

## The Cold Boy

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Once there was a boy who was in love with the cold. He longed for winters of fleeting day and endless night, was fascinated by the way that leaves and flowers collected frost as they might dew in the the warmer months, and would often stop in the middle of his path to catch a snowflake or two on his tongue.

This boy loved to take long walks in the frigid air of the morning and the night, and he could hardly ever be persuaded to wear a suitable coat on these excursions, and as such, he was often bedridden with head cold, or a fever, or both. And it was, in fact, during one of these very illnesses that the boy met his true love for the first time.

He was propped up in his bed in the dreamy witching hour, awake but not fully, watching snow flakes dance with each other outside of his window, when he fancied he had seen someone. He sat up more fully and stared through the window until the someone danced back into sight, laughing rather merrily for such a time of the evening. The boy was very curious now, and he listened quite closely, which was very lucky, because otherwise he would not have been able to hear:

Ivory boys and alabaster girls  
Hey, nonny, nonny, nonny  
I've got ribbons and diamonds and silver and pearls  
Hey, nonny, nonny, nonny...

By this time, the boy had pulled on a dressing-gown and bolted for the door. The singing kept on:

I'll take you to Wonderland, dress you in gold  
Hey, nonny, nonny, nonny,  
But don't blame old Jack if you're left in the cold  
Hey, nonny, nonny, nonny--

The figure turned around and saw the boy, and stopped, suddenly. It was a boy, too, considerably older than he was, but much younger at the same time.

"I didn't mean to make you stop singing," the boy said to him. He took a step closer. The other boy danced a little further away. "Please, what is your name?"

The other boy cocked his head in a not-quite-human fashion, and regarded him. "My name," and his voice was the bitter wind whistling through the pines, "is Jack Frost."

The boy's mother had seldom allowed him to read faerie-tales, but he had a faint inkling of who he thought Jack Frost was, and so he asked him, to be sure: "Are you all that is cold in the world?"

"Why, yes," Jack Frost replied, looking the boy up and down as if he had said something very amusing.

"Well, I happen to love all that is cold in the world," the boy continued, while Jack Frost watched him, "and so I suppose that means that I love you."

"I suppose that it does," Jack Frost replied, showing teeth like icicles.

"And do you love me?" the boy asked.

"That is a very dangerous question to to ask, my pretty," Jack Frost replied, "and an even more dangerous one to answer. But I am not someone who likes to flatter danger with fear, so yes, I suppose I love you."

The boy's heart was pounding very fast indeed."Then if we are in love...should you not kiss me?"

"I suppose I should," Jack Frost replied with a wicked sort of grin, and he leaned closer.

The boy blinked up at the white sky from his bed on the white snow. Morning had come, his governess was calling him, and he could not remember his name as well as he liked.

The boy spent many months that winter wondering if he would see Jack again, but it was not until the middle of the next year's winter that he met him without even trying to.

He had been walking through the snow on his way home from an excursion, looking at the blue sky, dreaming. What about, he couldn't have said. The important thing was that he had been. He'd been gazing up above humming *ribbons and diamonds and silver and pearls* when before you could say *hey nonny nonny nonny* his ankle had slid through a snow bank into the crooked crevice below.

The boy gasped. He was in more pain than he was accustomed to, and he did not find it agreeable.

He was thinking very seriously about what death would be like when the merry jingle of laughter came dancing through the trees, and suddenly Jack Frost was perched on the fallen log in front of him.

"Hey-oh, my pretty," Jack smiled at him through eyes of ice, "what a little mess you've gotten yourself into, eh?"

"Hello, Jack," the boy replied, though he did not know he should be so forward and he was in rather a lot of pain.

"Got your self stuck, there, chickadee?" Jack seemed delighted. "Good and trapped."

"There isn't a chance you would help me?" the boy whispered, the reality of the situation crashing into him.

"There's a chance, chickadee," Jack Frost replied, "but a slim one. What shall you do for me in return?"

The boy considered it. "What do you want?"

"The world on a string," Jack replied, lobbing an icicle at a passing sparrow.

"I cannot give you that," the boy said, "only because I am not able. But I could hang a star from a string for you. They are much smaller."

"I suppose it'll do," Jack Frost sighed. He winked, and the boy found himself standing up straight again. "Be wary of the winter, my pretty. I'll be back for my star." And he bounded away like a hare.

The boy waited and waited by the window with his star, but Jack never came for it. After a while, he put it outside, and the wind carried it off, and that made him fairly confident that Jack had gotten it.

The rest of that winter was exceptionally warm, and so Jack did not come back that year (although the boy thought he had seen him dancing through the trees once or twice during spring's colder months); and the next year, the boy contracted a very bad and drawn-out illness and was not allowed outside at all. He was beginning to hope that Jack Frost was not just a dream when the first flakes of the year began to fall and the singing once more echoed through the trees:

Ivory boys and alabaster girls  
Hey, nonny, nonny, nonny  
I've got ribbons and diamonds and silver and pearls  
Hey, nonny, nonny, nonny...

The boy waited until Jack was near, and then ran out to meet him.

"Hello, my love," Jack said, layers of sunlight reflecting off his skin, as if he were made of ice.

"Hello, Jack," the boy said, and because he had spent far too long indoors and had forgotten to be wary of the winter, he also said: "Won't you show me what the ribbons and pearls are like?"

Jack Frost laughed a hearty laugh, a rattling laugh like the wind in the gate. "I certainly will, chickadee." For the first time, he danced closer. "Would you like pearls for your fingers and ribbons for your hair? Pearls for your hair and ribbons for your fingers? Pearls for your ribbons and fingers for your hair?" And he stretched out his arms.

The boy woke a time later, covered in a blanket of snow. Jack Frost was perched on a fallen tree, watching him.

"You aren't dead," he said, cocking his head in that not-quite-human way of his. "Usually you must be dead to wear my ribbons and pearls. Otherwise the warmth of your heart will melt them."

"Well, I am not dead," the boy said, and looked down at himself to make sure he was wearing Jack's ribbons and pearls, "and my heart has not melted them." The ribbons and pearls sparkled and shone in the sun.

"It is very curious," Jack Frost said, and they looked at each other. Then the boy said, "Have you ever kissed another person?"

"What sort of a question is that, my pretty?" Jack asked, shifting on his tree.

"I was only wondering if your kiss had frozen my heart, you see."

Jack Frost skipped down from his seat and laid his smooth, cold hand over the boy's breast. After a while he said, "I think that must be it." He looked at the boy more closely. "But it is hard to live in your world with a frozen heart. Shall I un-freeze it for you?"

"No," the boy said, very firmly; he liked the way it felt in his chest, and only wondered why he had not celebrated it sooner.

"Suit yourself," Jack said, "but you shall never be able to love anyone. Except me," he added, and gave a little skip and a cackle.

"I am perfectly satisfied to love only you," said the boy, "for my mother and father have gone away, and I cannot think of anyone else who is kind to me."

"Very well, my little chickadee," Jack said, dancing close again. "Only I've realised that if I love you and you love me, then we are lovers, and you needs must come away with me, and never look back."

"Is that what lovers do?" the boy asked.

"It is," Jack replied, his boots marking a dizzying pattern in the snow.

"That feels right," said the boy.

Jack Frost stretched out his hand, and the boy took it, marvelling at how well it fit in his own, and then they danced into the air on a passing gust of wind, the soles of their feet making a sound like jingling bells on the roof tops, and the pair of lovers flew away into the frozen sky.