

IN THE MIDDLE OF POPLAR STREET

By Nate Southard

Ginny stood at the upstairs window, looking down at them all and trying not to cry. She had burst into tears twice in the past, and her mother had scolded her for it both times, telling her the thing in the street didn't deserve her sadness. Ginny couldn't help it, though. The people were just so mean it, and the scene unfolding now was just too strange, too awful, to be real.

A man in the coveralls was peeing on the thing in the middle of Poplar Street. The dead man, now staked to the concrete with pieces of rebar through his shoulders and around his throat, writhed as much as the pieces of steel would allow as he tried to escape the stream of urine. Her eyes darted from the groaning creature to the limp piece of flesh in the peeing man's hands, and she didn't know which

was more horrible. She tried to look away, but both sights horrified her, left her cold and disgusted even as they pulled at her eyes.

All around, the crowd laughed and cheered. A bearded man gave the one in coveralls a pat on the back. A bunch of teenage girls giggled.

Ginny decided she'd never giggle when she grew older.

She felt so sorry for the dead man. She didn't even know if he...it...had feelings anymore, but she still felt sorry.

At least they weren't using the fire hose.

The people did that sometimes. Their small town only had what Mom called a volunteer fire department, and every once in a while, one of the firemen would bring down a hose from the station. While everybody watched, making little giggles and almost shaking with excitement, the fireman would hook up the hose to a hydrant across the street and blast the thing with water. The creature would go crazy, wrestling against the water and rebar while the people cheered. Usually, the crowd kept spraying the hose for half an hour or more, until people wanted to get back in and kick the trapped dead man again. Of course, the firemen didn't bring out the hose much anymore. The last time, a bunch of skin and stuff had come off of the dead

man. One piece had hit a little girl, and everybody freaked out. Ginny hadn't seen the girl since.

She was probably freaked out, too.

Suddenly, the blinds slammed shut an inch away from her nose. She gasped, jumping backwards, and screamed when she found her mother standing right behind her.

"I told you not to watch that."

"I wasn't!"

"Don't lie to me."

Ginny turned around, wrapping her arms around her mom's waist. The woman smelled like cookies, and Ginny breathed the scent in deep. She loved her mom, loved her more than anything in the world, but she didn't see why the woman hated the thing in the street so much.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to lie to you. I just feel so bad."

Ginny looked up to see her mom, her face framed by stringy black hair, shake her head.

"Don't you feel bad for that thing, Ginny. It doesn't deserve it. You should know that."

"But he--"

"Don't you 'but' me, Ginny. And it's not a 'he,' okay? It's not a real person, not anymore. I don't care how miserable that monster out there looks. I want you to

remember that it wants to kill you, me, and everybody else in this town. If it ever gets off all that metal, it's going to do just that."

"Then why don't the people just kill it?"

"I wish they would. I hate having it this close."

"So why don't they?"

"You know the rules, Ginny. We have to wait for the county's clean up crew. We're not allowed to do it ourselves."

"So why are they hurting it?"

Her mom turned away then, looking around the room, examining the walls and doing her best to keep her eyes hidden. When she finally spoke, Ginny thought her voice sounded weird, a little bit softer than usual.

"Ginny, you know how the dead people used to be real people, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, the real people in this town went through a lot of trouble because of the dead. Remember that thing that happened at the school? Well, that truck driver was probably trying to get away from a bunch of those monsters, and that's why he crashed. A lot of people were killed by the ones who came back--not just here, but all over--and the real people were very afraid for a very long time. In

a lot of ways, they're still scared, and sometimes scared people get mad."

"But there's not really anything to be afraid of anymore, Mom. Most of the dead people are gone."

Ginny's mom smiled. "I know, honey, but people don't stop being scared right away. It takes time."

"But why do they get angry?"

Her mother sighed, and even Ginny could tell she was getting annoyed, struggling to remain patient. "Honey, scared people get angry because they don't like being afraid, and they think it's somebody else's fault that they were so scared in the first place. That's why they do stuff like what they're doing down in the street. It's because they hate that they're so scared, and they want to feel like they've made it all even. I guess...I guess they just need to convince themselves they're in control again."

Ginny breathed in her mom's scent, trying to make sense of what she'd said. Yeah, people were afraid. She had been afraid, too, but the dead people were mostly gone, now. There wasn't any reason to be scared anymore.

Sometimes people just didn't make any sense.

"You understand, honey?"

Ginny looked up at her mom. She smiled and hugged her tight around the waist.

"I do, Mom. I'm sorry."

It was the first time she could ever remember lying.

"So," her mother said, "What do you want for dinner?"

Ginny pretended to think it over.

"Cheeseburgers."

"I don't have any hamburger thawed out. We can have some tomorrow, if you want. Is that okay?"

"Sure. Can we have spaghetti tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Let's have spaghetti."

Mom smiled. "Okay, and I'll set some hamburger in the fridge to thaw."

"Thanks, Mom," Ginny said as she hugged her mother again. "I love you."

"I love you too, honey."

Her mom walked to the door, turning back to give Ginny a sad smile. "Stay away from the window, okay? I don't want you upsetting yourself."

She nodded, gave her mom a thumbs up. As she made the gesture, she realized how stupid it looked, how...silly.

Mom left the room. A second later, Ginny turned to peer through the blinds.

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Ginny pretended to sleep, the covers pulled up to her chin and her cheek against the pillow, until the noises from the street disappeared as the crowd dissipated and all she could hear was her mother's soft snoring. She waited a while longer, her eyes roaming the bedroom, and then climbed out of bed. The hardwood floor was cold beneath her feet, but she tried to ignore it. The air outside would be colder, the pavement ice against her soles, but she couldn't risk putting on her shoes or coat. Any unnecessary noise might wake up her mother, and then she'd have some explaining to do.

She crossed the hall and stepped to the window, pulling back the blinds the slightest bit. Poplar Street stood dark and empty, the way she had expected to find it. Squinting through the night's shadows, she could make out the sickening garden of rebar, the twisting figure it pinned to the pavement. The people always left the reanimated alone at night, and they never bothered leaving a guard, either. They knew it was harmless. Without its arms or jaw, it was just a thing. A punching bag or something more pitiful, and most didn't appear to like torturing it without an audience. Ginny shook her head, thinking about the people, and then stepped away from the window.

She made it to the kitchen without creaking any of the floorboards and pulled the refrigerator open as quietly as she could, her hand darting inside to shut off the interior light. Heart thumping behind her ribs, she paused to listen to the house, remaining still until she decided her mother was still asleep. The hamburger sat on the bottom shelf, still wrapped in plastic. Ginny removed it from the fridge and tucked it under her arm, closing the door behind her.

Almost done. The other item she needed was under the sink. She remembered last seeing it on the right hand side, and she hoped Mom hadn't moved it. Searching under the sink would be so loud it might wake the entire neighborhood, not just her mother. Luckily, her fingers closed around the object right away. She breathed a sigh of relief, and her heart calmed the slightest bit. Moving slowly, careful to keep the hinges from squealing, she opened the back door and left the house.

The winter air slashed at her as she rounded the house and stepped onto the cold concrete of Poplar Street. The dead person staked to the street like some kind of weird science project looked up, sensing her approach, and moaned.

"Quiet," Ginny said. "You have to be quiet, or I'll get caught."

The dead man didn't understand. It continued to groan, the sound both ominous and pathetic, as she stepped closer. When she finally stood over the creature, it could only wheeze in excitement, staring up at her and the objects in her hands.

Without a word, she set one of the objects down so she could unwrap the hamburger. The reanimated dead man caught the scent of blood and meat and began to thrash against its metal bounds. She placed the hamburger on the ground and then pushed it forward with her foot until it was within reach of the creature's ruined mouth. It looked up at her, eyes wide and glazed, yet somehow thankful. Then it dove into the meat. It worked with its dead tongue, doing its best to lap up the raw beef, and paused only to groan in pleasure before returning to its meal.

Ginny watched it eat, and she wondered what it might have looked like when it was alive. She could tell it had been a man. Maybe he had been handsome. Or maybe ugly. What about the man's family? Had he been married, had kids, maybe a little girl around her age?

Nobody in town seemed to care. They just used the thing in the street as something to beat on and torture.

Did it really make them feel safer? How could it? She doubted it. If people really feared the thing in the street, they wouldn't leave it alone at night.

"Monster," Ginny said, and she leaned forward to spit on the dead man. The glop of saliva struck the back of the thing's head and began to trickle down its ruined scalp. Ginny expected the thing to look up at her or try to shrink away or something. Anything. But the corpse didn't do a thing but work at the hamburger, its moans growing louder as it managed to eat more and more.

She drew in a deep breath and held it. The smell of hamburger mixed with the clean, empty smell of winter, but beneath it all, a rotten smell lingered, and she knew it was the miserable thing staked to the pavement. Disgusting.

Baring her teeth, her face morphing into an angry sneer, she picked up the other object and stepped forward. Slowly, she raised the hammer over her head, her fingers curling tighter and tighter. The reanimated continued to ignore her, not noticing the growl in her throat or even her presence until she swung the hammer as hard as her arms allowed, slamming the metal against the creature's shoulder. A screech split the quiet night as the dead

man's head arched away from the pavement, flesh and bone scraping against rebar.

Ginny caught a scream in her throat as terror burst up from her stomach and lungs. She scrambled away from the thing, making a trio of hurried steps across the pavement before her ankles twisted and she landed hard on her bottom. Then she scurried like a crab, forgetting the hammer, until she reached the sidewalk and the grass beyond. Its moans chased her, and soon she began crying, wiping at her eyes as she drew her knees under her chin.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Sitting in the grass, she found herself scared of her ability to hurt the thing. If she could hurt it, did that mean she could enjoy hurting it? She didn't want to find out.

Shivering, she watched the reanimated and waited. It continued to groan its pain into the street for several long moments, and she watched the houses for any lights flicking on or doors opening. No one appeared to notice, however, and after a few minutes the dead man returned to the package of hamburger. The night filled with slopping sounds and groans of pleasure.

Slowly, Ginny returned to her feet and started across the street. She stopped long enough to retrieve the hammer

from where she'd dropped it, and then a few more steps took her to the reanimated.

"I'm sorry," she told it again.

It ignored her, instead concentrating on the last few clumps of raw beef.

"I don't know who you were," she said. "You probably don't deserve this, though."

Ginny raised the hammer over her head once more. She eyed a spot on the back of the dead man's skull.

The wind picked up, and Ginny held her breath.