

# The Uninvited.

In early September tornadoes raged through Athens County in Southeast Ohio scattering homes, cars, and lives. The view from The Plains, one small town in the path of the storm.

**Y**ou could stand at the top of the hill, behind the school and under the ceiling of gray clouds, above the ruined football stadium and see the path of the storm. You didn't have to close your eyes or imagine- it you could look out over the line of trees snapped in half off into the distance. Splintered. You saw where it touched down, leaped up like a child playing hopscotch, and came crashing down again.

The long green hill behind the high school, soaked from the rains, wept under your footsteps. You ducked to avoid the ribbons of FIRE LINE DO NOT CROSS. It was as you came around the side of the second trailer tossed and rolled like an empty cigarette carton that you realized why it was resting in that awkward position, tilted and turned, but not yet at rest. It was crushing two cars underneath.

One, two, three trailers in a row, blown over along McDonald Street. In front of each one folks lingered- landlords, volunteer firefighters, onlookers. Not so many of the

former occupants. They were in the hospital or the shelter. A guy about 60 with a big gut and arms, torn jeans, a red ball cap and a scowl on his face leaned against a mailbox smoking a cigarette. Talking and listening, he could be anywhere, any day. It's like he didn't notice behind him the shell of a suddenly very mobile home lay on its side.

People walked up and down the street with their arms extended, squinting into the screen of their mobile phones, trying to cram the whole broken scene into a text message. Old ladies bent to avoid the downed power lines stretching between downed poles. People gathered near the school They got yelled at by an administrator, "Get off the track, PLEASE get out of the stadium." The bleachers for the visiting team were twisted, flipped in a less than sportsmanlike way. There was no more press box, and the cinderblocks for the concession stand were like loose molars, spilling out of the sagging walls.

Five seniors, members of the football team loitered around the

back of the field near their houses where some of them waited out the storm. Their coach came over, stepping over a bed of soft pine boughs to them. He rested his elbows on the fence where it sagged under a broken pine tree. He asked them what they thought- there was a football game tonight. They could either play it somewhere else, or call it off, it was up to them. He turned and walked away so they could think about it and a couple of them hung their heads. The biggest one, a senior with a shaved head and an Athens Top Dogs t-shirt on stretched thick arms out and up, laced his fingers together and held his head in his hands. Next to him a teammate saw and threaded an arm around his shoulder. Overwhelmed and confused he let the tears come. His friends sitting nearby looked away. The painted Bulldog mascot looked sideways from the buckled and falling billboard next to the flattened scoreboard.

Behind the school eight battered cars rested in the grass, unmoved since the storm. A Buick had its rear window smashed. An F-350

Story and pictures by Victor J. Blue

extended cab had its side punched in. Senior Laura Tobar got the door of her friend Chris Nance's Mazda open. Her blonde hair blew in the breeze as she put her fingers through the punctured windshield and went through what she and her friends Ian and Keefe found inside. Keefe held up a book to her. "Should we keep 'The Crucible'?" "It's so weird," she said. "It's like we know these cars."

The fences filtered the mess, the mass of material moved by the winds. A newspaper shard weaved through the chain links, torn where a recipe was. A white sheet of aluminum siding suspended three feet off the ground. The pattern of the links was a sieve for shingles and drywall. Once pink insulation draped and clumped across them like dead and sagging jellyfish. A popcorn box from the soccer game that never finished stuck in them. You never realized there was so much particle board in everything, or yellow foam. Why do they build places for people to live out of all this yellow foam?

At the far end of McDonald a hill of wreckage rested on a green

lawn. Dee Forsyth sat on a set of disembodied porch steps leading to nothing. The wheels of her trailer hung 8 feet off the ground, resting on the pile of all of her belongings. "My boyfriend works in Columbus. He came home and said 'I need a haircut, let's go to Wal-Mart.' About 15 minutes later the storm hit." She wore a buckeyes t-shirt and black workout pants. Her home was all over the yard around her, the guts of her house, it's entrails spread out around. The floor of the trailer on top, the weak walls filled with that damn yellow foam folded underneath it. The kitchen sink hung from a hose resting on the fake wood tiles that were the kitchen floor. Her pantry spilled across McDonald Street. A ruptured can of peas, broken boxes of macaroni. A slick of Hershey's syrup spread from a crushed bottle. Egg cartons. A bathing suit still hung from a towel rack. Couches. Bathtub. Black and broken Sony flatscreen TV. Bed frames. Coat rack. Freezer. Doors. A crushed La-Z-Boy. Washing machine. Walls. All of it like it was in a blender, spilled out. Dee leaned against a destroyed Mitsubishi Eclipse in what used to serve as the driveway. "I feel like I should

be cleaning this up, but what the hell do you do with it?" A DVD sat scratched on the ground in among crystals of shattered glass and scattered pine needles. It read 'The Uninvited.'

Her mother Linda stood near wearing an Ohio University shirt, arms crossed, her glasses magnifying her sky blue eyes. She was off from her job at Arby's, called and said she wasn't coming in. She lives in Chauncey. 1937, there was a tornado there. She remembers seeing pictures in the paper a few years back on the anniversary. She stood quiet, worried. She looked over it all. Broken and smeared and soaked. She was quiet, trying to be there but out of the way. "They say in the hills you don't get tornadoes." She looked up at the sky, at an army helicopter beating the sky with it's rotors above her. "But we're in the hills here, and we sure got it." ■