

# I've Got Today

*by Caspar von Wrede*

The three figures stepped into the night and were immediately enveloped by the bitter cold. As the icy air washed over their faces the warmth of the restaurant had already become nothing but a distant memory. A neon sign above them flickered and briefly illuminated the flurries and confusions of snowflakes that fell from an inky sky. The smallest of the three figures gave an exclamation of childish glee at the sight of the newly fallen snow, whilst the remaining two stood hand in hand. With the child running ahead, and the parents following, they began carefully making their way over the glittering layer of white, which crunched softly under the soles of their feet.

The young mother pressed up close to her husband for she could already feel the darkness sapping her warmth through the thin overcoat.

"Carol, stay with us", she called to her four year-old daughter whom the snow-specked darkness was threatening to swallow. Her voice was weak.

"How bad is it today?" the young man asked his wife quietly, in case the child heard him.

"It has been worse", she coughed feebly, and hoped in vain that he had not heard the wince of pain that followed. "But I think I'll need those stronger pills". The man squeezed his wife's waist with the one arm he had laid around her.

"Of course, Honey, we'll pop down to the hospital first thing tomorrow." He tried to sound casual but in reality it seemed a cord had tightened around his heart. He knew that his wife was suffering terrible pain and that her death loomed ever closer. They both realised the futility of the medications she was taking at the moment but they were prepared to try anything that would inspire hope. The list of cures, that had been tried and failed, had grown longer ever since the disease was diagnosed.

"We'll try and get home soon; it must be the cold that's making it so bad". His breath hung in the air like the lie he had just told.

The young girl with her inexhaustible supply of youthful energy, was busy making snowballs. She was not aware of her parents' apprehensions, nor of the cold that would soon begin to bite. Her face was alight with her glowing vitality whilst the snow frosted her white blonde hair.

"Daddy, where is the car? Are we going home soon?" "Yes, my sweet, the car park is just beyond that road". The carefree voice of his daughter had, as always, dispersed the gloom that had settled on the young man's soul.

The three of them came to some broad stone steps that led into an empty square. A deserted road junction was just visible through the darkness and falling snow beyond the square. A rank of sodium arc lamps stretched into the gloom along with the empty roads. Their lights, high above the ground, glowed diffusely and were surrounded by a halo of falling snow. They caused the whole scene to be bathed in a supernatural orange light.

It is so silent, thought the man, as he helped first his wife and then his daughter down the steps. Not a breath of the air stirred, whilst the featureless expanse of orange-tinged snow stretched away before them. It almost looks like a vast stage, he thought, I wonder what scenes will be acted out upon it tonight.

The trio trudged silently across the seamless blanket of snow towards the deserted junction, where a single traffic light glimmered. The snow had settled on the lanes of tarmac and it was obvious that no snow plough or grit spreader would clear this road tonight.

As they reached the curb, the young woman was suddenly racked by a coughing fit and doubled over. The young man knelt before her and anxiously peered into her face which was contorted with pain.

"Julie? Are you all right?"

Neither of them could see that the young child had stepped over the curb and was crossing the road.

"Yes, it's Okay, I just need to rest"

For a brief second a car's headlights swept through the snow far ahead of them. The man looked up in their direction and they reappeared, two malevolent eyes cutting swathes into the driving snow. Soundlessly the lights glided towards him and his wife who was kneeling in the snow. For a fraction of a second he had the illusion that the car would hit them but then he saw it would pass harmlessly by on the road. Then his eyes fell onto his daughter who was still crossing the road and the adrenaline erupted into his blood.

"JESUS CHRIST! CAROL! GET OFF THE ROAD! CA-" The car was coming too fast, the child was too far away. He stood transfixed, his last words caught in his throat. It seemed to him that time had slowed to a trickle. The car came on

with an unerring slowness, yet his limbs locked solid as he tried to leap forward. He knew that what was unfolding in front of him now was being burned indelibly into his memory, to haunt him in his nightmares and every waking hour for years to come. The picture before him remained crisp and almost unnaturally sharp. He could see everything down to the tiniest detail. He saw that one of his daughter's shoelaces was undone and that she had a small pink plaster on her little finger. He saw the individual snowflakes as they hit the car's windscreen and exploded into tiny drops of moisture.

The car had slowed to a crawl. It seemed to him it would stop before it ever reached the child, yet he knew it to be untrue. His imagination raced and already he could see and hear what was about to happen next. In his mind he saw the car's wet bumper touch his daughter's leg and crumple the thin trousers that covered it. He imagined the cold steel on the child's thigh and the soft snaps as the delicate bones fractured. He saw the girl's foot begin to drag in the snow as the car advanced steadily further. He heard the soft thud as the radiator grille butted into her torso. He could perfectly imagine the tiny rib cage dent and expel the last, warm breath from his daughter's mouth. He imagined the tiny heart crushed, caught in mid beat. He could see the small head, with its wispy curls, whiplash onto the bonnet. He imagined blood. He heard the patter of a million droplets and saw the crimson smear, dark on the snow.

Then, mercifully, his mind blanked, overloaded with the images that crammed into it. There was a second of blackness, a mental vacuum, and then for the first time he heard the car. It exploded into his brain, a mechanical roar, the whistle of hot exhaust and the muted concussions deep inside the engine block.

An eternity later his wife sharply hitched in breath beside him. Now she will scream, thought the man as he slowly opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the car that had wildly slewed into the junction. His wife did not scream, however, she only sobbed once, heart-wrenchingly, and then she stood up and ran into the road.

For there stood the girl, untouched. The mother gathered her into her shaking arms and held her close. She felt the warmth that the child radiated and the vitality that coursed through its body.

As she stood in the sifting snow, inches from the fresh tyre tracks and feeling the inextinguishable life that pulsed in her arms, the young woman felt, for the first time in years, hope.