

IT'S COLD OUT THERE, MAN

By Bradley Walton

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AUTHOR NOTES

I started work on this while visiting some friends in the country during the dead of winter. As I was typing, someone brought one of the dogs in from outside, and somebody else said, "It's cold out there, man." Without giving it much thought, I typed those words into the computer, and in fairly short order, they took over my script. The sentence has since become a running joke between me and my wife.

The convenience store in this script was inspired by a real place. I bought a gallon of milk there once. I am never, ever going back.

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CAST: a male or female COLLEGE STUDENT

AT RISE: The COLLEGE STUDENT, dressed in winter clothing, on a bare stage.

The cat is called "Roach." I suspect the name has something to do with what Roach considers everyone around him to be. There is an arrogant moral superiority in his eyes, the kind that says "I would have a seat on the Supreme Court, if it was worth my time."

Roach sits on the lap of a woman with a face so incredibly angular she resembles a Pablo Picasso painting brought to life. I think her name is Aunt Priscilla. I think she is glowering at me. But with that face, it's hard to be sure.

Beside Roach and Aunt Priscilla is a very large animal. I suspect it is a dog. It is definitely on Aunt Priscilla's side of the family. I think it wants to eat me. Looking from its eyes to Aunt Priscilla's and back, there is remarkably little difference in their expressions. I begin to think that she wants to eat me, too.

Roach is not interested in eating me. He is too highly evolved to be bothered with such things as food. When the others kill me, he will simply drink my soul.

There is a blast of frigid air and I try to sink down into my chair to hide from the cold. Sadly, it is a folding chair, and my gambit is unsuccessful. The door slams shut and an old man stands there with a second dog-like creature on a leash. They are both covered with a dusting of snow which they both proceed to shake from their bodies in an alarmingly similar manner. The old man is named Zeke. He is my roommate's grandfather. "It's cold out there, man," he says.

I am uncertain how I should respond to this. It is, in fact, extremely cold outside. That is not in doubt. But why Zeke would go out in a tank-top undershirt that doesn't quite cover his geriatric beer gut is beyond me. (*If the narrator is female, add, "The fact that I am not a man is also mildly disconcerting."*)

"It's darn cold out there, man" Zeke repeats, adding the "darn" for emphasis.

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It occurs to me that Zeke may be giving me a subtle warning. A warning that I am trapped here and will freeze to death in the bitter cold if for any reason I should try to leave.

I look at Zeke. Zeke looks at me. I look at Roach. Roach looks at me. I look at Priscilla. Priscilla looks at me. I look at the dog creatures. The dog creatures look at me. There is an incredibly uncomfortable silence that I feel hinges on...me. I must speak. I must speak now. I must choose my next words very, very carefully. I fear that they could be my last.

"Yup," I say.

"Sure is," Zeke says. Priscilla nods. Roach doesn't care. The dog creatures look disappointed. I get to live for another minute.

When I say, "Live for another minute," I am, perhaps, exaggerating the potential danger. There is nothing outside of my own paranoia to suggest that the incredibly scary people and animals in this room would even consider killing or eating me. But my paranoia is doing quite fine on its own, thank you.

In the kitchen, my roommate helps his (or "her") mother prepare Thanksgiving dinner. It is a succulent feast of consisting of fish sticks, cheese dogs, burritos, pork rinds, and fried Cheerios. "Nobody in my family actually likes dressing or cranberry sauce," my roommate had explained. "We ain't fancy like that. If you're gonna pig out, might as well make it food that you want to eat." I can't argue with the reasoning, but I would feel better about it if I didn't get the impression that the family does all of their grocery shopping at the 7-11 down the road.

I noticed early in the school year that my roommate's taste in food veered toward the unhealthy. I have never seen him eat a vegetable. In fact, I think for one entire week he lived exclusively off of Twinkies and Mountain Dew. I assumed at the time that he was rebelling against a culinarily restrictive upbringing. I know now that he was, in fact, honoring the spirit of the family dinner table with the fidelity of a zealot.

Because of my mistaken assumption about my roommate's eating habits, and because I had never seen any pictures of his family, I accepted his invitation to Thanksgiving dinner. My family is half a continent away. His was "just over the mountain" in the rural outskirts of a fairly major city. I will never again underestimate the words "rural" and "outskirts". Even when located within a few miles of a major metropolitan area, places are called "rural" and "outskirts" for a reason.

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One of the dog creatures slaps itself upside the face with its tongue in a sloppy licking motion. It looks around, confused, as if uncertain where the assault originated. Then it settles back down and does the same thing again. Aunt Priscilla shifts in her seat. Roach has probably just figured out time travel, but isn't about to tell anyone. Zeke looks out the window. "It's cold out there, man," he says.

Roach pivots an ear in my direction. I take it as a sign that I'd better answer quick if I know what's good for me.

"Yup," I say.

My roommate's mother calls my name. I am only too happy to join them in the kitchen.

Mrs. Kaine is a relatively normal-looking woman, in a frizzy, rotund and toothless kind of way. I feel bad for wishing she wouldn't smile at me.

"We're out of milk. Could you and Zeke go to the store?"

My hearts skips a beat. Alone with Zeke? In the snow? A thousand grisly scenarios flash across my brain in the second before I hear Zeke's voice holler from the living room, "It's cold out there, man." Apparently everyone to whom Zeke makes this declaration is "man" regardless of their actual gender.

"That may be, pa, but we need milk for the cheese dogs!" Mrs. Kaine hollers back.

We do? Really? I look around the kitchen, certain that I must be missing something obvious. Milk as a required ingredient for cheese dogs? I look at my roommate in confusion. He looks back at me, confused by my confusion. Whatever it is they do with milk and cheese dogs in this house is clearly such an ingrained part of his upbringing that it has never occurred to him to think otherwise.

Mrs. Kaine hollers back at Zeke, "Unless you want to spend your Thanksgiving day without milk for your cheese dogs."

Motivated by this harrowing scenario, Zeke stumbles to the kitchen. "Best get your coat on," he says to me. "It's cold out there, man."

We trudge through the snow to Zeke's ancient pickup truck. Zeke has bundled himself in a denim jacket which he has not bothered to button. I feel sorry for the poor exposed hairs sticking out of his navel.

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"It's cold out here, man," Zeke says as the truck pulls out of the gravel driveway.

"Yup." I agree.

We drive a mile down the road to the 7-11, which it turns out is not actually a 7-11, but a generic convenience store.

"You go in and get the milk. I'll keep the motor running," says Zeke. "It's cold out here, man."

Zeke makes no motion to hand me money. I quickly try to recall the contents of my wallet. I'm pretty sure I have at least ten bucks. I guess I can spring for milk if they're making me dinner. My brain shudders a little and re-words the thought: I guess I can spring for milk if they're making dinner for me.

I climb out of the truck and enter the store. It doesn't immediately strike me as scary, but the more I look around, the more things seem off. For one thing, there is no price to be found on any item anywhere. For another, there is a fine layer of dust not only on the shelves, but on some of the merchandise. Particularly the soap and personal care items. When I finally find the milk, it is stashed away in dark cooler along with several boxes of Ho-Ho's and a can of beans. I try not to wonder about this as I take the milk to the cash register. The going price of a gallon of milk is about \$3.50. I expect to pay more in a convenience store. Probably around \$4.50. I set the milk on the counter. The cashier, a forty-something woman with a long, twisty hair growing out of a mole on her cheek, does not scan the barcode. She looks blankly at me and says, "\$8.64."

There is a pause. I want to ask if she's kidding, but I feel certain she would pull a shotgun out from behind the counter and blow me to smithereens. I consider walking out the door without the milk, but Zeke's potential reaction concerns me. I start to reach for my wallet when Zeke pokes his head in the door.

"Sally, he's with me."

"Oh, you should've said something," Sally says to me with a rotted smile. "\$4.25."

AUTHOR NOTES

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