House on Fire

by Jason Lee Norman

They got on like a house on fire. That's what my mom used to say about our dog and cat. I never knew whether it was meant to be a good thing or a bad thing. The cat was missing most of its left ear and I was pretty sure that was the dog's doing. The dog has been limping from the moment we brought the cat home from the shelter. Whatever their relationship was, you could be sure that every Sunday evening they'd be curled up by the fire; asleep in each other's stinky paws.

My sister had wanted to rescue a cat for ages so finally my mom brought her to the pound and they picked the most wretched thing anyone had ever seen. It was the smell of gasoline that sealed the deal for my sister. It was her favourite smell. They got on like a house on fire. Come to think of it, my mom used to say that about the fruits and vegetables in the crisper as well. "Just like a house on fire", she'd say as she threw the carrots in next to the apples. She always said it with a slight smile on her face while shaking her head from side to side as if gently saying 'no'. Crows and squirrels, members of parliament, even two scoops of ice cream, they all got on like a house on fire according to my mum. No one paid her much attention until the house caught fire.

Let's get one thing straight before we move on: my father's death had nothing to do with fire. He was lying in bed when the fire started but the heart attack got him way before the fire did. It reduced him to just his fillings and shin bones but the doctors assured us that his death had nothing to do with fire.

I started the fire. I started the fire in my room. I started the fire in my room because I was cold. I figured something small, in an old oil drum I kept in there, and no one would get hurt. The house burned for nearly two months but for the first couple of weeks it was just localized to my room. I slept on the floor in my sister's room for the duration.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/jason-lee-norman/house-on-fire»*
Copyright © 2009 Jason Lee Norman. All rights reserved.

The neighbors stood outside in their pajamas for days and watched the fireman spray walls of water at the house be we mostly stayed inside. We brought the cat in at night and let the dog out. The fire burned through the end of daylight savings time and all the firemen got paid an hour of overtime. Behind one of the trucks they erected a tent and ate sandwiches. My mom brought them rice crispy squares for dessert.

If it wasn't the searing heat it was the smoke in my eyes. There was always something to make me unhappy. With our father turning to cinders in the master bedroom and the dog and the cat missing for over a week, my mother did her best but ultimately fell short. The fire spread to the main floor during my birthday party, right when I was going to blow out the candles. My mother did her best but enough was enough.

Later that night we packed our things and left through the front door. I wanted to jump from the second floor window but the fire chief couldn't guarantee that I would not break a bone. The neighbors that were huddled outside clapped as the firemen wrapped us in wool blankets. We ate the leftover sandwiches and watched the house burn for another week and waited for the cat and dog to come back.