he wore in the photo that Owen kept from the annual.

"Hello," George says. "George Matheson. Who are you?" He sits his tea cup down on the large desk with the cash register. He offers Owen his hand. It's warm and they shake. "Pleasure."

When George pulls away, Owen's hand is still out, ready to be shaken.

Still handsome, still wearing glasses and bookish. Glasses still needing being pushed up the bridge of his nose. Quinn squints and sees the tip soft part of it is missing. George's hair is grey now and he's sporting an undercut. The thickness on top is slicked back against the top of his head. Owen's eyes leave George's hair and travel down to his face.

It's not that George's face is gone. It's *interesting* as to what's *left* of it. Caved in scar tissue marks an X across him. And he's missing flesh off his nose and lips where the

X crossed over. There's such a good portion of his upper lip missing that his teeth are showing.

George waves his hand and beckons for Owen to follow him into the sitting room. Owen does and he falls into his seat, still clutching the ulu.

George is holding himself like one of those old men who just hang out in barbershops all day, palms planted on thighs and hawking loogies into a nearby trash bin or worse, the ground. Owen watches him recline back in the crooked chair. He watches him go for one of the free biscuits Ella kept on a plate near the register.

"I'm Owen. I've been visiting with your sister a little bit. I have this blog and I write about old houses like this. Ella actually gave me an interview last night."

"An interview? Well, hell, I can tell you some stories, too." George smiles the same ghost smile that Ella gives. "You an architect of some kind?"

"I study historical preservation" Owen says. "Mostly houses. I've not done any hands-on work yet, but I study history and this is the part of history I like the best."

"I can see why you like to come here everyday."

"Ella can tell you I've been refusing to buy something from here until I was sure I found exactly what I wanted."

They sit in silence and Owen can only gape at George. George forces out an android's laugh intended to convince Owen that he's human, too.

"I don't even know how often she changes these," George says about the pile of biscuits near his tea. "Want to bet that they've been here since Thanksgiving? Or Halloween?" He laughs and turns the biscuit this way and that in his hands before raising it to his nose and inhaling.

“Can you eat that?” Owen asks.

“Why, sure.” He sounds just like his sister.

“I just thought,” Owen gestures vaguely around his mouth with the tips of his fingers.

“Because of my,” George mirrors Owen’s motions, “*situation* you think I can’t have solid foods?”

“Don’t pieces get stuck in between your...*situation*?”

It reminds Owen of the people who split their tongues for shits and giggles. Or to make themselves beautiful.

George sticks his tongue out in between the triangular split and traces a line around the sides. “No. Although I’m sure you’d like to know about my situation.”

Owen hopes his face isn’t betraying him by showing *just how much* he wants to know.

“It’s all right, Mr. Ripley. You can look if you like. I don’t mind it, really. Not anymore. Hell, you’re the newest person I’ve seen in a long time. Long time.” George flexes his jaw and sets his gleaming eye on the corner of Owen’s face. “I travel so much and the places I stay in—well, lot lizards and truckers don’t pay too close of attention to me.” He drinks from his teacup. “What do you think? Got me good didn’t she? It was my sister that got me. Carved me up with that.” He points at the ulu in Owen’s lap.

George brings his thumb up to his mouth and nibbles on the corner and watches the younger man. “She came into my room one night,” he says. “It must’ve been real, real late. I’d been reading. Or writing in one of the notebooks. Possibly the one that you have, Mr. Ripley.”

“I—“

“No, it’s quite all right. You’re one of the few outside of Ella and my students who have read anything I’ve written. I find it flattering that you thought that whatever could have been in those pages are important enough to steal.”

George sips again at the empty cup he’s holding.

“She swooped upwards the first time,” he says.

He lights a cigarette and passes it to Owen. Owen hangs onto it with fingertips. He swaps the ulu on his knee for the ashtray nearby. He lets the ash grow a mile long before George knocks his knee with his own. Owen flicks the long ask into the ashtray.

George’s jaw twitches fondly. “And that’s when I was still in *bed*.” His good eyebrow quirks up with emphasis on the word and he eyes Owen.

“I woke up. Jumped up. I remember thinking to look for clothes to put on, like a t-shirt would save me from her slashing into my chest.” He flicks his ask into Owen’s ashtray. “I spun around, pushed her away. I was going to grab her arm, bend it like the police to.” He inhales and exhales smoke. “She swoops downwards the second time. She caught my lower eye lid. She caught my lips. Both times. She tried to brain me with it a third time. I jerked my head back,” he jerks his head back with his arms in front of him, palms out, cigarette clenched between his front teeth. “Got my nose.”

“Didn’t you call the police? Did the hospital have anything to say about it?”

Owen needs to know.

“You should remember that the police doesn’t take too kindly to calls about domestic disputes. Or that they never get there in enough time, rather.” George even talks like Ella. *That is that*, his comments say.

“She shaved the soft part of my nose off.” George thumbs at his stump. “I used to have a turned up nose. Like James Cagney.”

Owen exhales a laugh and stubs out his cigarette, never smoking it. “You didn’t.”

“No?”

“No,” Owen leans towards one side and sticks his hand down the back jean pocket. He flicks through the singles in his wallet’s money slot. He pulls out George’s school photo from the annual he took. “Not like Cagney.” Owen shares a smile with George. Owen is sure this is the only time he’s smiled in the house. And by now he’s not sure if it’s because he’s afraid.

George shows his teeth and then he leans forward and takes the tiny square. “I haven’t looked at this in forever. Any of them, really. You’re brave to take another man’s things.”

Owen shrugs.

“I was probably younger than you in this photo.” He grins.

“That’s what I was thinking.”

Owen snatches the photo from him and tucks it back inside his wallet, inside his pocket.

“I used to stay in, all the time.” George tells him. “I wouldn’t even go outside and walk the grounds out back. I don’t know who I thought was going to see me.”

“How did you get over that?”

“I just. I don’t know.” He traces the scar tissue on his face with gentle fingertips. Owen wants to feel, too. “I deserved it. I finally realized that this is what I looked like to her. All along. Some kind of ugly.”



Owen thought about animals that fight with other animals. A squirrel with a bald tail or a lizard with a missing tail. But these things grow back.

“How long have you gone like this?”

“A long enough time.”

“Ten years?” Owen presses.

“Twenty, more like it,” George’s brow furrows.

“Still handsome.”

“You really think so?”

Owen does. He nods.

“Thank you. Would you take me out?” George rolls a laugh from his tongue to the back of his throat.

Owen knows it’s a joke, but he would take George out. He doesn’t nod.

“I thought so.” George looks closely.

“Don’t the two of you ever talk about what she did to you?”

“No.” George goes to light another cigarette. “I think she’s just embarrassed more than anything. Not unlike the way we don’t talk about our childhood. They say a sibling is the first friend you’ll ever have. But I think we mess that up every time. We spend too many of the formative years trying to kill each other.”

“Not Quinn and I. He was the only friend I ever had. And I actually did kill him. Or, let him kill himself. It’s like knowing someone who is suicidal and choosing to not reach out to them. And then, the next time you hear their name it’s in the past tense. And everyone is running around screaming about ‘if only we’d known’,” Owen says. “But you do know. You knew all along and you hadn’t said anything to them. To anyone.

Because you thought that if you avoided it long enough, the problem would go away and they would forget about how depressed they were and not do anything about it.”

“And the only thing that goes away is them.” George offers.

Owen points at George. Yes.

George grabs at his heels and pulls his legs into his chair. “Tell me how your brother killed himself.”

Owen thinks about the questions people ask after they learn someone has died, and they always want to know how. Especially with suicides. “He didn’t kill himself in the way you’re thinking.”

”How do you know what I’m thinking?” George pulls the cigarette to his lips and Owen thinks he looks like David Bowie with the fluid moment.

“You probably think like a self-inflicted something. Quinn was addicted to heroin. And I knew it. Our parents thought he was into something but they... They thought it was like regular teenage pot smoking. I knew he began doing it more frequently and he overdosed once before I left for school in Bennington. I drove him to the hospital. But I didn’t do it right. I just threw him out the car. Like you would some random guy at a party. It was an attempt to getting rid of a guilty consciousness is all. And then I was supposed to come down here and pick him up. But I shit out on him. The next time he O.D’d, no one was there to dump him in a hospital parking lot.”

George sits back in his chair, rolling his tongue around in his mouth, as if he’s tasting the story Owen told him.

George finally speaks up, “I knew only one person in my life to kill himself. He

was a student of mine.” Then he scoffs. “Of course. I don’t have friends, either, Owen. I considered some of these kids my mentees—friends.”

“It’s understandable when you get close to someone. I have a few undergrads like that.” The ones who supply his Adderall.

“His name was Wayne and I knew him ever since he was a freshman. He didn’t talk much. But if you could bring up a book he liked, he could talk about it and analyze it for days. His favorite was *Moby Dick*. He told me about his home situation his junior year. It wasn’t great.”

“What, was he abused?” Owen asks.

“More like neglectful. Sometimes I would give him rides home because his mother or step father would forget about him. We would meet up for lunch in the summers. He wanted to be a writer. I thought that suited him so well. A ‘This Boy’s Life’ kind of deal. Sometimes if no one was at his house, I’d bring him here and we would feed him. I’d take him back home and there would still be no one there.”

George tells Owen how they kept in touch long after Wayne graduated. Owen remembers the name from George’s small notebooks. He’s the one that gave him copies of *Moby Dick* and the ulu.

“And then one day just out of the blue,” George says, “I get a phone call from a boy he was in school with. I never taught *him*, but he knew how to get ahold of me to ask if I’d like to come to the funeral. Wayne blew a hole clear through his head one summer. When I went to see him, I couldn’t even tell it was him in that casket. I thought I was at the wrong funeral. “

George pours a cup of coffee from the island. No steam rises from the cup—it must be from yesterday. “I think about Wayne everyday, Owen. I don’t think he’ll ever go away. I’d like to think the way I felt about Wayne is how Ella must feel about me or how I must feel about her. And that’s why she wanted me to stay.”

“That’s not right, George.” Ella is standing straight-backed as ever, arms crossed.

“What did I get wrong?” George is bemused. He would grimace if he could.

Her mouth is a thin line. “Did you tell him that you punched that young man’s father in the face at his funeral?”

“I didn’t.”

Ella smiles and walks over to her brother and presses her palms into his shoulders and squeezes. “Yes, he punched that poor man.”

“He wasn’t good to that boy.” Then George tells Owen, “I think everyone else was more embarrassed than I was.”

“Especially after you wouldn’t apologize,” Ella adds. “After that, they all stopped coming to see George. That’s when he—” She stops a beat and removes her hand and goes to leave the room. “That’s when he told me he’d be leaving in the morning. And I didn’t want him to go.”

“I didn’t go back to teaching that fall. Put all I had into the family business.”

“Which is interesting.”

“Yes, but it’s my story. And Ella’s story. You have your own. About your brother.”

George pushes himself up into a standing position and goes to look out the picture window towards the woods. “There’s a storm coming, Mr. Ripley. Monstrous fierce. The wind is already here.”

“I know.” Owen fixes his gaze—briefly, briefly—beyond George’s head in the direction of the shelf where the ulu rests. “I should get going. ”

“You could stay if you like, you know,” George offers. “Have dinner with us? Talk more?”

“I think I’m going to cook for my mom tonight. Give her a night off, you know?”

Ella smiles at him and tells him to come visit any time. She wants to know how his mother likes the elephant. “And come back to show us what you put on that computer.”

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Subject: Re: Dissertation Prospectus REMINDER

Dr. Radcliffe,

I’m writing to let you know that I won’t be returning to Amhurst next semester. My mother needs me in Louisville and I would like to stay with her as long as possible. I’ve missed too much of my family because of school.

I wondered if it was possible to deal with my dissertation at its early stages, remotely. If not, that is fine and I will write my academic advisor to let them know they need to revoke my funding.

I haven’t been sure if the program has been the right fit with me anyway now that I’ve realized what I’d like to write about: an intimate piece about my home city and its history. I don’t know if that seems blasé to you, but since coming home from the holiday,

I've realized that even though some of these places are in the middle of nowhere, that doesn't mean they don't have stories.

I want to thank you for all the time you've given me and I apologize for any inconveniences.

All the best,

Owen Ripley

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