Houses Are Havens and the Outside Plans Your Destruction

by Brett Fogarty

The first of the fires that started by the river in the abandoned mills were so hot they burned white and pale blue, shooting embers into the night sky. We watched them on the porch as distant sirens died and started up in cycles. Kevin drew the smoke silhouetted by the flames perfectly on paper grocery bags. I numbered his art 1-8 on the corners and hung them in sequence in the living room.

Mom says the reason why my little brother Kevin turned out like he did was because of oven cleaner. Fourteen years ago she left the door open for the special foam to form and when she came back he was playing in the oven like it was a bubble bath. It wasn't really any of our faults, but it didn't stop my father from disconnecting the pipe and throwing the appliance off the porch. When Spring came, the town put a letter in our mailbox telling my father to move the oven off the lawn or they would do it for him, at cost.

Since then, there has just been an gaping space in the kitchen with the flex gas line snaking out of the wall. Dad came home from work every night, jingled the change in his pocket, looked at the space where the oven used to be and said,

"How, how many empty mouths are there to fill tonight?"

The fires burned angry. Firefighters sprayed jets of water and special foam while helicopters circled, searchlights scanning, but the flames kept licking out, somehow finding air. We looked at the drawings, a timeline of the fires with eight night skies and jet black plumes of smoke snaking upwards, filling the space. Everyone was scared that summer, the days were quiet and at night we stayed near the television, waiting for the sirens.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/brett-fogarty/houses-are-havens-and-the-outside-plans-your-destruction--3»*
Copyright © 2010 Brett Fogarty. All rights reserved.

It was one of the homeless men who swathed himself with discarded blankets and slept by the train stop. The paper said he stank of paint thinner, it had saturated through each of his dozen blankets and turned the skin on his hands a disturbing shade of white. The police asked him how anyone could do such a thing. He said it was the space, there was so much of it everywhere and he could never put possessions or textile machines operated by workers in it, so at least he filled it with something, anything.

"My fires are gifts to the empty space", he told a nervous public defender.

I talked at Kevin about The Grotesques in Winesburg, Ohio. A news report in the background kept flashing pictures of the fires and a ten second shot of the homeless man being escorted to court. A camera steadied and focused on his white hands. At the dinner table Kevin kept repeating the word "grotesqueeeee!" through full mouthfuls of store bought mashed potatoes and roast beef. Afterwards, my mother went into the yard, wobbling with a glass of wine in her hand and sat in the square brown spot where the oven used to be.

The drawings on the bags got damp in a September heat wave and eventually fell off the wall. No one bothered to pick them up.