

Author of the *New York Times* Bestseller  
*Heart-Shaped Box*

# JOE HILL



## Better Than Home

A STORY FROM THE COLLECTION

20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY  
GHOSTS

# **BETTER THAN HOME**

**A Story from the Collection**

## **20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY GHOSTS**

**JOE HILL**

 HarperCollins e-books

*To Leanora:*

WE ARE MY FAVORITE STORY

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## BETTER THAN HOME

**M**y father is on the television about to be thrown out of a game again. I can tell. Some of the fans watching at Tiger Stadium know too and they're making rude, happy noises about it. They want him to be thrown out. They're looking forward to it.

I know he's going to be thrown out because the home plate umpire is trying to walk away from him but my father is following him everywhere he goes. My father has all the fingers of his right hand stuck down the front of his pants, while the left gestures angrily in the air. The announcers are chattering happily away to tell everyone watching at home about what my father is trying to tell the umpire that the umpire is working so hard not to hear.

"You just had an idea from the way things were going that emotions were sure to boil over sooner rather than later," says one of the announcers.

My aunt Mandy laughs nervously. "Jessica, you might want to see this. Ernie is getting himself all worked up."

My mother steps into the kitchen doorway and sees what is happening on the television and leans against the doorframe with her arms crossed.

"I can't watch," Mandy says. "This is *so* upsetting."

Aunt Mandy is at one end of the couch. I'm at the other, with my feet under me and my heels pressed into my buttocks.

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I'm rocking back and forth. I can't stay still. Something in me just needs to rock. My mouth is open and doing the thing it does when I'm nervous. I don't even know I'm doing it until I feel the warm dribbling wetness at the corner of my mouth. When I'm tense, and my mouth is stretched open like that, water runs out at the corner and eventually leaks down my chin. When I'm wired up tight with nerves like I am now, I spend a lot of time making these little sucking sounds, sucking the spit back into my head.

The third-base umpire, Comins, inserts himself between my father and Welkie, the home-plate umpire, allowing Welkie the chance to slip off. My father could just step around Comins, but he does not. This is an unexpected positive development, a sign the worst may yet be averted. His mouth is opening and closing, the left hand waving, and Comins is listening and smiling and shaking his head in a way that is good-natured and understanding yet firm. My father is unhappy. Our Team is losing four to one. Detroit has a rookie throwing the ball, a man who has never won a major league game in his life, a man who has in fact lost all five of his starts so far, but in spite of his well-established mediocrity he now has eight strike-outs in only five innings. My father is unhappy about the last strike-out, which came on a checked swing. He's unhappy because Welkie called it a strike without looking at the third-base umpire to see if the batter checked his swing or not. That's what he's supposed to do, but he didn't do it.

But Welkie didn't need to check with Comins down at third base. It was obvious the batter, Ramon Diego, let the head of the bat fly out over the plate, and then tried to snap it back with a flick of his wrists, to fool the umpire into thinking he didn't swing, but he did swing, everyone saw him swing, everyone knows he was fooled on a sinker that almost skipped off the dirt in front of home plate, everyone except for my father, that is.

At last my father says a few final words to Comins, turns, and starts back to the dugout. He's halfway there, almost free and clear, when he pivots and hollers a fare-thee-well to home-plate umpire Welkie. Welkie has his back to him. Welkie is bent over to brush the plate off with his little sweeper, his broad

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asscheeks spread apart, his not inconsiderable rear pointed my father's way.

Whatever it is my father shouts, Welkie wheels around and goes up on one foot in a jiggling fat man's hop and punches his finger into the air. My father whips his cap into the dirt and comes back to home plate in a loping run.

When it happens the first thing that goes insane is my father's hair. It has spent six innings trapped in his hat. When it springs out it is lathered in sweat. The gusting wind in Detroit catches it and messes it all around. One side is flattened and the other side is sticking up as if he slept on it wet. Hair is pasted damp against the sunburned and sweaty back of his neck. Hair blowing around as he screams.

Mandy says, "Oh my God. Look at him."

"Yes. I see," says my mother. "Another shining moment for the Ernie Feltz highlight reel."

Welkie crosses his arms over his chest. He has no more to say and regards my father with hooded eyes. My father kicks loose dirt over his shoes. Again Comins tries to get in between them, but my father kicks loose dirt at him. My father rips off his jacket and hurls it on the field. Then he kicks that. He kicks it up the third-base line. Then he picks it up and tries to throw it in the outfield, though it only goes a few feet. Some Tigers have collected out on the pitcher's mound. Their second baseman quickly puts his glove over his mouth so my father will not see him laughing. He turns his face into the loose group of men, his shoulders trembling.

My father leaps into the dugout. Stacked on the wall of the dugout are three towers of waxed Gatorade cups. He hits them with both hands and they explode across the grass. He does not touch the Gatorade coolers themselves, which some of the guys will be wanting to drink from, but he does take a batting helmet by the bill and he flips it out over the grass where it bounces, and rolls to the third-base bag. My insane father screams something more to Welkie and Comins and then crosses the dugout and goes down some steps and is gone. Except he isn't gone, he is suddenly once more at the top of the steps like the thing in the hockey mask in all those movies, the wretched creature you keep thinking has been destroyed and put out of the picture and



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his misery, but who always lurches back into things anyway to kill and kill again, and he pulls an armful of bats out of one of the deep cubbyholes for bats and throws the whole crashing heap of wood onto the grass. Then he stands there screaming and shouting with spit flying and eyes watering. The bat boy has by this time retrieved my father's jacket and brought it to the dugout steps, but is afraid to come any closer, so my father has to climb up to him and yank it from his hands. He shouts a last round of endearments and puts his jacket on inside out with the tag waving at the back of his neck and disappears now once and for all. I let out an unsteady breath that I didn't know I was holding.

"That was quite the episode," says my aunt.

"Time for that bath, kid," says my mother, coming up behind me and pushing her fingers through my hair. "Best part of the game is over."

In the bedroom I strip to my underwear. I start down the hall for the bathroom but when the phone rings I veer into my parents' bedroom and throw myself belly first on the bed and scoop the phone off the end table.

"Feltz residence."

"Hey, Homer," my father says. "I had a free minute. I thought I'd give a call and say good night. You watching the game?"

"Uh-huh," I say, and suck a little drool.

It's not the kind of thing I want him to hear but he hears me anyway. "Are you okay?"

"It's my mouth. It's just doing it. I can't help it."

"Are you getting yourself all tied in knots?"

"No."

"Who are you talking to, honey?" my mother calls out.

"Dad!"

"Did you think he broke his swing?" my father asks, shooting it to me point-blank.

"I wasn't sure he went around at first, but then I watched it on the replay and you can tell he went."

"Oh, shit," my father says, and then my mother picks up the extension in the kitchen and joins us on the line.

"Hey," she says. "It's a call from the Good Sport."

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“How’s it going?” my father says. “I had a free second, I thought I’d call up and say good night to the kid.”

“From where I’m sitting it looks like you ought to have the rest of the evening free.”

“I’m not going to tell you I think I was appropriate.”

“Inappropriate, maybe,” she says. “But inspiring, absolutely. One of those special baseball moments that make the human spirit sing. Like seeing someone jack a big home-run, or hearing the third strike smack into the catcher’s glove. There’s just something a little magical about watching Ernie Feltz calling the umpire a butt-sucking rat-bastard and getting dragged off the field in a straitjacket by the men in white coats.”

“Okay,” is what he says. “I know. It looked really bad.”

“It’s something to work on.”

“Well, goddamn it. I’m sorry. I mean that. No kidding—I am sorry,” he says. “Hey, but will you tell me something?”

“What?”

“Did you see the replay? Did it look like he went around to you?”

THE LEAK I get at the corner of my mouth when I’m feeling tense, that isn’t the only thing I’m struggling with, just one of the more obvious things, which is why I go see Dr. Faber twice a month. Dr. Faber and me get together to talk about strategies for coping with the things that stress me. There are lots of things that stress me; for example, I can’t even look at tin foil without going weak and sick, and the sound of someone crunching tin foil brings on an ill ache that goes all through my teeth and up into my eardrums. Also I can’t stand it when the VCR rewinds. I have to leave the room because of the way the machine sounds when the tape is whining backwards through the spools. And the smell of fresh paint or uncapped Magic Markers—let’s not even talk about it.

Also nobody likes that I take apart my food to inspect the components. I mostly do this with hamburgers. I was deeply affected by a special I saw on television once about what can happen if you get a bad hamburger. They had E.Coli on; they

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had mad cow; they even showed a mad cow, wrenching its head to one side and staggering around a pen bawling. When we get hamburgers from Wendy's, I have my dad unwrap it from the foil for me, and then I lay all the parts out and discard any vegetables that look suspect, and give the patty a good long sniff to make sure it isn't spoiled. Not once but twice I've actually discovered a spoiled one and refused to eat. On both occasions my refusal precipitated a royal screaming match between my mother and me over whether it was really spoiled or not, and of course such meetings of the minds inevitably can end in only one way, with me doing the kicking thing I sometimes do, where I lay on the floor and scream and kick at anyone who tries to touch me, which is one of what Dr. Faber calls my hysterical compulsions. Mostly what I do now is get rid of the hamburger in the trash without discussing it and just eat the roll. It isn't any pleasure, I can tell you, to have my dietary problems. I hate the taste of fish. I won't eat pork because pork has little white worms in it that boil out of the raw meat when you pour alcohol on it. What I really like is breakfast cereal. I'd have Kix three times a day if it was up to me. Cans of fruit salad also go over well with me. When I'm at the park I enjoy a bag of peanuts, although I wouldn't eat a hot dog for all the tea in China (which I wouldn't want anyway since for me caffeine triggers shrill, hyper behavior and impromptu nosebleeds).

Dr. Faber's a good guy. We sit on the floor of his office and play Candy Land and hash it out.

"I've heard crazy before, but that's just nuts," my psychiatrist says. "You think McDonald's would serve spoiled hamburger? They'd lose their shirts! You'd sue their ass!" He pauses to move a piece, then looks up, and says, "You and me, we got to start talking about these miserable feelings that come over you whenever you stick lunch in your mouth. I think you're blowing things out of proportion. Letting your imagination freak you out. I'll tell you something else. Let's say you did get some goofy food, which I claim is very unlikely, because the McDonald's chain has a vested interest in not getting their asses sued, *even if*—people do manage to eat some pretty foul stuff without, you know, *death*."

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“Todd Dickey, who plays third base for us? He ate a squirrel once,” I say. “For a thousand dollars. It was back when he was in the minors. The team bus crunched it backing up and he ate it. He says people where he’s from just eat them.”

Dr. Faber stares at me dumbly, his round, pleasant face struck blank with disgust. “Where’s he from?”

“Minnesota. Pretty much everyone there lives on squirrel. That’s what Todd says. That way they have more money for the important things at the supermarket—like beer and lottery tickets.”

“He ate it—raw?”

“Oh no. He fried it. With canned chili. He said it was the easiest money he ever made. The thousand dollars. That’s a lot of money in the minors. Ten different guys had to pony up a hundred dollars apiece. He said it was like getting paid a grand to eat a Whopper.”

“Right,” he says. “That brings us back to the McDonald’s issue. If Todd Dickey can eat a squirrel he scraped up out of the parking lot—a menu I can’t, as your doctor, recommend—and suffer no ill effects, then you can handle a Big Mac.”

“Uh-huh.”

And I see his point. I really do. He’s saying Todd Dickey is a strapping young professional athlete, and here he eats all this awful stuff like squirrel chili and Big Macs that squirt grease when you bite into them and *he* doesn’t die of mad cow disease. I’m just not going to argue after a certain point. But I know Todd Dickey, and that’s not a guy who is all right. Deep down something’s wrong with him.

When Todd gets into a game and he’s out on third he does this thing where he’s always pressing his mouth into his glove and it seems like he’s whispering into the palm of it. Ramon Diego, our shortstop and one of my best friends, says that he *is* whispering. He’s looking at the batter coming to the plate and he’s whispering:

“Beat ’em or burn ’em. They go up pretty quick. Beat ’em or burn ’em. Or *fuck* ’em. Either way. Either way beat ’em burn ’em or fuck ’em, fuck ’em, fuck this guy fucking *fuck* this guy!” Ramon says Todd gets spit all over his glove.

Also when the guys get talking about all the ball-club group-

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ies they've made (I'm not supposed to hear this kind of talk but just try being around professional athletes and not catching some of it), Todd, who is one of these big ballplayers for Holy Everlasting Jesus!, listens with a face that seems swollen, and a weird intense look in his eyes, and sometimes without warning the muscles in the left side of his face all at once will start jumping and rippling unnaturally, and *he doesn't even know his face is doing what it's doing when it's doing it*.

Ramon Diego thinks he's weird and so do I. No parking-lot squirrel for me. There's a difference between being a stone-cold Colt .45—drinking hayseed redneck and being some kind of whispering psycho killer with a degenerative nerve condition in your face.

MY DAD DEALS really well with all my issues, like the time he took me road-tripping with him and we stayed at the Four Seasons in Chicago for a three-spot with the White Sox.

We settle into a suite with a big living room, and at one end is a door into his bedroom, and at the other is a door into mine. We stay up until midnight watching a movie on hotel cable. For dinner we order Froot Loops from room service (his idea—I didn't even ask). He sits slumped low in his chair, naked except for his jockey shorts, and the fingers of his right hand stuck in under the elastic waistband as they always are except in my mother's presence, watching the television in a drowsy, absent-minded sort of way. I don't remember falling asleep with the movie on. What I remember is that I wake up when he lifts me out of the cool leather couch to haul me into my bedroom, and my face is turned into his chest, and I'm breathing in the good smell of him. I can't tell you what that smell is, except that it has grass and clean earth in it, and sweat and locker rooms, and also the inherent sweetness of aged, lived-in skin. I bet farmers smell good just the same way.

After he's gone I'm laying alone in the dark, as comfortable as can be in my icy nestle of sheets, when for the first time I notice a thin, shrill whine, bad like when someone is rewinding a tape in the VCR. Almost the instant I'm aware of it I receive the first sick pulse in my back teeth. I'm not sleepy

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anymore—being carried has jostled me partly awake, and the cold sheets have shocked me the rest of the way—so I sit up and listen to the light-starved world around me. The traffic in the street whooshes along and horns bleat from a long distance off. I hold the clock-radio to my ear, but that isn't what's doing it. I hoist myself out of bed. On with the light. It has to be the air conditioner. In most hotels the air conditioner is usually a steel cabinet against the wall beneath the window, but not the Four Seasons, which is too good for that. The only air conditioning component I can track down is a slotted gray vent in the ceiling, and standing beneath it I can hear that this is the culprit. The whine is more than I can stand. My eardrums hurt. I snatch a hardcover I've been reading out of my tote and stand beneath the vent throwing the book up at it.

“Be quiet! Shut up! Stop it! *No more!*” I hit the vent a couple good shots with the book, too—clang! whang! A screw pops out of one corner and the whole vent falls loose at one side, but no luck—not only does it still whine but now it is also sometimes producing a delicate buzz, as if a piece of metal somewhere inside has been knocked loose and is shuddering a little. A cool wetness trickles at the edge of my mouth. I suck spit and give one last helpless look at the busted vent, and then I go into the living room with my fingers jamming my ears to get away from it, but the whine is whining even worse in there. There is no place to go and the fingers in my ears are no help.

The sound drives me into my father's bedroom.

“Dad,” I say and wipe my chin on my shoulder—my jaw is slathered in spit—and go on, “Dad, can I sleep with you?”

“Huh? Okay. I got the farts, though. Watch out.”

I scramble into his bed and pull the sheets over me. In his room too there is of course the thin piercing whine.

“Are you all right?” he asks.

“The air conditioner. The air conditioner has a noise. It's hurting my teeth. I couldn't find how to turn it off.”

“Switch is in the living room. Right by the front door.”

“I'll go get it,” I say and I skitter to the edge of the bed.

“Hey,” he says and clasps my upper arm. “You better not. This is Chicago in June. It was a hundred and three today. It'll get too stuffy. I mean it, we'll die in here.”

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“But I can’t listen to it. Do you hear it? Do you hear the way it’s making that noise? It hurts my teeth. It’s as bad as when people crunch tinfoil, Dad, it’s as bad as that.”

“Yeah,” he replies. He falls quiet and for a long moment seems to be listening to it himself. Then he says, “You’re right. The air conditioner in this place sucks. It’s a necessary evil, though. We’ll suffocate in here like bugs screwed into a jar if we don’t have air conditioning.”

It has a steadying effect on me, the sound of his talk. Also, although when I climbed into the bed, the sheets had that crisp hotel room cold to them, by now I have warmed back up, and I’m not shivering so badly anymore. I feel better, although there are still the steady shoots of pain going through my jaw and up into my eardrums and then into my head. He has the farts, too, just as he warned me, but somehow even the reeky yellow smell of them, even that seems vaguely reassuring.

“All right,” he decides. “Here’s what we’ll do. Come on.”

He slips out of bed. I follow him through the dark to the bathroom. He clicks on the light. The bathroom is a vast expanse of beige-colored marble, and the sink has golden faucets, and in the corner is a shower with a door of rippled glass. It is pretty much the hotel bathroom of your dreams. By the sink is a collection of little bottles of shampoo and conditioner and skin lotion and boxes of soaps, a plastic jar of Q-tips, another of cotton balls. My father pops open the jar of cotton balls and crams one into each ear. I giggle at the sight of him—the sight of him standing there with a loose fluff of cotton hanging out of his big sunburned ears.

“Here,” he said. “Put some of this in.”

I force a few cotton balls deep into my ears. With the cotton in place, the world fills with a deep, hollow rushing roar. My roar, a steady flow of my own personal sound, a sound I find exceedingly pleasant.

I look at my father. He says, “Homkhmy chmn yhmu sthml hhmhrmr thrm hrrr chmndhuthmmnhar?”

“What?” I yell happily.

He nods and makes an O with his thumb and index finger and we both go back to bed, which is what I mean about how my father deals really well with my issues. We both have a great

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night of sleep and the next morning my dad makes room service bring us cans of fruit salad and a can opener for breakfast.

NOT EVERYONE OUT there deals so well with my problems, case in point my aunt Mandy.

Aunt Mandy has tried her hand at a lot of things, but none of it has gone anywhere. Mom and Dad helped to pay for her to go to art school because she thought she was going to be a photographer for a while. After she gave that up, they also helped her start an art gallery in Cape Cod, but like Aunt Mandy says, it never *gelled*, it didn't come together, the click never clicked. She went to film school in L.A., and had a cup of coffee as a screenwriter—no dice. She married a man she thought was going to be a novelist, but he turned out to just be an English teacher, and furthermore not a very happy one, and Aunt Mandy had to pay *him* alimony for a little while, so even being a married person didn't come together so well.

What Aunt Mandy would say about it is that she's still trying to figure out what it is she's supposed to be. What my father would say is Mandy is wrong if she thinks the question hasn't been answered yet—she already is the person she was always sure to become. It's like Brad McGuane, who was the right-fielder when my father took over managing the Team, who is a lifetime .292 batter but who only hits about .200 with men in scoring position and has never had a postseason hit, in spite of about twenty-five at-bats the last time he got to the playoffs. He's a meltdown case—that's what my father calls him. McGuane has drifted from team to team to team and people keep hiring him because of his good numbers in general and because they think someone with such a good bat is bound to *develop*, but what they don't see is that he *did* develop, and this is what he developed into. His click already clicked and it sure seems that there are not many fresh clicks out there for those sweet young men who find themselves in the game of baseball, or for middle-aged women either who marry the wrong people and who are never happy doing what they're doing but can only think of what else the world has to offer that might be better, or for any of us really, which I suppose is what I'm afraid of



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in my own case, since I think it's pretty clear despite what Dr. Faber says about it that I'm not really a lot better but actually about the same as I've ever been which we all can safely say is not the ideal.

Needless to say, as you would guess based on their differences of philosophy and world view, et al., Aunt Mandy and my father don't really like each other, although they pretend otherwise for my mother's sake.

Mandy and I went up to North Altamont just the two of us on a Sunday, because Mom thought I had spent too much of the summer at the park. What really bothered her was that The Team had been pounded five straight and Mom was worried I was getting all wound up about it. She was right as far as that goes. The losing streak was really getting to me. The leak had never leaked so much as during the last homestand.

I don't know why North Altamont. When Aunt Mandy talks about it, she always talks about going up to "*do* Lincoln Street," as if Lincoln Street in North Altamont is one of those famous places everyone knows about and always means to *do*, the way when people are passing through Florida they *do* Walt Disney World, or when they're in New York City they *do* a Broadway show. Lincoln Street is pretty, though, in a quiet little New England township kind of way. It's on a steep hill, and the road is made of brick, and no cars are allowed, although people walk horses right up the middle, and there are occasional dry, green horse-turd pies scattered over the road. I mean—*scenic*.

We visit a series of poorly lit patchouli-smelling shops. We go into one store where they're hawking bulky sweaters made out of Vermont-bred llama wool, and there's this music playing down low, some kind of music that incorporates flutes, blurred harpsichord sounds, and the shrill whistles of birds. In another store we peruse the work of local artisans—glistening ceramic cows, their pink ceramic udders waving beneath them as they leap over ceramic moons—while from the store's sound-system comes the reedy choogling of the Grateful Dead.

After a dozen stores I'm bored of it. I have been sleeping badly all week—nightmares, plus the shivers, and so on—and all the walking around has made me tired and grouchy. It

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doesn't help my mood that the last place we go into, an antique shop in a renovated carriage house, has on neither New Age music or hippie music, but more awful sounds yet—the Sunday game. Here is no store-wide sound-system, only a little table-top stereo on the front desk. The proprietor, an old man in bib overalls, listens to the game with his thumb stuck in his mouth. In his eyes is a stunned, hopeless daze.

I hang around by the desk to listen in and find out what all the misery is about. We're at the plate. Our first guy pops out to left, and our second guy pops out to right. Hap Diehl comes up planning to swing and racks up a couple strikes in practically no time.

"Hap Diehl has been just *atrocious* with the lumber lately," says the announcer. "He's hitting an *excruciating* .160 over the last eight days, and when do you have to start questioning Ernie's decision to leave him in there day after day, when he's just getting *killed* at the plate. Partridge sets now and delivers and—oh, Hap Diehl *swung* at a *bad one*, I mean *bad*, a fastball that was a *mile* over his head—wait, he fell over, I actually think he's *hurt*—"

Aunt Mandy says we'll walk down to Wheelhouse Park and have a picnic. I'm used to city parks, open grassy areas with asphalt paths and Rollerblading girls in spandex. Wheelhouse Park is *dimmer* somehow than a city park, crowded with great old New England firs. The paths are of Rollerblade-unfriendly blue gravel. No playground. No tennis courts. *No* ballpark. Only the mysterious pine-sweet gloom—in under the over-spreading branches of the Christmas trees there is no real direct sunshine—and the sometimes gentle swoosh of wind. We pass no one.

"There's a good place to sit up ahead," my aunt says. "Just over this cute little covered bridge."

We approach a clearing, although even here the light is somehow obscured and dimmish. The path wanders unevenly to a covered bridge suspended only a yard above a wide, slow-moving river. On the other side of the bridge is a grassy sward with some benches in it.

One look and I am not a fan of this covered bridge, which sags obviously in the middle. Once a long time ago the bridge

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was a firetruck red, but rot and rain have stripped most of the paint away and there has been no effort to touch up, and the wood revealed is dried-out, splintery, and untrustworthy in character. Inside the tunnel is a scatter of garbage bags, ruptured and spilling litter. I hesitate an instant and in that time Aunt Mandy plunges on ahead. I straggle along behind with such a lack of enthusiasm that she is soon across, and I have not even gone in.

At the entrance I pause once more. Sickly sweet smells: the smell of rot and fungus. A narrow track passes between the heaps of garbage bags. I am disconcerted by the smell and the sewer gloom, but Aunt Mandy is on the other side, indeed, already gone on out of my direct view, and it makes me nervous to think of being left behind. I hurry on.

What happens next, though, is I get only a few yards, and then take a deep breath and what I smell makes me stop walking all at once and stick in place, unable to go on. What I have noticed is a rodent smell, a heated dandruffy rodent smell, mixed with a whiff of ammonia, a smell like I have smelled before in attics and basements, a rank *bat stink*. Suddenly I'm imagining a ceiling covered with bats. I imagine tipping my head back and seeing a colony of thousands of bats covering the roof in a squirming surface of brown-furred bodies, torsos wrapped in membrane-thin wings. I imagine the faint bat squeaks so like the sub-audible squeak of bad air conditioners and VCRs on rewind. I imagine bats, but cannot make myself glance up to look for them. The fright would kill me if I saw one. I take a few tense mincing steps forward and put my foot down on some ancient newspaper. There is an unfortunate crunch. I jump back, the sound giving my heart a stiff wrench in my chest.

My foot comes down on something, a log maybe, that rolls beneath my heel. I totter backwards, wheeling my arms about to catch my balance, and at last manage to steady myself without falling over. I twist around to look at whatever it is I just stepped on.

It is not a log at all but a man's leg. A man lays on his side in a drift of leaves. He wears a filthy baseball cap—Our Team's

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cap, once dark blue, but now faded almost white around the rim where it is blotched by dried salts left by old sweats—and denim jeans, and a lumberjack's plaid shirt. His beard has leaves in it. I stare down at him, the first thrill of panic shooting through me. I just stepped on him—and he *didn't wake up*.

I stare at his face and like in the comic books I am tingling with horror. A little flicker of movement catches my eye. I see a fly crawling on his upper lip. The fly's body gleams like an ingot of greased metal. It hesitates at the corner of his mouth, then climbs in and disappears and *he does not wake up*.

I shriek; no other word for it. I turn and run back to my side of the bridge where I shriek myself hoarse for Mandy.

"Aunt Mandy, come back! Come back *right now!*"

In a moment, she appears at the far end of the bridge.

"What are you screaming your head off for?"

"Aunt Mandy, come back, come back, *please!*" I suck at some drool. For the first time I am aware of drool all down my chin.

She starts across the bridge, coming at me with her head lowered as if she were walking into a bitter wind. "You can stop that screaming right now. Just stop! What are you yelling about?"

I point. "Him! *Him!*"

She stops a quarter of the way across and looks at the stiff old goner lying there in the garbage. She stares at him for a few seconds, and then says, "Oh. Him. Well, come on. He'll be all right, Homer. You let him mind his business and we'll mind ours."

"No, Aunt Mandy, we have to go! Please come back, please!"

"I'm not going to listen to a second more foolishness. Come over here."

"No!" I scream. "No, I *won't!*"

I pivot and run, the panic swelling through me, sick to my stomach, sick of the garbage smell and the bats and the dead man and the terrible crunch of old newspaper, the stink of bat piss, the way Hap Diehl was swinging at shit and Our Team was going into the toilet just like last year, and I run gushing

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tears, and wiping miserably at the spit on my face, and finding that no matter how hard I sobbed I could hardly get any air into my lungs.

“Stop it!” Mandy hollers when she catches up to me. She throws our bagged lunch aside to have both hands free. “You stop it! Jesus—*shut up!*”

She captures me around the waist. I flail about, shrieking, not wanting to be lifted, not wanting to be handled. I snap back an elbow that cracks sharply against a bony eye socket. She cries out and we both go staggering to the ground, Mandy on top of me. Her chin clouts the top of my skull. I scream at the sharp little flash of pain. Her teeth clack together and she gasps, and her grip goes loose. I leap and almost get free but she grabs me with both hands by the elastic band of my shorts.

“Goddamn it, you stop!”

My face glows with an infernal heat. “No! No I won’t go back I won’t go back let me go!”

I surge forward again, coming off the ground like a runner jumping from the blocks and suddenly, in an instant, I am out from under her and tramping full-speed up the path, listening to her squall behind me.

“Homer!” she squalls. “Homer, come back here *right now!*”

I have gone almost all the way back to Lincoln Street when I feel a gush of cool air between my legs and look down and observe for the first time how it is that I have escaped. She had been holding me by the shorts, and I have come right out of them—shorts, Mark McGwire Underoos, and all. I look down at my male equipment, pink and smooth and small, jouncing from thigh to thigh as I run. The sight of all this bareness below gives me an unexpected rush of exhilaration.

She catches me again halfway to the car on Lincoln Street. A crowd watches while she yanks me off my feet by my hair and we wrestle together on the ground.

“Sit down, you weird shit!” she shouts. “You crazy little asshole!”

“Fat bitch whore!” I yell. “Parasitic capitalist!”

Well, no. But along those lines.

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\* \* \*

I DON'T KNOW but it might be that what happened up at Wheelhouse Park was the last straw, because two weeks later, when The Team is taking an off-day, the folks and me are driving to Vermont to tour a boarding school called Biden Academy that my mom wants us to look at. She tells me it's a prep school, but I've seen the brochure, which is full of code words—special needs, stable environment, social normalization—so I know what kind of school we're really going to look at.

A young man in a worn blue shirt, jeans, and hiking boots meets us on the steps in front of Main Building. He introduces himself as Archer Grace. He's with admissions. He's going to show us around. Biden Academy is in the White Mountains. The breeze swishing in the pines has a brisk chill to it, so that although it is August, the afternoon has the exciting, chilly feel of World Series time. Mr. Grace takes us on a stroll around the campus. We look at a couple of brick buildings smothered in fresh green ivy. We look inside at empty classrooms. We walk through an auditorium with dark wood paneling and a bunch of heavy crimson curtains hanging around. At one side of the room is a bust of Benjamin Franklin chiseled in milky blond marble. At the other, a bust of Martin Luther King in dark onyxlike stone. Ben is scowling across the room at the reverend, who looks as if he has just woken up and is still puffy with sleep.

"Is it just me or is it really stuffy in here?" my father asks. "Like, short on oxygen?"

"It gets a good airing out before the fall semester begins," replies Mr. Grace. "There isn't anyone here hardly except for a few of the summer-program kids."

We perambulate together outside and into a grove of enormous trees with slippery-looking gray bark. At one end of the grove is a half-shell amphitheater and terraced seats, where they have graduations and occasionally hold productions or shows for the kids.

"What's that smell?" my father asks. "Does this place smell funny?"

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What is interesting is that my mother and Mr. Grace are pretending not to hear him. My mother has lots of questions for Mr. Grace about the school productions. It's like my father isn't there.

"What are these beautiful trees?" my mother asks, as we're on our way out of the grove.

"Gingko," Mr. Grace replies. "Do you know there are no trees in the world like the Gingko? They're sole survivors of an ancient prehistoric tree family that has been wiped completely off the earth."

My father stops by the trunk of one of them. He scratches a thumb along the bark. Then he gives his thumb a sniff. He makes a disgusted face.

"So *that's* what stinks," he says. "You know, extinction is not always a bad thing."

We look at a swimming pool. Mr. Grace talks about physical therapy. He shows us a running track. He talks about the junior Special Olympics. He shows us the ballpark.

"So you get a team together," my father says. "And you play some games. Is that right?"

"Yes. A team, a few games. But this is more than just play, what we're doing out here," Mr. Grace says. "At Biden we challenge children to squeeze learning out of everything they do. Even their games. This is a classroom too. We see this as a place to develop in the children some of the most crucial life skills, like negotiating conflict, and building interpersonal relationships, and releasing stress through physical activity. It's like, you know that old cliché—it's not whether you win or lose, it's what you take away from the game, how much you learn about yourself, about emotional growth."

Mr. Grace turns and starts away.

"What did he just tell me?" my father says. "That was like in a different language."

My mother starts to walk away too.

"I didn't get him," my father says. "But I think he just told me they have one of these pity-party teams where no one ever strikes out."

Mr. Grace takes us last to the library and it's here that we meet one of the summer-session kids. We enter a large circular

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room, with rosewood bookcases wrapped around the walls. A distant computer clinkety-clicks. A boy about my age is lying on the floor. A woman in a plaid dress has him by the right arm. I think she's trying to get him on his feet, but all she's managing to do is drag him around in circles.

"Jeremy?" she says. "If you won't get up, then we can't go play with the computer. Do you hear me?"

Jeremy doesn't respond and she just keeps dragging him around and around. Once when she has him turned around to face us, he looks at me briefly with vacant eyes. He has the leak too—drool all over his chin.

"*Wanna*," he drones in a long, stupid voice. "*Wannaaaa*."

"The library just installed four new computers," says Mr. Grace. "Internet-ready."

"Look at this marble," my mother says.

My father puts his hand on my shoulder and squeezes me gently.

THE FIRST SUNDAY in September I go to the park with my father, and of course it is early when we get there, so early that no one is there, only a couple of rookie call-ups who have been in since the dawn to impress my father. My father is sitting in the stands behind the screen overlooking home plate and talking with Shaughnessy for the sports pages, and at the same time the two of us are playing a game, it's called the secret things game, where he makes out a list of things for me to look for, each item worth a different number of points, and I have to run around the park and try and hunt them down (no digging through the trash which he should know I would not do anyway): a ball-point pen, a quarter, a lady's glove, et cetera. No easy task after the crews have been out cleaning.

As I find things on the list I run them back to him, ball-point pen, string of black licorice, steel button. Then one time when I return, Shaughnessy has gone off and my father is just sitting there with his hands laced behind his head and an open plastic bag of peanuts in his lap and his feet up on the seat in front of him and he says, "Why don't you set awhile?"



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“Look: I found a matchbook. Forty points,” I say, and I plop into the seat beside him.

“Get a load of this,” my father says. “Look how nice it is when no one is here. When you get the place quiet. You know what I like best about it? The way it is right now?”

“What do you like best about it?”

“You can get some thinking done, and eat peanuts at the same time,” he tells me and cracks a peanut open.

It is cool out, the sky a whitish-blue arctic color. A seagull floats above the outfield, wings spread, not seeming to move. The rookies are stretching in the outfield and chatting. One of them laughs, strong, young, healthy laughter.

“Where do you think better?” I ask. “Here or home?”

“This is better than home,” he says. “Better for eating peanuts too, because you can’t just throw the shells on the floor at home.” He throws a few shells on the floor. “Not unless you want Mom to hand you an ass-kicking.”

We were quiet. A steady cool stream of air was blowing in from the outfield and into our faces. No one was going to hit any home runs today—not with that steady wind blowing in against us.

“Well,” I say, popping up. “Forty points. Here’s my matchbook. I better get back to it. I’ve almost found everything I’m looking for.”

“Lucky you,” he tells me.

“This is a good game,” I say. “I bet we could play at home. You could send me out to look for things and I could hunt around and find them. How come we never do that? How come we never play the game where we look for secret things at home?”

“Because it’s just better here,” he says.

At that point I run off to look for what’s left on the list—a shoelace, a lucky rabbit’s foot key chain—and leave my father behind, but the conversation came back to me later on and is kind of stuck in my head so that I think about it all the time and sometimes I wonder if that was one of those moments you aren’t supposed to forget when you think your father is saying one thing, but actually he’s saying another, when there’s meaning buried in some comments that seemed really ordinary. I

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like to think that. It's a nice memory of my father sitting with his hands cupped behind his head and the wintry blue sky over the both of us. It's a nice memory with that old seagull floating over the outfield and not going anywhere, just hanging in place with its wings spread, never traveling any closer to wherever it was heading. It's a nice memory to have in your head. Everyone should have a memory just like it.

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And how about a little thanks for you, the reader, for picking up this book and giving me the chance to whisper in your ear for a few hours?

Gene Wolfe and Neil Gaiman have both hidden stories in introductions, but I don't think anyone has ever buried one in

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their acknowledgments page. I could be the first. The only way I can think to repay you for your interest is with the offer of one more story:

### SCHEHERAZADE'S TYPEWRITER

Elena's father had gone into the basement every night, after work, for as far back as she could remember, and did not come up until he had written three pages on the humming IBM electric typewriter he had bought in college, when he still believed he would someday be a famous novelist. He had been dead for three days before his daughter heard the typewriter in the basement, at the usual time: a burst of rapid bang-bang-banging, followed by a waiting silence, filled out only by the idiot hum of the machine.

Elena descended the steps, into darkness, her legs weak. The drone of his IBM filled the musty-smelling dark, so the gloom itself seemed to vibrate with electrical current, as before a thunderstorm. She reached the lamp beside her father's typewriter, and flipped it on just as the Selectric burst into another bang-bang flurry of noise. She screamed, and then screamed again when she saw the keys moving on their own, the chrome typeball lunging against the bare black platen.

That first time Elena saw the typewriter working on its own, she thought she might faint from the shock of it. Her mother almost did faint when Elena showed her, the very next night. When the typewriter jumped to life and began to write, Elena's mother threw her hands up and shrieked and her legs wobbled under her, and Elena had to grab her by the arm to keep her from going down.

But in a few days they got used to it, and then it was exciting. Her mother had the idea to roll a sheet of paper in, just before the typewriter switched itself on at 8 P.M. Elena's mother wanted to see what it was writing, if it was a message for them from beyond. *My grave is cold. I love you and I miss you.*

But it was only another of his short stories. It didn't even start at the beginning. The page began midway, right in the middle of a sentence.

It was Elena's mother who thought to call the local news.

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A producer from channel five came to see the typewriter. The producer stayed until the machine turned itself on and wrote a few sentences, then she got up and briskly climbed the stairs. Elena's mother hurried after her, full of anxious questions.

"Remote control," the producer said, her tone curt. She looked back over her shoulder with an expression of distaste. "When did you bury your husband, ma'am? A week ago? What's wrong with you?"

None of the other television stations were interested. The man at the newspaper said it didn't sound like their kind of thing. Even some of their relatives suspected it was a prank in bad taste. Elena's mother went to bed and stayed there for several weeks, flattened by a terrific migraine, despondent and confused. And in the basement, every night, the typewriter worked on, flinging words onto paper in noisy chattering bursts.

The dead man's daughter attended to the Selectric. She learned just when to roll a fresh sheet of paper in, so that each night the machine produced three new pages of story, just as it had when her father was alive. In fact, the machine seemed to wait for her, humming in a jovial sort of way, until it had a fresh sheet to stain with ink.

Long after no one else wanted to think about the typewriter anymore, Elena continued to go into the basement at night, to listen to the radio, and fold laundry, and roll a new sheet of paper into the IBM when it was necessary. It was a simple enough way to pass the time, mindless and sweet, rather like visiting her father's grave each day to leave fresh flowers.

Also, she had come to like reading the stories when they were finished. Stories about masks and baseball and fathers and their children . . . and ghosts. Some of them were ghost stories. She liked those the best. Wasn't that the first thing you learned in every fiction course everywhere? Write what you know? The ghost in the machine wrote about the dead with great authority.

After a while, the ribbons for the typewriter were only available by special order. Then even IBM stopped making them. The typeball wore down. She replaced it, but then the carriage started sticking. One night, it locked up, wouldn't move forward, and oily smoke began to trickle from under the iron

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hood of the machine. The typewriter hammered letter after letter, one right on top of the other, with a kind of mad fury, until Elena managed to scramble over and shut it off.

She brought it to a man who repaired old typewriters and other appliances. He returned it in perfect operating condition, but it never wrote on its own again. In the three weeks it was at the shop, it lost the habit.

As a little girl, Elena had asked her father why he went into the basement each night to make things up, and he had said it was because he couldn't sleep until he had written. Writing things warmed his imagination up for the work of creating an evening full of sweet dreams. Now she was unsettled by the idea that his death might be a restless, sleepless thing. But there was no help for it.

She was by then in her twenties and when her mother died—an unhappy old woman, estranged not just from her family but the entire world—she decided to move out, which meant selling the house and all that was in it. She had hardly started to sort the clutter in the basement, when she found herself sitting on the steps, rereading the stories her father had written after he died. In his life, he had given up the practice of submitting his work to publishers, had wearied of rejection. But his post-mortem work seemed to the girl to be much—livelier—than his earlier work, and his stories of hauntings and the unnatural seemed especially arresting. Over the next few weeks, she collected his best into a single book, and began to send it to publishers. Most said there was no market in collections by writers of no reputation, but in time she heard from an editor at a small press who said he liked it, that her father had a fine feel for the supernatural.

“Didn't he?” she said.

Now this is the story as I first heard it myself from a friend in the publishing business. He was maddeningly ignorant of the all-important details, so I can't tell you where the book was finally published or when or, really, anything more regarding this curious collection. I wish I knew more. As a man who is fascinated with the occult, I would like to obtain a copy.

Unfortunately, the title and author of the unlikely book are not common knowledge.

# About the Author

**Joe Hill** is the author of the critically acclaimed *New York Times* bestseller *Heart-Shaped Box*, a two-time winner of the Bram Stoker Award, and a past recipient of the World Fantasy Award. His stories have appeared in a variety of journals and Year's Best collections. He calls New England home.

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