

SWEET BY & BY

RILEY TIMMS

THERE WAS THE GROANING AGAIN. It was dry and rasping, and it trailed off with a wavering gurgle. Like batteries running low in a toy. Long, drawn out, echoing in the silence of the dark home. You covered your ears; it didn't work, but you did it anyway. Sometimes it made you feel better.

Anna-Marie Johnson was a star student with the perfect boyfriend and a bright future. Or, that's what you pretended. You liked to pretend that she'd had blond hair, two younger brothers, and a love for habanero peppers. Not anymore though. The rotting flesh and her moaning, groaning shambles. The cannibalism too. Some people tried to say that they ("those things!") weren't human anymore, so what they did wasn't cannibalism. But they looked human to you, still, so you could pretend. Pretend that the thing outside your apartment had family and feelings and wasn't scratching divots in the wood to try and tear open your insides.

It worked. Sometimes.

The building whistled with wind. It sounded like the floorboards themselves were groaning, and you gave a little silent giggle- turned into a dry, muffled sob halfway. You were fine. It was fine. It was fine, sitting here in the old farmhouse, waiting and pretending. Sometimes you imagined that the sound of footsteps was a hero here to save the day, and they'd say "it's alright now!" and your family would be safe, your dog would be alive, and Dog Cops would play on tv. Back to normal. Anna-Marie Johnson would be saved, of course, and she'd be your best friend, and you'd both sit at Bruno Brother's Pizzeria and play at the arcade, just like friends, no hard feelings.

Wouldn't it be nice?

Maybe tomorrow would be the day the hero came. You hoped it was. Maybe tomorrow morning you'd wake up at dawn, to the sound of bones snap-

ping as the things dragged themselves into the shade to sleep, and you'd hear a big heavy car rumble down the road and all the heroes would come out. Bang bang. The sound of their guns firing, not of rotting fists at your door. Bang bang. The heroes would shoot the monsters, and they'd tell you how brave you'd been. That they were proud of you.

They'd come tomorrow. You knew they would. So you lowered your head to the floor, laying it on your balled jacket, and you tried to pretend that the thing breaking down the door was named Anna-Marie Johnson, that she was your best friend and tomorrow you'd get pizza and beat Tetris and everyone would clap and sing.

It was a nice dream. ✱