

The Gutter Rats

By Marilyn Reeves

I rarely go out at night, especially downtown, but there was an event and I met some friends. A play. Dancing and singing. Colorful costumes. Hilarious laughter. What a treat!

Afterward we stopped at Starbuck's, had some coffee – they ordered the fancy stuff, I drank mine plain. Then they walked me to the parking lot and we said goodnight. It was great fun. Let's do it again sometime.

Took a wrong turn coming out of the lot. Wasn't sure where I was, which way to go. I never go downtown. Well, there's the river – it ought to tell me something. It doesn't. I just keep driving, but I don't know where I'm going. I'm lost.

I cross railroad tracks, see a lot of old, abandoned buildings, windows boarded up. It's so dark – not many street lights. Where am I? How do I get out of here? I don't like this neighborhood – it gives me the creeps.

I stop for a red light. There's a tap on my window. Scares me half out of my wits! A man in a hoodie – looks dangerous! I run the red light, I am terrified! And then I see them. Bodies everywhere. They look like animals, huddled against doorways, lying on the sidewalk. Alive or dead? Two filthy children wearing nothing but diapers playing in the gutter. So tiny I hardly see them. Slam on my breaks so I don't run over them. Where is their mother? It's late. Why aren't they home in bed?

Women with hollow eyes make beckoning motions to me, but they're too drugged out to get up off the ground. I pity them but I don't acknowledge them. I look straight ahead, instead.

An old man in a pea coat is lying flat on the sidewalk, snoring loudly, cradling an empty bottle. People walk right over him as if he wasn't there.

I can't believe what I'm seeing – do people actually live this way? How can they survive? Do they even want to?

I'd help them if I could, but I don't know how. I don't have the wherewithal. Just get me out of here – I want to go home!