

Timmy Reed

Wet Sugar

Our neighborhood was expecting a storm.

We lived in a valley between two hills with a brown stream that hooked at the bottom, cutting us off from the rest of town. On one of the hills was a telephone tower. Below, there were houses and a tavern and store. There were also churches and a burial mound. Children played on the mound. Adults stayed away unless they had someone to put inside. The neighborhood was dense with priests and old women who had settled close, toes clenched, to watch each other.

In the few weeks before the storm, priests walked in silent lines through the streets. Women hid inside houses and sheds, making pies.

The children fed black birds that gathered on the mound. The birds ate bits of meat from their fingers.

The tavern was open to everyone, but always full of men. The men's backs curved like hooks as they leaned over the bar and talked into their drinks. The older men in the neighborhood developed bent shoulders with lumps that resembled the mound.

In the evening, candles were put outside of houses here and there throughout the neighborhood. Candles in front of priests' homes were prayers. Candles in front other homes were spells or placed there to light the way for children and husbands so they would come back at night to be warm.

I was the only child who stayed away from the mound, whether there was a funeral or not. I had no friends because of this. I wandered the streets and alleys with my little sister, Ruth, who pitied me. I made her hold my hand sometimes. I pretended that it was for her sake. She

pretended too. Ruth only avoided the mound when she was with me, but it felt like we were always together.

Some nights our mother left candles for us or for our father. Our father was inside the mound.

Ruth collected candy in hordes and tucked it away in invisible places. Witches and worried mothers left out sweets for the children, hidden around doorsteps or tucked into gardens and under lawn ornaments. Ruth saved them for what she called “Emergency Special Occasions.” I collected nothing but my own thoughts. I couldn’t help myself. Even bad things. I replayed my life in my head all day long, until I went to sleep at night. I forgot things anyway. Mostly good ones, I bet.

I replayed the events of the storm in my head even though they hadn’t happened yet.

Neighbors grumbled about who predicted the storm first. The only thing we all agreed on was that we could feel the air changing and it was best not to talk about, or to talk about very quietly.

Ruth and I walked everywhere together. People saw us so much that the whole neighborhood thought we were spying on them. Ruth didn’t mind. She would have suffered any reputation to make me feel comfortable.

There was a tension in the air like static. The telephone tower hummed. Matches were more easily lit here than in other places. The air sizzled and tasted like copper buttons. My mother lived her whole life in a nervous daze, as if she had just been slapped while alone in an empty room and was trying to ignore the presence of ghosts. She pretended that life was not beautiful, but pretty. She kept plastic flowers in water until mold grew on the stems. She raised

us like dolls from an old play set, I thought. She held us up to her heart sometimes and other times it was like we weren't there at all.

I knew the neighborhood and maybe even the world beyond that was beautiful. And anything beautiful was also terrifying. The hole in our family was at the top of that list.

I think Ruth had yet to find any of that out. She just nodded and pet my hand when I told her what I suspected about life. We both worried about our mother but I think I worried more because Ruth was so busy worrying about me.

The storm was about a week away. I heard men whisper or laugh through the opening and closing tavern door while I played pinball in the mud room in front with Ruth at my side. They never mentioned the storm directly. They wanted sandbags and batteries, the prayers of the faithful or a new girlfriend, without saying why they needed these things. I heard a story from the mouths of other children who were walking through my alley on the way to the mound. They said somebody was building a boat. They said they were building it to save all the bones.

My mother stood in the window and watched the mound. There was a row of houses between her and the mound so she couldn't see it with her eyes. She stared straight through the houses as if they didn't exist. Ruth and I coughed when we entered the kitchen. We walked with heavy feet so she would know we were home.

"Hello, Children," she said. Or something very close. Her eyes were big and watery. She was holding a pair of large scissors. Lately it seemed like she was always holding something sharp when we came home. I looked around the kitchen for scraps. She had not been cutting anything. I put my hand on Ruth's shoulder.

"Hello, Mom," we said. Or something very close.

Ruth offered her a piece of licorice. She first looked at the candy noodle as if it was a worm. Then she bit into the candy and chewed. “There’s a storm coming,” she said, with a shiver.

“We know,” Ruth said and pulled me upstairs.

I was young when my father died and the memories I had of him were like a faded recording, worn thin and crackly and full of empty spots. Ruth was a baby when he died. I imagined her memory of him to be like a tinny song winding down on a music box. I couldn’t imagine how my mother remembered him. It was probably like a symphony.

We locked ourselves in my closet with a flashlight and cookies. The coats and sweaters were like a wall of soft vegetation. “I’m scared for Mom,” I whispered.

“Did you say ‘of’ or ‘for’?” Ruth asked. “We don’t need to whisper. We can just talk normally.”

She was waiting for me to tell her “Both.” I didn’t need to. The fact that she was waiting meant she already knew.

“I think she’s scared of the storm,” she said. “People act weird when they are scared.” She gave me a look. “You should know.”

I didn’t say anything. I ate a cookie.

“Maybe part of her wants the storm too,” she said.

I swallowed. “Why would anyone want a storm?” I asked. I had been trying to figure this out for awhile.

“I don’t know.”

We sat in silence for a long time and ate cookies.

“I guess people get sick of waiting for things,” Ruth said.

We made shadow puppets on the wall of the closet. Ruth created black birds with her little hands. I made a lonely dog. When I fell asleep her birds were still circling the closet, like they were trapped.

For a week it drizzled nonstop. A light grey mist filled the streets. Candles were still put out at night, under awnings or shielded by lamp shades. Birds flew through the sky and the other children still played on the mound. They stared outward in a circle, waiting for someone to come for the dead. I watched two old women wrapped up in black scarves mumble back and forth through a knothole in their fence as they tended to their gardens. I made Ruth stop and stand still to listen. One of them said something about “wicked duration, not ferocity.” The other made a noise like a squirrel.

There was a group of priests on a corner of the main drag through our neighborhood, the road that led to the mound. They were in long black or grey coats and huddled very close together as if to hide from the cold. They were all very tall and thin and their hats made them look taller, like giants. Even in their silence, I got the idea they were trying to remind us of something. Their presence was like a warning. I thought if they did talk, icicles would come out of their mouths. I stopped to watch for a moment, then walked past like everyone else.

I thought of Mom at home alone, waiting for the storm. She didn't need to be reminded of anything.

That morning she talked about what it must be like to drown. “Suffocating,” she said a few times over breakfast. She said she dreamt about being smothered as a little girl. In her dream

she smothered by wet cloth, like her blankets were sweating on her. She looked at the ceiling fan and took a breath. Then she gave us a lesson in how to breathe. “In through the nose,” she said.

“Out through the mouth. It keeps your heart beating regular.”

She asked if there were a death we would prefer to drowning.

“Death by chocolate,” Ruth said.

The rains picked up over the weekend. On the radio there was talk of mud sliding down the hills and covering our neighborhood, turning it into a giant mound. The stream was swollen and rushing. It carried broken limbs and bits of trash. I had already been out for a walk. Some houses were sandbagged and boarded up, while other houses, like ours, had done nothing at all to prepare. The other children were circled on the crest of the mound, looking outward.

The tavern was packed. I suggested our mother go there to wait through the storm with our neighbors. I was always trying to get her out of the house to meet people, even if she already knew them. I wanted my mother to be happy because I thought if she was happy, I would be too.

Mom didn't respond to my suggestion. She walked over to the window and looked toward the mound. She picked up a knife and ran her finger along the serrated blade. It was the knife we used to cut bones when we needed to make stock.

Ruth asked me to take her out for another walk. We sprinted from tree to tree for cover. Ruth seemed to know where she was headed. I didn't care. I just didn't want to be at home. I didn't want our mom to be home alone either. I didn't want anyone to be alone or get hurt or feel bad. More than that, I didn't want to think about those things anymore. I imagined crawling underground to sleep for a long time, hundreds of years, and yawning when somebody found me.

I thought about our house being washed away as I ran and the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. I thought about moving somewhere else, but I knew my Mom would not leave the neighborhood unless the mound was washed away too. It felt as though we had all forgotten you could leave.

If the mound was washed away, would our ghosts be free to follow us?

The streets would be littered with bones either way.

Ruth was too fast for me, even though her legs were smaller. I caught up with her under a weeping willow tree. It didn't provide much protection, but enough for us to talk. Lightening lit up the clouds and made them look like floating brains, sparked with electricity. Ruth was smiling. I was not.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Behind the store," she said.

"I have candy there," she said.

I wondered why she would keep candy behind the store and not in the house. I wondered why I didn't know any of this about her.

"It's not like we're joined at the wrist," she said.

"I know that," I said. I hadn't though. Not really. It was like I had been learning to pedal a bike and I just found out there was no one in back holding me up. I felt alone, but okay.

Ruth had already taken off running. I followed behind.

The store was catty-corner to the tavern. Both were full of people. I watched the customers in the store window as they rushed to wait in line, green baskets all stocked up with boxes and cans and batteries. There was a man outside under a tent selling ice. Across the street at the tavern people were smoking cigarettes out of cracked windows, huddled close to watch the

lightening. The churches at the far end of the street were all lit up but empty. Ruth and I scurried down the middle of the road in our raincoats. We cut into an alley behind the store. The wind was picking up. I worried about the kids on the mound. I hoped they would go home to get warm. I did not think a boat was coming.

There was a pile of tires by the loading dock in back of the store. I had never noticed it before. The pile was covered with a coal blue tarp. Ruth pulled me under the tarp, which was being lifted at the corners by wind. She pointed at a crack between the tires. We peered through. There were huge black trash bags sealed with zip-ties smooshed together and piled heavy inside like limp bodies.

“That’s our candy,” Ruth yelled through the rain.

She looked at me with an expression of hope when she said “*our*.”

“I need your help to move the tires,” she said. “Because I’m too small.”

I didn’t understand how her tiny body could have gotten so much candy inside there. I asked her why she kept her candy in the tires.

“For emergency special occasions.”

“But why not keep it at the house where it will stay dry?”

“Because it’s delicious,” she said. Even yelling, her voice sounded matter of fact. “I would eat it all.”

We removed the tires and got dirty doing it. Ruth had black smudges on her cheeks. The wind ripped the tarp off the stacks. It flew through the air like a kite. The tires fell toward Ruth. I got in the way and they knocked me down. I pushed the tires off. Ruth was smiling at me in the mud. She helped me up. I told her to stand by the loading dock as I got back to work.

Soon we stood in the growing rain with five giant trash bags that weighed more than both of us combined.

“Let’s go,” Ruth said and grabbed my hand.

We loaded three bags on my back. Ruth put one over her shoulder and one we shared between us. We plodded down the center of the street side by side, trying to keep each other’s pace. Water was collecting along the sides of the roads. We didn’t stop between trees.

I glanced at the mound as we ran past. Under a flash of lightening, I could see the black shapes of children scattering. Ruth led us down an alley and over two yards, until we were across the street from our home. The bags of candy felt like they were full of packed mud. The rain started to sound angry as we came inside.

Our mother was watching out the kitchen window. Our bags made a mess on the floor. Ruth began to light candles, even though the lights hadn’t gone out yet. She brought us into the living room, in front of the arched doorway, and sat us in a triangle. Mom carried a pair of scissors, which she held in her lap. The wet trash bags slumped on the outside of our triangle. They leaked sludge on the edges of the Oriental rug. I tried to hide a black puddle by sitting on it. Ruth pushed me away. She was over hiding things, I think. Mom didn’t seem upset about the mess. She seemed like someone who was being swept off her feet.

Wind shook the bushes outside. Rain fell harder.

Mom and I sat quietly on the carpet as Ruth went upstairs and came back down with blankets and sleeping bags. We were unsure what to talk about. The weather was too obvious. We said “I love you.” It worked to fill the space between us.

Ruth was still out of breath from our mission in the rain. She plummeted down the wooden stairs in a huff, riding on the blankets. There was nothing in her little pink face except a

desire to make us comfortable. I got up to help her. I think my mother was going to also, but Ruth plowed over the hardwood too quickly for us. She was like an ant carrying dead beetles. We made a nest of pillows and sweets.

Two of the trash bags were filled with assorted candies: gum, toffee, jawbreakers, chocolates, anything else we could imagine. The wrappers sparkled like glass. The other three bags were full of red shoestring licorice. Ruth encouraged us to eat all the candies, but kept the licorice to herself.

A lot of the candy had gotten wet. It was sticky.

“Candy is good,” she said with her mouth full. She kept nodding. You could tell she thought we needed convincing. She weaved strings of licorice together as she spoke. “Let’s just eat candy and be happy together,” Ruth said as she chewed. “Let’s just do that, okay?”

We ate candy for a day and a half. We ate it by candlelight after our power went out. The storm cooped us together. It made us feel close and crazy. We spoke to each other in made up voices. We stretched toffee between us until we fell back and hit our heads on the floor. We laughed at thunder. We sang. Our bellies ached but we kept eating.

Ruth told us stories in which the three of us were characters. They were wild fictional stories where anything could happen. In one of the stories, we floated up to heaven and had a picnic. Heaven was not how I imagined it. It was more like real life, but people had forgotten to be unhappy. Our father was there. Ruth described him as if she had known him for eternity. I have never seen my mother so attentive. She played along, adding touches to the story; things like broken glasses and a cowlick and lost keys. She squeezed the scissor-handles like they were a

stuffed animal. Once she clapped like a seal. She left the shears on the carpet as though she'd forgotten they existed. She held my hand and squeezed.

I noticed chipped fragments of rock candy stuck to mother's cheek. I picked them off and ate them.

As Ruth narrated, she weaved more and more licorice until there was a very large red sheet braiding out in loose folds from her lap. It flooded our living room and out into the hallway. The whole house smelled like sugar and artificial strawberries and candles. Our mother sniffed deep, like she was in a garden. I wondered if Ruth was making us another blanket, or maybe a flag. I wanted her to tell me on her own, as part of a story maybe, so I didn't ask.

It turned out she was making a sail.

Timmy Reed

Jane Delury

Thesis I

Story Revision

Jane -

Wet Sugar, formerly Scurvy, came about as part of an experiment really, something I had tried before and enjoyed but still a new strategy or technique to me for the most part. The exercise basically consisted of focusing on images I thought I were beautiful or haunting or somehow pleased me (the birds, the mound, a brewing storm, candy, etc.) and begin to stack them on top of each other to create a setting, with no real plot or characters in mind. This is a little bit of the reverse of most of my stories, in which most of the images develop as a result of setting or character or plot. It is hard to talk about though. Kind of a chicken and egg thing. In any case I tried very hard to focus on image here, with the mindset that if I put enough images that I liked in proximity to each other, a story would no doubt appear. Note: I think, in general, that it is much more difficult to avoid a narrative than it is to create one. Narratives tend to be inevitable.

In revising, I knew my strategy would be to cut the images liberally after getting a feel for how they interacted with each other and, more importantly, with the story that had arisen from the original experiment. So, in the last week since I received everyone's comments, I have focused on bringing the characters further into the forefront. In order to do this a lot of my favorite images had to be sacrificed (perhaps to live another day in a different story), which was fine by me. See I had always wanted the story to feel like it was in a rich world, a surreal, symbolic kind of setting, but I had also wanted a starkness and brevity that stacking image upon image upon image naturally led me away from. Cutting allowed me to get closer to the

mood I had felt a little of when I started the experiment. I added information about the characters, but in small ways in a number of places. I gave them some new actions. But more than anything, I removed a number of their thoughts, and toned the voice down to something that felt a little more minimal and solemn. Something that fit the mournful tone of the story (about a family growing up near the grave of their dead father) and also jived better with the character's young age. I laid waste to the writing with an axe in a lot of places where I felt like space could serve the same purpose as well as where it could add mystery. The more information you put in, the less the reader needs to imagine on their own. I wanted it to be the kind of story you feel very "active" when reading, I guess.

I want to thank you so much for all your help on this story (and all the other ones this semester and over the past few years, but I will get to that later.) I followed your edits very careful and found them useful, as well as the advice about "compression" which really became my strategy in the revision. Also I used the advice of writing toward my ending, which turned out to be basically writing toward the plot in general in this case since much of the original draft was atmospheric detail. I have only been revising for a week and feel like there may be some more work to do; mainly with the mother I think. And Ruth too, maybe. Ruth is the most "together" of the characters in the story, but I still want her to be vulnerable. They are all vulnerable, and she is a little girl that's worried about her brother and mom. Still, I don't want the focus to shift and I don't want to give too much away. I think it will be a fine line with this one. The title may change too. "Wet Sugar" sounds too sexual maybe; readers might be highly disappointed when they find out the story is so innocent; I mean, I think it could probably be a YA type of thing if it were less...something. Maybe that *is* the target...

Now: Thank you so much for all the help you have been with my writing since I came to UB. I have taken so many classes with you, I really feel like you have become a mentor to me

and I think my writing has improved considerably because of it - as has my understanding of the publication process and everything else. I just want you to know I am very appreciative. If I don't see you before next semester, have an awesome holiday!

Thanks,

Timmy