

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

Stephanie Bills
Sandy

OCTOBER 22 2012 – SANDY DEVELOPS INTO A TROPICAL STORM IN THE CARIBBEAN SEA.

“I don’t know why everyone is freaking out,” my roommate tells me as we watch a news report about a hurricane headed up the eastern coast.

“We live in Maryland, when was the last time a serious hurricane hit Maryland,” she scoffs, switching the channel. “Can’t wait to get out of class for #rainstormsandy. Wait, hold on,” she says, “I have to tweet that.”

OCTOBER 27 2012 – THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE DOWNGRADES SANDY TO A TROPICAL STORM.

“Are you sure you guys don’t want to stay with me for a couple days,” I ask my mother over the phone.

“Cupcake, there is no reason to freak out. Both your father and I have lived on the Jersey Shore our whole lives. This isn’t our first hurricane. We’ve got plenty of food and the generator. We’ll be fine.”

“But—”

“Don’t ‘but me’, miss.”

OCTOBER 28 2012 – SANDY STRENGTHENS TO A CATEGORY 1 HURRICANE WITH SUSTAINED WINDS OF 75 MPH. NEW JERSEY & MARYLAND DECLARE STATES OF EMERGENCY.

Grocery List:

Batteries

Flashlights

Bread

Water

Paper Towels

Chips

Oreos

Redbull

Vodka

Umbrella

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"Why are we getting vodka?" I ask my roommate.

"Hurricane Sandy Party, obviously," she says, running to grab two bottles of chasers before turning to look at me from halfway down the aisle.

"What the hell else are we supposed to do?"

OCTOBER 29 2012— HURRICANE SANDY MAKES LANDFALL IN U.S. NEAR ATLANTIC CITY, N.J., WITH WINDS OF 80 MPH. ALL COSTAL TOWNS FORCED TO EVACUATE.

Mom Cell [6:45 p.m.]: Honey, I tried to call but the lines are a little wonky

Me [6:48 p.m.]: What's going on

Mom Cell [7:01 p.m.]: Storm gettin pretty bad.

Me [7:03 p.m.]: Is everyone alright?

Mom Cell [7:05 p.m.] : Anything you want me to save from the house?

Me [7:10 p.m.]: Save from the house?

Mom Cell [7:23 p.m.]: Not a whole lot of time. What do you want me to save?

Me [7:25 p.m.]: Mom...your kinda scaring me.

Mom Cell [7:45 p.m.]: Cell phone batteries are dying. They are evacuating us. I'll grab

what I can. Love you cupcake. Be safe.

Me [8:15 p.m.]: ... Mom

Me [9:30 p.m.]: ... seriously.Mom.

Me [1:15 a.m.]: ... Answer your phone!

OCTOBER 30 2012 — SANDY IS UPGRADED TO A CATEGORY 2 STORM

Jesse, the only other person I know from New Jersey, and I watch on the news as our hometowns flood, surges higher than 14ft above sea level.

"Power lines are down leaving communication to loved ones in the state nearly impossible," a perky woman says on the screen and we both grip our cellphones tighter. It's been 24 hours since either of us heard anything.

"Death-tolls are already starting to reach us here at the station. Hurricane Sandy has taken the lives of 5 New Jersey residents and 6 more from New York as of 8:00 P.M. E.S.T."

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"I can't watch this sober," he says, swinging his legs off the couch. He heads for the small corner table where we keep our stash of liquor and pours us each a shot.

"We've just received word that Casino Pier, the iconic beach front pier in Seaside, New Jersey has just collapsed into the ocean. Bits of the boardwalk are smashing into oceanfront houses as the sea and the bay flood," a new anchor told us.

"My house is ten minutes from there..." he whispers.

I go over to hug him. My grandmother's house sits along the bay.

NOVEMBER 1 2012— 3.3 MILLION NEW JERSEY RESIDENTS REMAIN WITHOUT POWER.

"What do you mean I can't get through," I tell a national guard who stands behind a barrier fifteen miles from my parents' house.

"This area is still flooded," he says to me, looking at my Maryland tags. "No one can get through yet."

"I don't know where my family is ..." I say with a fresh set of tears. "They aren't at my sister's and my grandmother's and my parents' house are all that way." I tell him, pointing beyond the blockade.

He looks tired, dark blue circles under his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he says before stepping back behind the barrier.

NOVEMBER 3 2012— CON EDISON ANNOUNCES IT HAS RESTORED ELECTRICITY TO MORE THAN 645,000 CUSTOMERS.

Unknown Caller

"Hello?" I say into the phone, reaching to find the light switch to the Red Roof motel lamp on the bedside next to me.

She lets out a soft sigh before speaking.

"Hey Cupcake—"

NOVEMBER 4 2012— FIRST ESTIMATE OF 346,000 HOMES DAMAGED OR DESTROYED THROUGHOUT NEW JERSEY IS RELEASED TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC.

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Things Not Destroyed:

Homemade Ceramic Pencil Holder from the 1st Grade

Two Folding Chairs

Sentry® Safe Fire/Water Combo Lock Safe

The Dog Cage

Three Wine Glasses

The Concrete Anchor that had been in our front Yard

“We can only give you about fifteen minutes,” a national guardsman tells us. “There is still water in the basement so we won’t know the full extent of the damage until it recedes. For right now I can only let you on the first floor.” He says, handing us facemasks.

My father mumbles something to the guardsman while the FEMA representative starts jotting down everything that is salvageable on a clipboard.

My mother grabs my hand tight in hers. Her back is straight as she looks at the front yard that is littered with sand, chunks of thick brown wood that washed up the three blocks from the ocean to our front lawn. Her eyes settle on the big yellow question mark that FEMA has drawn on our windows.

“What does that mean?” I ask her.

She looks at me with a sad smile. “It means they haven’t condemned the house.”

“Not yet,” my father says from her other side, running his hand through his soft peppery hair.

“Can we go in now?” she whispers, I feel her hand trembling in mine and squeeze tighter.

The guardsman nods and three of them follow us into our home. The first thing I notice is the smell. It hits you before you step through the open space where our front door used to hang, rotten and dank. Beneath my feet the navy blue carpet squishes with salt water.

I watch the guardsmen move in front of us, each taking careful steps to check the strength of the floor below us.

There is a line cutting the front room horizontally about the same height as myself. I run my hand along the slight yellowish green color, bits of sand and grit falling as my gloves brush it from the tan colored wall.

“What is this?” I ask to no one in particular.

“That’s the waterline.”

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NOVEMBER 6 2012— 41,000: NUMBER OF FAMILIES STILL DISPLACED FROM THEIR HOMES

A guardsman takes the lead heading down the wooden stairs, pausing with each creek under his feet before waving us along.

Everything is wrong. The pool table where my sister and I used to make wagers for chores is smashed along the far wall, two legs missing.

Family photographs that we kept in sealed bins are littered across what used to be a pale blue carpet, warped with faded colors.

The spare freezer had tipped over spilling chicken, my mother's home-made lasagna, Lean Cuisines, frozen peas/carrots/potatoes/vegetable medleys all swirling in a small lake formed by melting ice.

My mother lets go of my hand for the first time and a guardsman follows me around the corner. I'm not looking for something but I'm fighting the urge to pick up everything and cry over it. There is an old tutu from my sister's ballet years covered in a thick layer of algae, Halloween decorations we haven't bothered to put up in years, old tattered clothing, notebooks, Christmas decorations, blankets and scarves my grandmother had knitted when we were young, and a pale green teddy bear.

Its eye was missing, the same as when I put it down here. The arm dangles by a few threads and it is ripped in half along the stomach. Tears spill down my cheeks and the guardsman snaps around as I let out a hiss of air.

The material squishes as I lift it, more stuffing falling from the upper-half as water drips down my arm.

Emma...Emmy...something with an Em. I rub my gloved hand over the missing eye that I had picked off when I was five.

"Miss, you have to put that down." the guardsman says towering over me.

"But it's mine," I tell him.

"Mold levels are too high for anything to be taken from in here. You have to leave it."

I held the bear tighter to my chest.

"Please put it down," he says again with more authority.

"Cupcake," my mother says, "let it go."

NOVEMBER 28 2012 — NEW JERSEY GOVERNOR CHRISTIE ESTIMATES SANDY RELATED DAMAGES TO BE ABOUT \$36.8 BILLION DOLLARS. MILLIONS OF MILES OF SHORELINE BEACHES ARE SEVERELY ERODED.

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My mother and I sneak past the barriers blocking off the two blocks leading to the ocean after it gets dark. Half crumbled houses blend into the piles of sand to the point where, in the shadows, you can't tell one from the other. My mother grips my hand and pulls me along behind her heading for the coastline.

We've done this walk together, barefoot in the summers, kicking leaves in fall, crunching through snow in the winter, a hundred times over. But now we climb over steep mounds of sand, avoiding chunks of metal and wood till we came to the where the shoreline used to be.

We stand there for a moment. Just looking. The sound of wind whistling through the houses behind us sends shivers down our spines.

My mother let go of my hand stepping further out on the sand. She looked small, for the first time in my life. Surrounded by nothing but broken bits of boardwalk, homes and memory. For the first time since the storm, I'm scared.

"Everything I grew up with is gone," she whispers.

Shadows cover most of her body but I can tell she's crying. I've never seen her cry before. She lets out a sob. Not loud, but like the soft mewing of a newborn cat, trying to hide her tears from me.

"It's okay, Mom." I tell her, moving closer so I can rub small circles around her back like she used to do when I was young.

"No—Steph. Right now, it's not," she tells me, grabbing ahold of my hand anchoring herself to me. She lets a few more tears fall before leaning on me, letting me support both of our weight as our feet sink into the sand.