

"The Anomaly"  
by Daniel Overton

Though Ms. Tenderbrook was fresh out of college and brand new at Kingsfield Elementary, she considered herself quite well versed in reading books and people alike. Within ten minutes of her first day in the second grade classroom, she had the troublemakers pinned; she knew which children were idlers and which were bookworms, which were genuine and which would suck up in attempt to get good marks. She took pride in maintaining control of her classroom, and categorizing the children was the first step to success in the aforementioned field.

As the year set off, success Ms. Tenderbrook did have. The children completed their work and focused on their lessons and exercises. Hair-pulling and shin-kicking was scarce. Tardiness was uncommon, and detention even rarer. The one anomaly in behavior, however, lay in a scrawny, wide-eyed girl called Ruthie Gillespie. Ruthie was a mystery to Ms. Tenderbrook from the start; she fit into no category that Ms. Tenderbrook had ever seen, and though Ms. Tenderbrook would never admit it, the girl unnerved her for it.

Of course, equally as perturbing was Ruthie's tendency to lock her wide, blue eyes on whomever happened to be speaking, her jaw agape as if she was watching something absolutely appalling unfold in front of her. Then the girl would smile, wrapping her rope-like braids around her neck and tugging, her eyes unfocused yet. If asked a question, she rarely answered; when she deigned to speak, her voice was hoarse from disuse.

The other children gave her a wide breadth, utterly repelled by her, though always sneaking glances. It seemed to be a favorite game of theirs, seeing who could eye her the longest without being caught by her deadened eyes. Ruthie always seemed to know when her peers were

watching; she would whip around, braids bouncing, and bare her teeth at the observers, who always rushed to avert their gazes. Ms. Tenderbrook couldn't determine the extent to which this bothered Ruthie, seeing as the girl was inscrutable enough to begin with. Regardless, Ms. Tenderbrook pitied her. The gawking certainly didn't help her disturbedness.

Perhaps Ruthie knew this, Ms. Tenderbrook theorized as the weeks passed, because while the other children ran about during recess, Ruthie isolated herself in the far corner of the schoolyard, jabbing at the ground with sticks and rocks. Most skirted around her like a precarious grenade, though on occasion, an errant ball would roll into her region; the kickball players always traded looks of alarm, forcing the lowliest to scamper over to retrieve it. She hadn't even been a target of a vicious pack of twelve-year-old boys, the oldest in the school, who tormented most loners with delight.

Then, one morning in mid-November, two new boys arrived at Kingsfield Elementary. They were brothers, Ms. Tenderbrook knew, one in the third grade and one in the fifth. The elder was Thomas and the younger was Jim or James or John. They wore tweed caps and neatly fitted shirts, their pants pressed and their shoes spotless. They carried themselves with a light-chested swagger that Ms. Tenderbrook recognized from her time studying in the city; they curled their lips at the belted-in shirts and loose pants of their new peers. Unsurprisingly to Ms. Tenderbrook, they were the ones that pulled Ruthie's pin.

Ms. Tenderbrook was grading spelling tests at her desk as the children played outside in the schoolyard when the usual sounds of chatter that drifted through the glass window panes were replaced by absolute silence, as if the children had been vanished. Ms. Tenderbrook straightened her head and set down her pen; slowly, she turned to peer out the window. The

children were present but frozen in place, their heads turned to Ruthie's corner. With some trepidation, Ms. Tenderbrook followed their gazes down the yard and found the city brothers towering over poor Ruthie, whose braids were glazed with dirt.

Ms. Tenderbrook stood up from her chair, her lips pursed as she strode across the room and down the hall. She pushed the front door open and stepped out into the yard, her shoulders lifting against the chilled air. To her alarm, Ruthie was on her feet, lunging at the younger brother.

"Stop that!" she called, bustling towards the corner, but the children didn't seem to hear her.

The younger brother was retreating from Ruthie now, his wide eyes glued to her as she swiftly turned and grabbed Thomas's collar. She was snarling at him, her words unintelligible until Ms. Tenderbrook apprehensively drew close.

"... *Dead*, my daddy, he kill't a man, I sawr it. He'll kill you too, I'll get 'im to kill you *an'* your brother. He's gonna use a gun, he will. An'... An'... Bang! You'll be *dead*."

"Ruthie, stop it," Ms. Tenderbrook finally drew the nerve to say. "That's enough."

Ruthie's piercing eyes snapped up to Ms. Tenderbrook, who took a step back without even thinking about it. "My daddy 'll *kill* 'im. *Dead!*"

"You shouldn't tell lies like that," said Ms. Tenderbrook in an attempt at admonishment. "Let him go, now."

Thomas was leaning so far back that he was prone to topple at any moment. Ruthie turned to look at him again, her fists tightening on his crumpled collar.

“I ain’t lyin’,” she told him, her voice dropping into a lower, more sinister range. “My daddy’s a *murd’rer*. Look in the paper.”

Thomas’s face, which had been white when Ruthie grabbed him, was slowly taking a bluish hue. Ruthie leaned in closer and squinted, as if looking at him for the first time. She must’ve seen the fear in his eyes, because without any notice, she released him; he stumbled back, grabbing at his younger brother, who was still captivated by Ruthie.

“Let’s go, John,” said Thomas hoarsely.

John remained motionless for a long moment, staring at the girl who unmade his brother. Ruthie jutted her chin forward, daring him to test her as his brother had. Thomas seemed to have had his fill, because he took John by the arm and dragged him across the yard, not to lick wounds so much as to cower. John went without argument.

Ms. Tenderbrook looked back at Ruthie, who had retaken her seat in the grass and was stabbing at a figure sketched out in the dirt with a small twig. The only hint of something amiss was the dust on her long, messy braids. Ms. Tenderbrook opened her mouth to scold the girl, but, lacking the words or the courage for it, she let her jaw fall shut, retreating back into the school. Upon sitting down at her desk, she peered out the window; the children seemed to be resuming play, the brothers Thomas and John still as far from Ruthie as possible.

She would say nothing to the class, she decided as she picked up her pen. No one had been badly injured, the brothers had learned their lesson, and Ruthie seemed unaffected. Her threats were empty, surely. Just a ploy to be left alone. Ms. Tenderbrook couldn’t deny that Ruthie’s words had troubled her, but she resolved to ignore the niggling uneasiness in the back of her mind in favor of gathering her attention back to the spelling tests.

By the end of the day, however, Ms. Tenderbrook still hadn't managed to shake her perturbation. When the children were dismissed, she didn't linger about the classroom as she often did to reorder books and push in stray chairs. Instead, she gathered her things, hurrying to set off down the dirt road that wound along the outskirts of town.

She passed the Wilson house, where Mrs. Wilson, a stout, busy woman, was hanging her laundry to dry; she lifted a hand in acknowledgement, which Ms. Tenderbrook mirrored in return. Charlie Miller, whom Ms. Tenderbrook had taken a shy liking to, was carting manure to his field across the road. Ms. Tenderbrook would usually slow her pace in hopes of being noticed, but today she strode along unwaveringly. She barely paused to return Mrs. Babicz's greeting that came from the orchard house afront a grove peach trees; she felt a twinge of guilt for it, as the woman reminded her of her late grandmother.

Nearing her own home, she caught a glimpse of her next-door neighbor, Mr. Hodge, who the children supposed to be over a hundred and fifty years old. Though Ms. Tenderbrook knew this to be tripe, one rumor that held true was that he was never without a paper clutched between his shriveled fingers. Indeed, he was so focused on some article or another that he didn't notice her approach. She nearly went by without calling a customary hello, but something rattling in the back of her skull stopped her in her tracks; it solidified in the form of Ruthie's assertion in the schoolyard - *My daddy's a murd'rer. Look in the paper.*

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hodge!" she close to shouted.

Most anyone would've startled, but as a testament to his supposed age, Mr. Hodge lifted his head slowly. His eyes followed a moment later, as if it took grueling effort to rip them from the page in front of him.

“G’d afternoon,” he creaked, squinting at her as she trotted up to his front steps. “Howdy do?”

“I’m well, and you?”

Mr. Hodge waved a hand. ““Preciatin’ the sun while it’s still around.”

“It hasn’t been too cold yet,” Ms. Tenderbrook agreed. She glanced down at the paper before asking, “Any big news these days?”

““Round here?” Mr. Hodge coughed, or maybe laughed. “Naw. Not ‘less you count the suicide, but that was back in August, you ‘member.”

Ms. Tenderbrook’s eyes widened. “I don’t. I only moved to town in September, see.”

“Did you?” Mr. Hodge scrutinized her with care, then said, “I s’pose no one told you, then. Too soon to talk about it, I’d think.”

Ms. Tenderbrook waited with bated breath for him to carry on.

“Wouldn’t’ve wanted to put you off,” said Mr. Hodge elusively. “It was an awful shame.”

“What happened?” Ms. Tenderbrook asked, drawn in.

Mr. Hodge leaned closer; his wrinkled face was somber, but he seemed to be enjoying the role of gossip immensely.

“Donnie who worked at the mill, his Sarah past’ away last winter. Started coughing an’ didn’t stop, they didn’t have the money for a hospital...” Mr. Hodge took a contemplating pause before continuing, “He just wasn’t right after that. E’ryone saw that, but no one saw it coming. No one but God can see things like that coming.”

“How horrible,” Ms. Tenderbrook murmured, pressing a hand to her chest.

Mr. Hodge nodded gravely. “Shot ‘imself. But the real shame, the worst bit, he did in in front o’ his little girl.”

Ms. Tenderbrook gasped. “No.”

“Yes.” Mr. Hodge shook his head, his jowls swaying. “An’ now she ain’t quite right, either. An awful, awful shame.”

He lowered his head, his lips moving soundlessly in what Ms. Tenderbrook guessed were words for the Lord alone to hear. In the silence, Ms. Tenderbrook thought of Ruthie, whose haunted eyes never quite left her mind alone.

“Mr. Hodge,” she said slowly.

“Hm?”

“The girl - do you know her name?”

Mr. Hodge lifted his head. “Ruthie. Ruth Gillespie.”