

# The Biting Cold

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I awake where they left me and I'm *cold*. In my skin and my flesh and bone, relentless *cold* gnawing me to my core. The sun is gone, but I can see everything and I'm *cold*. The alley reeks of piss and rot and mildew and trapped smog and I'm *so very cold*. There's something coming closer, and it's *warm*. Tiny and sharp and but *warm*. I can smell the rat before I can see it, wet fur and ammonia. I should be shivering, I'm *so cold*. But I'm not. I haven't moved at all. So it comes without fear to sniff at the place on my arm where one of them was biting at me, and *I've never been this cold before*.

Faster than it can blink, I've got it in my hands. And it's *warm*. So very *warm*! I can feel it pulsing and wriggling and its teeth do nothing. I need its *warmth*. And I *know* how to claim it. My teeth are sharp and its spine and ribs crumple, rattling my jaw, and I drink and my mouth is *warm*. And my tongue is *warm*! And my throat is *warm*. And--

And fast as it came, it's gone and everything I am is *cold*!!

No no no no no! I throw the empty meat away and I tear through the garbage bins and the cardboard! More rat, a racoon, cockroaches, *anything to escape this cold*! I think I'm screaming, but no words are forming. My mouth is too *cold* to make them.

Someone calls out to me. Someone from the street, framed by alleys walls, backed by glowing fog. He's pointing one way and beckoning to me with the other. He's bundled against the night, but he doesn't know what *cold* is. I do. I do and I hate it! I know what I have to do, but I can't remember if it's wrong. I try to remember, and he comes closer. Points to himself then to me then back at himself. He's saying something about alcohol and loss and getting right with Jesus and I don't care *because I'm cold*. *I can't bear this cold*! We're the same, he says. We are not the same. *I'm cold! Not him!*

I think I'm growling, and he knows I'm charging at him.

He kicks and shouts and claws and but he's *warm* and I'm *cold* and *I win*! When I take his neck in my teeth he gurgles and groans and I do what I have to do to drive the *cold* away. I'm *warm* in my mouth and my tongue and my cheeks and ears and *warm* in my throat and my chest and my belly and arms and legs and even my hands and right down to my toes. !! Am! *Warm*! I think I'm laughing, or maybe not because I don't feel it in my chest. The bundled man is lying at my feet, empty meat without a scarf, but the *cold* is his problem now. I leave him there in the alley like they left me, and as I walk out into the street I tell myself that if I can just get home and into my own bed, I'll wake up and this will be all a horrible dream --

*My toes have gone cold again* And my fingertips, and I know it's no dream. I think I'm crying, but my cheeks aren't wet and *they're going to get colder and colder if I don't do something right now!* *know* it! Like my feet and any fingers and no no no no I'll do anything! Anything! Just don't let the *cold* take me! I don't ever want to be *that cold* again!

Warm bed! *He said warm bed!* The empty meat, he said it! My ears are still *warm* and I remember! He said 'shelter this way'! He was pointing me *this* way. Left! If I just keep following this street, I'll find the shelter. I walk past grime-encrusted bricks, crumbling concrete, blowing papers. My knees

and my elbows are *cold* and so is everything past them. I run. I run until I smell the shadow of soup. Beans, rice, empty broth. I'm close. I turn left again. I follow my nose. I see the brightly frosted windows, lit from inside. The stuttering neon sign: All Are Welcome.

There will be people inside. So many people. Bedding down for the night.

*And they'll all be warm.*