

by Carroll Brown

Little Jenny's fingers painting on the window, melting the frost into pretty pictures for Jack Frost. Rub, rub, rub, there's an eye. Scratch, scratch (it tickles and tingles on her fingertips), there's his big smile, just for little Jenny. Hello, Jack Frost!

James Wheeling walked up behind his daughter, stood behind her quietly as she painted in the frost, and looked out past the sharp-eyed grinning faces of her imagination, out into the field. The grass was dry, spiked and frozen under the moonlight, marching like the spears of a thousand miniature armies in the night. The snows would be coming soon. The air had that heavy, laden quality, the clouds that were slowly building above looked bloated, swollen, ready to burst, and the wind blew with the cracking cackle of winter.

He hated winter, hated snow, despised with passion everything about those four or five months out of the year when the world died, when everything beautiful was buried under the white blanket.

"Come away from the window, Jenny," he said quietly, still staring into the grey night. He touched her shoulder.

"But Daddy," she whined, letting all the petulance of a seven year old creep into her voice, "I'm playing with Jack Frost."

"Jennifer."

She straightened, knowing what the tone in his voice meant. She slid into his arms, returned his hug half-heartedly, looking back at the window as he carried her toward the fire, watching as tears streamed from icy eyes and the face melted, grinning.

The first snowflake hit the windshield like a dying butterfly, the thin wet splat audible even over the grumbling roar of the engine. He stared at it for a moment, disgust and a small twinge of horror swirling across his face, watching it slide down onto the wiper and leaving a clear trail over the dirty glass. He flipped the wiper switch, the blades scattering the droplets of water like the ashes of a vampire, and grinned. But the flakes came down harder, slowly whitening the world around him, and he let his smile drop as the frozen charms overpowered his car, piling on the hood and windshield faster than the wind and his wipers could beat them back. He turned up the wiper speed, listening to the slick whistle of rubber on wet glass.

It had been a day like this, he thought. True, there had been snow already on the ground then, but it was old snow, black and oily by the roadside; the pavement had been clear for a week. And then it had started; at first, light, almost pleasant, a quaint New England snowfall that brought images of Robert Frost poems to mind. The snow came smiling down singing songs and painting pictures in the fields with the help of a brisk westerly breeze. Then it turned mean.

He shuddered. He didn't know. He hadn't been there, couldn't possibly know how it had been. But he should have been there. Perhaps if he had been...He yanked his mind away from that train of thought. Down that path madness lies, he told himself.

The snow already lay in a thick dusting across the front yard by the time he reached home. Miniature drifts rising no more than an inch above the frigid ground rippled across the lawn, turning it into a scale version of some great wind-swept desert, the dunes rolling like waves into the distance. The wind had begun to pick up.

When he walked in, the house was dark, lit only by the blue-white shine of the moon reflecting through snowflakes, and he groped for the switch, calling his daughter's name. No answer. He dropped his brief case with a small bang onto the floor and called again, one hand still blindly hunting for the little lever.

Something moved upstairs. He froze, trying to determine the sound. It certainly hadn't sounded like a

noise a little girl would make, but exactly what it had sounded like eluded him. He frowned.

"Jennifer?"

The noise again, at the top of the stairs. A shadow moved, flowed like a breeze across the wall and over the knob of the banister, twisting like a snake, slowly, down the rail. His breath began to come in little gasps. He remembered lying in the dark as a child, crying, waiting for the beasts to come. Something frigid slipped across his ankle, and he jumped, looking down. From under the door he could see pale moonlight seeping in, glowing blue, little flakes swirling in and gathering on his feet. They clung there, melting on his socks, killed by his body heat, chilling his skin.

He raised his head quickly. The shadow was almost in front of him, rising, rising, getting bigger, a shade cast by the moonlight, eyes opening, mouth gaping, coming down. His hand continued to dance on the wall on its own, ran across the button and moved on, and he pulled his arm back, trying to find it again, and flipped the switch upward.

The house was empty, filled only with the gentle warm electric glow.

"Jennifer!"

He saw her from the kitchen window looking back over the field behind the house. She cavorted in the snow-covered grass, dancing and twirling in her thin nightgown like a suburban faery princess, picking up the handfuls of the dry snow and sprinkling it around her in a hail of magic dust.

She screamed when he grabbed her, so caught up in her delight that she never heard the crunch of leather soles coming toward her.

"What the hell are you doing?" She cringed back from the force of his anger, cowering in his grip.

"Playing," she said in a weak voice. "With Jack Frost."

"Do you want to die, is that it?" He knew he shouldn't be screaming like this, that she was just a little girl and didn't know any better, but he couldn't stop the storm once it had begun. "Do you want to get pneumonia? People who run around in the snow barefoot get sick and they die." He reached down, grabbed a handful of snow and shook it in her face. He couldn't tell if she was crying or if it was just the snow, melting on her cheeks. "This kills people! Understand?"

She nodded weakly, her eyes scrunched up, tearing now, he was sure. "I'm sorry, Daddy."

He just looked down at her for a long moment, staring, letting the winds blow down from the Arctic and over them. Then he picked her up, out of the snow, brushing away the flakes that had gathered in her hair.

"Let's go inside," he said.

She nodded, hugging her arms protectively around his neck, but he didn't notice. He knew the noise in the house, recognized its voice, could still hear it whispering as it slid down the stairs toward him. It had sounded cold.

After a while the swamp starts to suck you down. You fight it, because your ancestors fought it for a million years, but eventually it gets a hold of you and starts dragging you under. Finally you just say the hell with it and you let it take you, because you're tired, so goddamned tired. And you slide underneath, in the thick liquid arms of the muck and the slime, but you're not dead yet. Even if you've given up, every cell in your body is sucking in oxygen, grabbing what it can, trying everything to stay alive. You're not dead yet, and you can feel the swamp creatures twist around you, gliding over you and taking little bites and you want to scream because you know that soon you'll be inside of them. But you can't scream, and the swamp fills your lungs.

That's the way James Wheeling felt the day they laid his wife in the earth.

Oh very young, too young, God, he had sobbed. Don't take her, just leave us be, let us be happy you son of a bitch why did you take her give her back, he had screamed and screamed and screamed and stood there silently, the tears flowing like slow glaciers down his frozen face, stood there wondering why everyone couldn't hear the sounds in his head. They all watched, doing nothing, as his wife descended into blackness. He wanted to leap into the pit, reclaim her, not let the merciless earth take her.

And he stood there, holding Jennifer, who watched the snowflakes gliding down, and he did nothing, too.

The slip of the wheel, the eternal second of horizontal free fall, each grain of snow grinning as it shot past. Images swam by, rotating, spinning, an insane rush of sight that blurred into white. Far off there was a high sound, and the long, long metallic thunder.

He jerked awake, his eyes almost out of their sockets, and lay there, panting, feeling like a landed fish. Sweat ran in tears down the sides of his face, collecting behind his head. He breathed in a quick gulp, his hands twitching. The goddamn dream, the dream is back, the words ran in loops through his mind. The dream had stalked his nights for months after the accident, waiting always in some overlooked corner before striking. It had driven him to drink, it had driven him to an analyst's couch, it would have driven him to insanity if he could have afforded the fare.

But he couldn't. He had Jennifer, the last piece of Helen on this earth. He had sat in the swamp, slowly sinking, and looked at her as she watched him, her eyes growing bigger, and farther away. Those eyes were his lifeline. He had clung to those watching eyes as the muck sucked at his toes, some part of him refusing to go down, and inch by inch, hand over hand, he had pulled himself from the swamp on those eyes.

And now the swamp was swimming around his knees again, and he didn't know why. He rolled his head, felt something crunch, and gingerly pulled one hand from beneath the covers, feeling the back of his head. The hair, soaked in sweat and frozen in little spikes and spires, pricked at his fingers, and he massaged it, breaking the crust of ice. Frozen? His mind ran down the list of possible problems, and he rose, swinging his legs out, and jerked them back in. The air was frigid, and he finally noticed the cloud that drifted around him with every breath. Cold. Way, way too cold. Something was wrong.

A chill crawled up his spine, running on a thousand legs along his vertebrae, and he shivered, turning. Winter yawned at him through the open window, a low steady wind as if the house was inhaling the frigid darkness. It seemed to hum, a light moan, singing its way through the room and under his door. He rose, pattering gingerly on his bare feet, wrapping his arms futilely around himself as the hair on his chest rose like hackles, pulling hard on the window. It stuck for a moment, fighting to stay open, and he shook his head, wondering how it had gotten open in the first place, much less with such force.

Finally, with a gunshot echoed by his quick grunt, it closed, but the singing of the wind still danced through the room, reversed now, blowing in from the hall, and he followed it.

The window at the end of the hall screamed at him open-mouthed. In the guest room, little dervishes of snow whirled across the carpet. And below him, over the railing and down, he could see the blue moonlight crawling in the open front door. He shivered.

The temperature in the house had dropped, was dropping by the second, far below freezing. Inside was no warmer than out, three thousand years of civilization wasted as nature came beckoning to embrace him. Them. His daughter. Jennifer; it rang like a bell in his head, clanging wildly, and he sprang across the carpet, ignoring the frost that hardened the nylon needles. How long has it been like this? People die when it gets this cold, the heart just can't keep up, and hers was such a little heart.

She sat up blearily when he crashed into the room, rubbing one eye and tugging at her nightshirt. "What's wrong?"

He slowed, sat on the bed, effecting calmness, and felt her face. She was warm, fine, perfectly fit. He rubbed her hands, which betrayed only the slightest clamminess, more dried by the frigid air than frozen. "Nothing's wrong, honey," he stroked her hair. "It just got real cold all of a sudden and I wanted to make sure you were all right."

"I like the cold," she said dreamily, and he stiffened. The windows, open, the snow circling the house and darting in, Jennifer dancing in her nightgown in the frozen field. Good God, could she have...? She was not a reckless girl, not stupid. But she had changed since Helen's death, did irrational things, become more fey. If she had... He could feel the heat rising in his cheeks.

"Jennifer," he could feel the tightness in his voice, "why did you open the windows?"

"Hm...?" Late night fuzz blurred her voice, and she lay there, eyes closed, the blankets pushed down

around her stomach. He pulled them up, concentrating on pulling slowly, smoothly, softly up to her shoulders. His daughter's small, fragile form lay perfectly still as he ran a hand over the bedspread, leveling it. He pushed down every crease. "I didn't, Daddy. Jack Frost did it."

His hand almost clenched, almost shattered that level cotton plain, bunching it into mountains. His fingers twitched. He kept his arm perfectly still.

"Jennifer, don't play games with me. It's too late, and it's too cold. Now you go to bed, and we won't talk about Jack Frost ever again." He raised his hand, lowered it slowly over her hair, but the little snakes were still writhing. He snatched it back, stood to close and latch the window, and without looking back at her turned to leave.

"He said Mommy was lonely."

He stopped. The shadow was crawling up his spine; he could feel it rising behind him, growing, towering over him, filling the room. He turned his head, he could hear the muscles creak, he turned his head to look back at her, and tried to hide the fear that flamed in his eyes. But she had already wiggled one arm out of the covers, and she was fast asleep.

The swamp sucked at him all night.

For a week the storms built around him, and he felt the icy fingers of winter clutching at his coattails. Each day something new, some small disturbance, but he felt each as the first flakes of a coming flurry.

He arose the morning after the night of open windows to find his central heating unit dead, the motor overpowered in its battle with the implacable forces of winter the night before. He did what he could, but managed to elicit only the brief sputtering clearing of a mechanical throat before it sighed and gave up entirely. A repairman, he was told, could make it out sometime later in the week.

Seals around doors and windows cracked and split, peeling away from the woodwork, and the house was filled with the constant whistle of drafts seeping around corners and through the smallest of slits.

One night, as he lay huddled like a child under a pile of quilts and even a throw rug, having given Jennifer the sole electric blanket in the house, the stakes were upped. The window of his room exploded inward, showering crystalline slivers of glass across him. He rose in a detonation of blankets and flailing limbs and leaped to the window. The field below was empty. Not even footprints marred the fresh expanse of white that stretched to the distant line of trees. He turned, and saw it laying on the carpet, not melting in the chill tomb that the house had become. An iceball, a perfect sphere of slush, packed and frozen to the density of cement. He lifted it, letting the cold burn into his hand, and hefted it out the window.

And on and on, each one worse than the last, each one more infuriating or frightening or dangerous than its predecessor, each one another tendon in the tentacle that wrapped around his ankles and pulled, tugging him back to the swamp.

And Jennifer continued her fey dances, and her delight.

But now it would come to an end, he thought. After the broken window he had decided, and the request had been okayed. An opening in the Atlanta branch, and in a week he would fill it. Georgia, away from snow, away from the cold, away from everything except what mildly passed for winter in those southern climes. His only regret was that the position in Hawaii had been filled before he could apply.

He laughed when they told him the position was his. He gloated all through the day, chuckled to himself at lunch. He smiled as he started the car for the trip home, and the joy of telling Jennifer.

The storm hit halfway to the house.

The wipers beat double time, striving against impossible odds to bring the clear vision he required, battling valiantly against the quickening buildup of ice and snow. A blizzard of freezing rain and huge flakes battered at the car, but he did not slow anymore than was necessary, speeding down the narrow country roads. "Home" was the only thought that coursed through his mind. Each night he made it home

brought him one day closer to escape, and those days now numbered so very few.

He would not allow regret to cross his thoughts. Helen's grave had kept him in the region for three years, not wishing to be parted from her even in death, no matter what the marriage ceremony said. And someday he would return to join her; but not now. Not yet. She might be lonely, he thought, but she would not wish for her husband and daughter to join her yet. Of that much he was certain.

He peered through the windshield, the road discernible only because the banks of the hills on either side kept the snow from drifting too high over the asphalt. The terrain had become a tundra, one great plain of blankness, all landmarks covered and vanished under the pounding onslaught of winter. He slowed a little, looking harder, searching for the turn off to his house.

And saw her. Standing in the field that ran next to the road, her scarf stretched straight out behind her in the winds but everything else calm and unruffled, not a hair in the bangs that fell down around her face moved. She stood with her arms by her side, watching the road, watching the car, watching him. Helen.

His lurched forward in the seat, wiping at the condensation on the inside of the glass, his eyes glued to her, staring. Their eyes met. There was a sudden thunder.

The car, under his blind guidance, continued straight as the road jogged, plowed into the snow bank and sent it scattering in hunks to settle as a fine dust, reintegrating into the storm. The car stopped quickly, the low hill slowing its momentum as it came to rest in the field, one rear wheel still spinning as it hovered over a dip in the landscape.

The force of the impact jerked him forward, his head grazing the windshield without breaking it, and he felt some ribs crack and splinter as the seat belt grabbed his chest and abdomen, yanking him back into the seat. One hand flung out in reflex toward the dashboard, attempting to soften the expected collision of leather and flesh, but succeeded only in snapping two fingers backward, the thin bones popping as they broke, before his quick reverse journey.

It was a moment before he realized what had happened. He shook his head, the pain in his forehead accelerating the process of reorientation, and laughed. The quick harsh laugh of the wolf that has just chewed its way out of a trap. Not me, he thought. You took Helen, but you didn't get me.

That thought sobered him. Helen. He quickly unbuckled his seat belt, pushed the door open as far as it would go until it jammed against the drift, and clambered out of the car, searching the field.

A figure, barely discernible now through the thickening air, a scarf flapping in the wind. He made his way toward it over the tundra, the wind battering at him every step, the snow and ice circling its way up inside his coat. He stumbled, came down on his broken hand, but stifled the scream, letting shock and the cold numb the fingers that pointed at unnatural angles.

It seemed like hours later that the storm gave up the struggle momentarily, let him scurry the last few yards to the figure. A snowman, its hat long since lost to the wind but its scarf still whipping gallantly in the breeze, stared back at him. Small rocks pushed into the top segment outlined a crooked smile and shining eyes. The nose was gone, and he kicked at the snow at the base of the sculpture until he found it.

He knelt, holding the rock in his hand and chuckled at his own foolishness, his own pent up dreams and strangled desires, turning the rock over and over as he stared at it, and out across the field. He recognized it now. If he cut across it he was no more than a half mile from his own home. The jog in the road, the one he missed in his brief frenzied vision, had been the final landmark to the turn off, only a few hundred yards before the road that ran in front of his house. He laughed again, dropping the snowman's nose, and looked up. And screamed.

The sculpture looked down at him with Helen's face. A face of flesh and blood, surrounded by the hard-packed snow, the eyes cold and unmoving, but alive, glaring down at him, the mouth a rigid line, a black chasm in the pallid whiteness of the face.

He scuttled backward, his mouth still open but no sound emerging, and as he did so the face changed. Helen's features slowly melted away, bit by bit blown away by the resurgent winds, the last features, the eyes, still staring at him before they closed and disappeared, and were gone. The snowman's stone smile twisted above him. But for a moment, for a moment it had been another face, neither Helen's nor the snowman's, but something in between. Something that grinned at him with teeth that stretched

below its smile, and eyes that burned red for just a second, before cooling into stone.

He rose and fled toward his house, not looking back at the snowman that stood, like the emperor of the wastelands, in the field behind him.

The house appeared as a deep shadow in the winds from a hundred yards away, and he kept running, his feet skidding across the glazed surface of the snow, his breath cutting like razors in his frozen lungs. Jennifer. He kept his mind on Jennifer. He would gather her up, wrap her in blankets and make it to the neighbors house, only a few hundred yards down the street. A few hundred yards. He cursed his penchant for living in the country. The city. He would call a cab, or get the neighbor to drive them. Stay in a hotel for the few remaining days, and then escape all of this. Escape.

He stopped. From a dozen yards away, the door of his house yawned like the maw of some snow beast, inviting him into its belly. The door was open. He could see the wind, the ice and flakes carried on it, rushing into the house as if it were a vacuum. Even from here he could see the drifts piled in the foyer, the glint of the streetlight bouncing off the iced walls.

Jennifer was in there. He rushed forward, pushing himself on though all his heart and soul told him he did not want to see what was waiting for him, could not bear the sight of her small body as the drifts claimed it. He stepped in the door.

Silence hung in the air like ice, solid and unseeable.

"Jennifer!" The sound echoed through the foreign place that had once been his home. The snow had transformed it, built it into a place of crystalline horror, unrecognizable as the habitat of a man. All that remained real to him were the walls, stark and white, coated in the freezing layer of rain that had whipped through the corridors, and even they bent and swayed in the motion of the moonbeams falling in the window.

"Jenny?" His voice was a harsh whisper.

"Here I am, Daddy." Her high-pitched giggle came from behind him, and he turned, his feet crashing in the crusted snow. A breeze blew in the open door, kicking powder up in little clouds, but he ignored it, moving deeper into the house.

"Say something, Jenny," he pleaded. "Say something so Daddy can find you." A laugh broke out from somewhere near him, but it bounced off the walls in brittle staccato cracks, and he spun in confusion. The rising wind carried the sound until it surrounded him, crashing with a deafening roar through the room, and the snow carried on that hideous laugh scratched his face, blinding him, tearing his skin in flayed strips as he floundered blindly.

"Here I am Daddy! Here I am!"

He ran, his hands over his face, trying to hear his daughter over the gale. A sudden gust lifted him, slamming him down onto the rock hard ice. Tears came to his eyes, freezing in little pellets on his lashes and cheeks, and he brushed them away harshly, trying to stand. Somehow he had wandered outside, apparently in his flight from the wind, and he gripped a small tree, bare and now broken in the storm that cut through the air, carrying the countless shards of ice that flew with deadly speed, that could strip a man of his flesh. He could feel a thousand cuts and abrasions, but the blood froze before it could travel far. He tottered weakly, bracing himself, and bellowed.

"JENNIFER!"

"Here I am."

The voice that spoke the words was not his daughter's. Deep and rumbling and ancient like the scraping of glaciers over mountains, the voice overpowered the wind, and he stood, could have been mistaken for frozen except for the brief sharp rise and fall of his chest. The snow still whipped through the air in its mad dance, and the force of the gale threatened to lift him off his feet, but it was strangely silent, as if the wind had lost its voice, beaten back by the terrifying call. He could hear his heart beating with erratic force, trying to keep pace, but he could also hear another noise, far behind him. One, then another, then another, the soft rhythmic crunch of weight in the snow. It grew louder, but he did not turn, instead standing as he was, leaning on the tree, waiting, listening to the approach. And behind him, close, the footsteps stopped.

He twisted, slowly and evenly, a smooth turn, almost floating, until he faced whatever might be there.

But the landscape was empty, the field stretching around him devoid of everything except himself and his tree. He began to laugh, cackling into the wind that swirled around him and cut into the fallen snow, etching lines that shifted and moved...

And the eyes opened. The lines of the face were faint, changing in the drifting snow, but the eyes glowed with a crimson fire, flaming ice and wind. They stared up at him from the ground, unblinking, unchanging, and slowly the face rose, twisting until the disembodied sheet of ice faced him at arms length, and he knew where he had seen it before. The memory of little fingers scribbling on the frosted window overwhelmed him, and his gleeful chuckle grew and changed until he sobbed with laughter. The face rose, pushing upward as if it had been kneeling, until it towered above him, looking down on him from the height of giants.

With a resounding crash like a sonic boom, the voice of the wind returned, drowning out his pitiful laughter, and the snow surged into great coils, obscuring the world.

The bright morning glare reflected off the ice, sending up sheets of light and jumping in glimmering points about the house. The breeze from the field swirled in the front door like a river, flowing down the hall and breaking against the walls in small splashes of snow-capped waves.

Upstairs, a quiet click, a door shutting ever so gently, not wanting to disturb, and the soft padding of light feet. The small figure tread cautiously down the flight of stairs, one hand grasping the banister, her bare feet unaffected by the crusted snow, her step so light the ice did not even buckle beneath her weight.

She walked in the shambling purposefulness of a child, looking into each room, giggling a little at the strange shapes the drifting snow had made of the furniture. Finally she returned to the kitchen, sitting in her favorite spot, in front of the big window, and looked out over the field, at the unbroken crystalline lake it had become. She rested her head on one hand, and smiled. Her finger glided pleasingly over the window, burning lines in the frost.

Hello...

Carroll Brown has written and sold fiction, poetry, non-fiction articles, academic scholarship and most recently had a screenplay produced into a feature film.

Currently he is a communications consultant as well as being the Review Editor for a genre magazine, and, like everyone else, is working on his first novel.