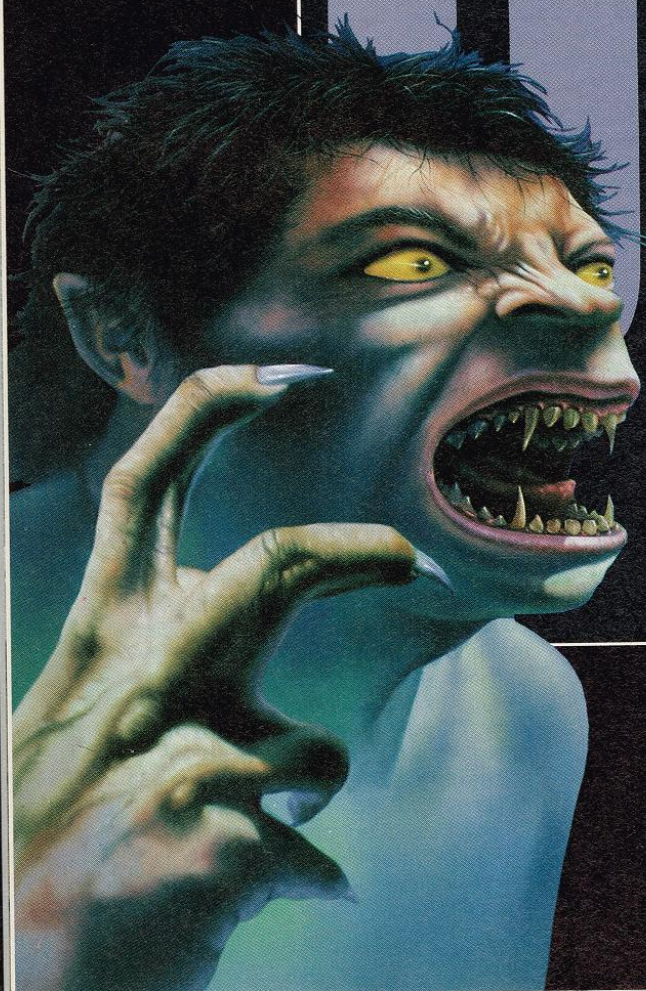


THE COLD FIT



MISTER ICE COLD BY GAHAN WILSON Listen, children! Hear the music? Hear its bright and cheerful chiming coming down the street? Hear it playing its pretty little tune—dingy di-ding, dingy di-ding—as it sings softly through the green trees, through the blue sky overhead, as it sings through the thick, still, sultry summer heat? It's Mister Ice Cold coming in his truck! Mister Ice Cold and his nice ice cream! Fat, round, cool balls of it plopped into cones! Thick, juicy slabs of it covered in frozen chocolate frosting and stuck on sticks! Soft, pink, chilly swirls of it oozed into cups!

The music's coming closer through the heat—dingy di-ding, dingy di-

Four horror tales by Gahan Wilson,

CHILDREN

ding—and excitement starts stirring where all was lazy and drowsy just a sweaty blink before! Bobby Martin's no longer lying flat on the grass, staring up at a slow-moving summer cloud without seeing it at all; he's scrambled to his feet and is running over the thick summer grass to ask his mother—nodding on the porch over a limp magazine almost slipped from her fingers—if he can have enough money to buy a frozen lime frog. And Suzy Brenner's left off dreamily trying to tie her doll's bonnet over her cat's head (much to the cat's relief) and is desperately digging into her plastic, polka-dot purse to see if there's enough change in there to buy her a cup of banana ice cream with chocolate sprinkles. Oh, she can taste the sweetness of it! Oh, her throat can feel its coolness going down! And you, you've forgotten all about blowing through a leaf to see if you can make it squeak the way you saw Arnold Carter's older brother do it; now you're clawing

by Whitley Strieber, John Kipp and Craig Spector, and Pat Cadigan

feverishly with your small hands in both pockets, feeling your way past that sandy shell you found yesterday on the beach, and that little ball chewed bounceless by your dog, and that funny rock you came across in the vacant lot which may, with luck, be full of uranium and highly radioactive, and so far you have come up with two pennies and a quarter and you think you've just touched a nickel. Meantime Mister Ice Cold's truck is rolling closer—dingy di-ding, dingy di-ding—and Martin Walpole, always a show-off, wipes his brow, points, and calls out proudly, "I see it! There it is!"

And sure enough, *there it is*, rolling smoothly around the corner of Main and Lincoln, and you can see the shiny, fat fullness of its white roof gleaming in the bright sun through the thick, juicy-green foliage of the trees, which have, in the peak of their summer swelling, achieved a tropical density and richness more appropriate to some Amazonian jungle than to midwestern Lakeside, and you push aside one last, forgotten tangle of knotted string in your pocket and your heart swells for joy because you've come across another quarter and that means you've got enough for an orange icicle on a stick which will freeze your fillings and chill your gut and stain your tongue that gorgeous, glowing copper color which never fails to terrify your sister!

Now Mister Ice Cold's truck has swept into full view, and its dingy di-ding sounds out loud and clear and sprightly enough, even in this steaming, muggy air, to startle a sparrow and make it swerve in its flight.

Rusty Taylor's dog barks for a signal, and all of you come running quick as you can from every direction, coins clutched in your sweaty fingers and squeezed tightly as possible in your damp, small palms, and every one of you is licking your lips and staring at the bright blue lettering painted in frozen ice cubes that spells out MISTER ICE COLD over the truck's sides and front and back, and Mister Ice Cold himself gives a sweeping wave of his big, pale hand to everyone from behind his wheel and brings his vehicle and all the wonders it contains to a slow, majestic halt with the skill and style of a commodore docking an ocean liner.

"A strawberry rocket!" cries fat Harold Smith, who has got there way ahead of everyone else as usual, and Mister Ice Cold flips open one of the six small doors set into the left side of the truck with a click and plucks out Harold's rocket and gives it to him and takes the change, and before you know it he has glided to the right top door of the four doors at the truck's back and opened it, click, and Mandy Carter's holding her frozen maple tree and licking it and handing her money over all at the same time, and now Mister Ice Cold is opening one of the six small doors on the right side of the truck, click, and Eddy Morse has bitten the point off the top of his bright red cinnamon crunchy munch and is completely happy.

Then your heart's desire is plucked with a neat click from the top middle drawer on the truck's right side, which has always been its place for as long as you can remember, and you've put your money into Mister Ice Cold's large, pale, always-cool palm, and as you step back to lick your orange icicle and to feel its coolness trickle down your throat, once again you find yourself admiring the sheer smoothness of Mister Ice Cold's movements as he glides and dips, spins and turns, bows and rises, going from one small door, click, to another, click, with never a stumble, click, never a pause,

click, his huge body leaving a coolness in the wake of his passing, and you wish you moved that smoothly when you run over the gravel of the playground with your hands stretched up, hoping for a catch, but you know you don't.

Everything's so familiar and comforting: the slow quieting of the other children getting what they want, your tongue growing more and more chill as you reduce yet another orange icicle, lick by lick, down to its flat stick, and the heavy, hot summer air pressing down on top of it all.

But this time it's just a little different than it ever was before because, without meaning to, without having the slightest intention of doing it, you've noticed something you never noticed before. Mister Ice Cold never opens the bottom right door in the back of the truck.

He opens all the rest of them, absolutely every one, and you see him doing it now as new children arrive and call out what they want. Click, click, click, he opens them one after the other, producing frozen banana bars and cherry twirls and all the other special favorites, each one always from its particular, predictable door.

But his big, cool hand always glides past that *one door* set into the truck's back, the one on the bottom row, the one to the far right. And you realize now, with a funny little thrill, that you have never—not in all the years since your big brother Fred first took you by the hand and gave Mister Ice Cold the money for your orange icicle because you were so small you couldn't even count—you have never *ever* seen that door open.

And now you've licked the whole orange icicle away, and your tongue's moving over and over the rough wood of the stick without feeling it at all, and you can't stop staring at that door, and you know, deep in the pit of your stomach, that you have to open it.

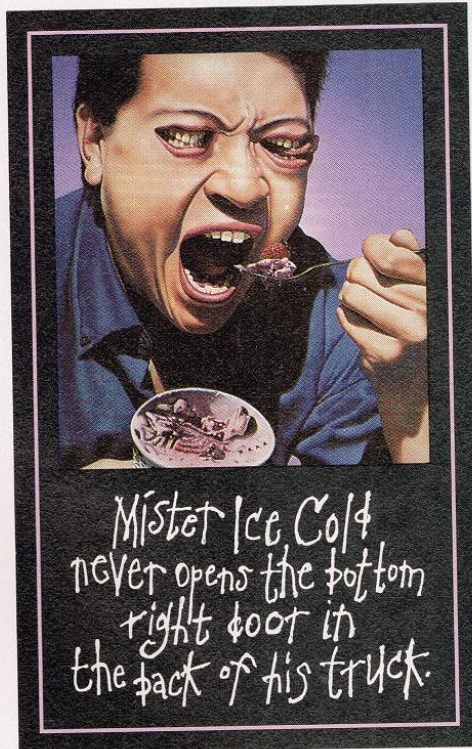
You watch Mister Ice Cold carefully now, counting out to yourself how long it takes him to move from the doors farthest forward back to the rear of the truck, and because your mind is racing very, very quickly, you soon see that two orders in a row will keep him up front just long enough for you to open the door which is never opened, the door which you are

now standing close enough to touch, just enough time to take a quick peek and close it shut before he knows.

Then Betty Deane calls out for a snow maiden right on top of Mike Howard's asking for a pecan pot, and you know those are both far up front on the right-hand side.

Mister Ice Cold glides by you close enough for the cool breeze coming from his passing to raise little goose bump on your arms. Without pausing, without giving yourself chance for any more thought, you reach out.

Click! Your heart freezes hard as anything inside the truck. There, inside the square opening, cold and bleached as glistening, are two tidy stacks of small hands, small as yours: their fingertips reaching out toward you and the sunlight their thin, dead young arms reaching out behind them, back into the darkness. Poking over the top two hands, growing out of something round and shiny and far back and horrible still, are two stiff golden braids of hair with pretty frozen bow tied onto their ends. But you have stared too long in horror and the door is closed, click, and almost entirely covered by Mister Ice Cold's hand, which seems enormous, and he bent down over you with his huge, smiling face so near yours you can feel the coolness of it in the summer heat.



"Not that door," he says, very softly, and his small, neat, even teeth shine like chips from an iceberg, and because of his closeness now you know that even his breath is icy cold. "Those in there are not for you. Those in there are for me."

Then he's standing up again and moving smoothly from door to door, click, click, click, but none of the other children see inside, and none of them will really believe you when you tell them, though their eyes will go wide and they'll love the story, and not a one of them saw the promise for you in Mister Ice Cold's eyes. But you did, didn't you? And some night, after the end of summer, when it's cool and you don't want it any cooler, you'll be lying in your bed all alone and you'll hear Mister Ice Cold's pretty little song coming closer through the night, through the dead, withered autumn leaves.

Dingy di-ding, dingy di-ding....

Then, later on, you just may hear the first click. But you'll never hear the second click. None of them ever do.

SCANMAN BY PAT CADIGAN As soon as she opened the

door, Loretta knew she was in trouble. The living room was empty and quiet, but the stale stink of cigarette smoke was like a shrieking alarm, attuned to a frequency only she could hear. The Dave Frequency. Calling all victims—*Stop it!* She clutched her briefcase more tightly. *I am a professional woman now, a responsible, self-sufficient, strong working single parent, not Dave Alessio's Live-in Victim and Punching Bag, and if he is here, I will just call the police and they will cart him away.*

The ashtray on the floor next to the couch was full. He must have sat for hours, chain-smoking while he waited for her or Barry to come home—

Barry. She felt herself go cold from the inside out. *God, if there is a God, let this be an afternoon that Barry had soccer practice, or Chess Club, or Computer Club, or that he went over to Michael's house to ride Michael's skateboard. Dear God, don't let him have come home alone to walk into this. Dear God, if You have spared him this I swear I'll buy him his own skateboard—*

Barry's schoolbooks lay in a heap on the dining room table. Loretta's inner temperature dropped to absolute zero. She could imagine it: Barry letting himself in through the kitchen door, maybe singing to himself, dropping his books on the table as he headed for the living room to watch a little illicit MTV before she came home when she'd told him no MTV until his homework was done, and then stopping short at the sight of his father sitting on the couch, smoking, grinning. His father, who had finally put both of them in the hospital, her with cracked ribs and a concussion, Barry with a broken arm and bruises, before she had come to her senses, put out a restraining order, and fled to a shelter. Dave, whom Barry hated and feared more than anyone else in the world.

It wasn't the first time he'd found them. In the four years since they had left, Dave had found them half a dozen times. She had no idea how. Dave was incapable of staying off booze, holding a job, controlling his temper, or anything even approximating normalcy, but the one thing he *could* do was find her and Barry whenever he wanted. Whenever he tired of taking his black hate out on the world in general and needed a couple of *real* victims to terrorize.

"Barry?" she whispered hoarsely and cleared her throat.

Maybe he was hiding. Maybe he had smelled the ciga-

rette smoke (the one thing Dave had gotten out of the few AA meetings he had attended: another habit) and hid. Maybe he was still hiding. A slim hope, but something she could cling to besides her briefcase as she tiptoed through the living room, past the dining room table to the kitchen. The house was so impossibly quiet, as it couldn't have been with Dave on one of his rampages, that she wouldn't rule the possibility out. At eleven, Barry was a bright, resourceful kid—the counselor at school had called him gifted, so maybe...*maybe...*

The small, narrow kitchen had been thoroughly trashed. Everything from the cabinets, the shelves, the refrigerator had been thrown on the floor, and the refrigerator door still hung open. Dave, looking for a bottle of anything, cooking sherry, vanilla extract, cough medicine, anything with alcohol in it.

She caught sight of the picture taped to the refrigerator door. Barry had made it, using his computer scanner on her favorite picture of herself. She had wished aloud for something that would make her stay on her diet, and Barry had whipped out a mock ad titled "Mom's Diet" with before and

after pictures, the before picture stretched horizontally, the after picture stretched vertically. Written in heavy black marker across both pictures was the word BITCH.

"Barry!" The despair in her voice shocked her more than the ruined kitchen, and she was suddenly filled with rage. She yanked open one of the kitchen drawers, grabbed the biggest carving knife she owned, and strode back through the living room to the stairs.

"Dave?" she called, starting up slowly. "Dave, I know you're here! I'm coming upstairs now, and if you're smart, you'll just leave quietly, because somebody will get hurt if you don't, and it won't be me this time! And if you've hurt Barry, if you've even *touched* him, I'll *kill* you!"

No answer. She stood at the top of the stairs, knife in hand, and looked down the hallway.

At last the sounds penetrated the fear-rage that had enveloped her: funny little mechanical sounds, the beeps and boops and buzzes of one of Barry's computer games. Barry playing a computer game? With Dave? It couldn't have been Dave playing

alone; he wouldn't have had the first idea how to turn Barry's computer on. He was more likely to smash it—

"Barry? Answer me!"

Barry's door opened then, and her son poked his head out, smiling. "Sorry, Ma, I didn't hear you calling." He disappeared. "C'mon in, I've got a hot game going here."

"A hot game?" She ran to the doorway, expecting to see Dave sitting on the edge of Barry's bed looking smug, or maybe passed out on the floor, but there was only Barry, sitting at his desk, beaming at the computer monitor while he manipulated the joystick.

"C'mon in," he said again without looking away from the screen. "You might want to try this one."

"But the cigarettes—the kitchen—" She stopped.

He glanced at her, flashing a grin. "I'll help you clean it up, don't worry. But you *gotta* check this out, Ma."

She hid the knife behind her back and went over to him. On the screen was a cartoony scene from something called *Barbarian Battler* or some such, where a stiff little figure with a sword fought its way through a series of monsters, avoiding traps, cliffs, boiling oil, and hurtling balls of fire—

He glanced at her again. "Is this great or what?"

