

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

JOE HILL



You Will Hear
the Locust Sing

A STORY FROM THE COLLECTION

20TH CENTURY
GHOSTS

YOU WILL HEAR THE LOCUST SING

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20TH CENTURY GHOSTS

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HarperCollins e-books

To Leanora:

WE ARE MY FAVORITE STORY

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1.

Francis Kay woke from dreams that were not uneasy, but exultant, and found himself an insect. He was not surprised, had thought this might happen. Or not thought: hoped, fantasized, and if not for this precise thing, then something like it. He had believed for a while he would learn to control cockroaches by telepathy, that he would master a glistening brown-backed horde of them, and send them clattering to battle for him. Or like in that movie with Vincent Price, he would only be partly transformed, his head become the head of a fly, sprouting obscene black hairs, his bulging, faceted eyes reflecting a thousand screaming faces.

He still wore his former skin like a coat, the skin of who he had been when he was human. Four of his six legs poked through rents in the damp, beige, pimped, mole-studded, tragic, reeking cape of flesh. At the sight of his ruined, castaway skin he felt a little thrill of ecstasy and thought good riddance to it. He was on his back, and his legs—segmented, and jointed so they bent backwards—wavered helplessly above his body. His legs were armored in curved plates of brilliant metallic green, as shiny as polished chrome, and in the sun that slanted through his bedroom windows, splashes of unwholesome iridescence raced across their surfaces. His appendages ended in curved hooks of hardened black enamel, filigreed with a thousand blade-like hairs.

Francis wasn't all the way awake yet. He feared the moment

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when his head would clear and it would all be over, his coat of skin buttoned back up, the insect shape gone, nothing more than a particularly intense dream that had persisted for a few minutes after waking. He thought if it turned out he was only imagining it, the disappointment would crack him open, would be too awful to bear. At the very least he would have to skip school.

Then he remembered he had been planning to skip school anyway. Huey Chester had thought Francis was giving him fag-got looks in the locker room after gym, when they were both getting undressed. Huey scooped a turd out of the toilet with a lacrosse stick and flung it at Francis to teach him something about staring at other guys, and it was so funny he said it ought to be a new sport. Huey and the other kids argued over what to call it. Dodge-a-shit was one favorite. Long-Range Shit Launching was another. Francis had decided right then and there to stay clear of Huey Chester and gym—of the whole school—for a day or two.

Huey had liked Francis once; or not liked him exactly, but enjoyed showing him off to others. He liked Francis to eat bugs for his friends. This was in fourth grade. The summer before, Francis had lived with his grand-aunt Reagan, in her trailer over in Tuba City. Reagan smothered crickets in molasses and served them in the afternoon with tea. It was really something, watching them cook. Francis would lean over the gently bubbling pot of molasses with its tarry, awful-sweet reek, and go into a happy kind of trance, watching the slow-motion struggles of the crickets as they drowned. He liked candied crickets, the sweet crunch of them, the oily-grassy taste at the center, and he liked Reagan, and wished he could stay with her forever, but his father came and got him anyway, of course.

So one day at school Francis told Huey about eating crickets, and Huey wanted to see, only they didn't have either molasses or crickets, so Francis caught a cockroach and ate it while it was alive. It was salty and bitter, with a harsh, metallic aftertaste, terrible really. But Huey laughed, and Francis experienced a swell of pride so intense, he couldn't breathe for an instant; like a cricket drowning in molasses, he felt suffocated by sweetness.

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After that, Huey gathered his friends for afternoon horror shows in the playground. Francis ate cockroaches they brought him. He crushed a moth with splendid pale green wings into his mouth and munched it slowly; the children quizzed him as to what he was feeling, how it tasted. “Hungry,” he told them in answer to the first question. “Like someone’s lawn,” he said in answer to the second. He poured honey to attract ants and inhaled them out of the gleaming lump of amber with a straw. The ants went *phut-phut-phut* on their way up through the plastic tube. Groans rose from his audience, and he beamed, intoxicated by his newfound celebrity.

Only he had never been famous before, and he misjudged what his fans would tolerate and what they wouldn’t. On a different afternoon, he captured flies swarming around a calcified pile of dogshit, inhaling them by the handful. Again he was delighted by the moans of those who gathered to watch. But flies off dogshit were somehow different than honey-coated ants. The latter was comically gruesome. The former was pathologically disturbing. After that they started calling him the shiteater and the dung beetle. One day someone planted a dead rat in his lunchbox. In biology, Huey and his friends pelted him with half-dissected salamanders, while Mr. Krause was out of the room.

Francis let his gaze drift across his ceiling. Strips of flypaper, curling in the heat, drifted about in the breeze made by the humming, elderly fan in the corner. He lived alone with his father, and his father’s girlfriend, in the rooms behind the filling station. His windows looked down through sage and brush, into a culvert mounded with garbage, the back end of the town dump. On the other side of the culvert was a low rise, and beyond that, the painted red flats, where on some nights they still lit The Bomb. He had seen it once—The Bomb. It was when he was eight. He came awake to the wind rushing against the back of the gas station, tumbleweeds flying through the air. He stood on his bed, to peer through one of the windows high in the wall, saw the sun rising in the west at two in the morning, a gassy ball of blood-colored neon light, boiling up into the sky on a slender column of smoke. He watched until he felt a transcendent pain flaring at the back of his eyeballs.

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He wondered if it was late. He didn't have a clock, didn't worry about being places on time anymore. His teachers rarely noticed if he was in classes, or when he entered the room. He listened for some sound of the world beyond his room, and heard the television, which meant Ella was awake. Ella was his father's mountainous girlfriend, a woman with fat legs and varicose veins, who spent the entire day on the couch.

He was hungry; he would have to get up soon. It came to him then that he was still an insect, a realization that surprised and galvanized him. His old skin had slid down off his arms and hung in a rubbery mass from his—what were they, shoulders?—anyway, lay beneath him like a wrinkled sheet of some stretchy synthetic material. He wanted to flip over, get down on the floor, and have a look at the old skin. He wondered if he could find his face somewhere in all that, a shriveled mask with holes where his eyes had been.

He tried to reach for the wall, meaning to use it to turn himself. But his movements were uncoordinated, and his legs jerked and twitched in every direction except the one he wanted. As he struggled with his limbs, he felt a gaseous pressure building in his lower abdomen. He tried to sit up, and at that instant, the pressure blew out his rear end, with a hard hissing sound, like all the air going out of a tire at once: *paffff*. He felt an unnatural warmth around his back legs, and glanced down in time to see a rippling distortion pass through the air, like heat rising off a distant, sun-struck road.

This was funny. A monster insect fart; or maybe a monster insect bowel movement. He wasn't sure, but he thought he felt wetness down there. He shivered with laughter, and for the first time became aware of some impossibly thin, impossibly hard plates, trapped between the curve of his back and the bunched-up lumps of his former flesh. He considered what they might be. They were a part of him, and it felt as if he might be able to move them about like his arms, only they weren't arms.

He wondered if anyone would check on him, imagined Ella rapping on the door, then sticking her head in . . . and how she would scream, mouth falling open so wide it would make four double chins, her piggy close-set eyes shiny with terror. But no; Ella wouldn't check. It was too much trouble for her to get off

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the couch. For a while he daydreamed about marching out of his room on all six legs, walking straight past her, and how she would shriek and cringe. Was it possible she might die of a heart attack? He imagined her cries becoming choked, the skin under her pancake make-up turning an unpleasant cast of gray, her eyelids fluttering and the eyes themselves rolling back to show the glistening whites.

He found he could hump his way along by heaving his whole body up and to the side, moving in little increments towards the edge of the cot. As he twitched closer to the edge, he tried to imagine what he would do *after* giving Ella the heart attack. He envisioned letting himself out into the hot glare of the Arizona morning, scrabbling right down the middle of the highway. He could see it already: cars swerving to avoid hitting him, horns blaring, the shrill whine of tires, people driving their pickups into telephone poles, hillbillies screaming, *What the fuck is that thing*, then grabbing for their shotguns on the rifle rack . . . on second thought, maybe it would be better to stay off the highway.

He wanted to make his way over to Eric Hickman's house, scuttle into the basement and wait for him there. Eric was a scrawny seventeen-year-old with a skin disorder that had caused dozens of moles to erupt on his face, most of them sprouting bunches of wiry pubic hair; he also had a filmy black mustache, growing thick at the corners of his mouth, like the whiskers of a catfish. He was for this reason known around school as the cuntfish. Eric and Francis met for movies sometimes. They had seen the Vincent Price picture *The Fly* together; also *Them!* twice. Eric loved *Them!* He was going to wet himself when he saw what had happened. Eric was smart—he had read everything Mickey Spillane had ever written—and they could make plans about what to do next. Also maybe Eric would get him something to eat. Francis wanted something sweet. Ding-Dongs. Twinkies. His stomach rumbled dangerously.

In the next moment, Francis heard—no, *sensed*—his father entering the living room. Each step Buddy Kay took set off a subtle vibration Francis could feel in the iron frame of his cot, and humming in the dry hot air around his head. The stucco walls of the filling station were relatively thick, and absorbed sounds well. He had never before been able to clearly hear a

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conversation going on in the next room. Now, though, he *felt*, rather than heard, what Ella was saying and how his father answered her; felt their voices as a series of low reverberations, which stirred the exquisitely sensitive antennae at the top of his head. Their voices were distorted, and deeper than normal—as if their conversation were taking place underwater—but perfectly understandable.

She said, “You know he never went to school.”

“What are you talking about?” Buddy asked.

“He never went to school is what. He’s been in there all mornin’.”

“Is he awake?”

“I don’t know.”

“Din’t you look?”

“You know I don’t like to put no weight on my laig.”

“You fuckin’ lazy cow,” his father said, and began to stride towards Francis’s door. Each step sent another shivering jolt of pleasure and alarm through Francis’s antennae.

By then, Francis had reached the edge of the bed. The skin of his old body, however, hadn’t come along with him, and lay in a knotted mess in the center of the mattress, a boneless canoe filled with blood. Francis balanced on the iron rail that ran along the outside of his cot. He tried to shuffle another inch or two closer to the side, not sure yet how to get down, and turned over. His old skin yanked at his limbs, the weight of it pulling him back. He heard his father’s boot heels ringing on the other side of the door, and he heaved himself forward, alarmed at the thought of being found helpless on his back. His father might not recognize him and go for the gun—which was on the wall in the living room, only a few steps away—and blow open his segmented belly in a whitish-green gush of bug innards.

When Francis threw himself at the edge of the bed, the rags of his old flesh came apart, with a ripping sound like someone tearing a bedsheet; he fell; flipped at the same time; and landed with a springy lightness on all six feet, with a grace he had never known in his days as a human.

His back was to the bedroom door. He didn’t have time to think, and for that reason, perhaps, his legs did just what they were supposed to. He spun around, his rear legs running to the

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right while his front legs scabbled to the left, turning the low, narrow five-foot length of him. He felt the microthin plates or shields on his back flutter strangely, and had just an instant to wonder again what they were. Then his father was braying at the door.

“What the fuck you doin’ in there, you asshole? Get the fuck to school—”

The door banged open. Francis reared back, lifting his front two legs off the floor. His mandibles made a rapid clattering sound, like a fast typist giving a manual typewriter a workout. Buddy hung in the open door, one hand still gripping the door-knob. His gaze fell upon the crouched figure of his transformed son. The color drained from his starved, whiskery face, until he looked like a waxwork of himself.

Then he shrieked, a shrill piercing sound that sent a white electric throb of pure stimulation shooting down Francis’s antennae. Francis shrieked himself, although what came out in no way resembled a human cry. It was the sound instead of someone shaking a thin sheet of aluminum, an undulating, inhuman warble.

He looked for a way out. There were windows high in the wall above his bed, but they weren’t big enough, just a series of wide slots barely a foot tall. His glance fell upon his bed and held there for a startled instant. He had thrown his sheets off in the night, kicking them to the far end of the mattress. Now they were lathered in some kind of white spittle, and they were *dissolving* in it . . . had liquefied and blackened at the same time, becoming a mass of fizzing organic sludge.

The bed sagged deeply in the center. The castoff raiment of his flesh was there, a one-piece boy costume that had been ripped apart up the middle. He didn’t get a look at his face, but he did see one hand, a crinkly flesh-colored glove with nothing in it, fingers curling inwards. The foam that had melted the sheets was trickling down towards his former skin, and where it touched it, the tissue blistered and smoked. Francis remembered farting, and the feeling of liquid trickling between his hind legs. *He* had done this somehow.

The air shuddered with a sudden heavy crash. He looked back and saw his father on the floor, his toes pointing out-

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wards. Stared past him into the living room, where Ella was struggling to sit up from the couch. Instead of turning gray and grabbing her chest, she stiffened at the sight of him, her expression going fixed and blank. She had a bottle of Coke in one hand—it wasn't yet ten in the morning—and she sat frozen with it raised halfway to her lips.

“Oh God,” she said, in a dazed, but relatively normal tone of voice. “Just look at you.”

Coke began to spill out of the bottle, drizzling down her breasts. She didn't notice.

He would have to go, and there was only one way out. He jogged forward, erratically at first—he zagged a little too hard to the right on his way through the doorway and clouted his side, although he barely felt it—and climbed over the body of his unconscious father. He continued on, squeezing between the couch and the coffee table, aiming himself at the screen door. Ella daintily lifted her feet onto the couch to let him pass. She was whispering to herself now, so softly a person sitting right next to her might not have been aware she was doing it. Francis, however, didn't miss a word, his antennae trembling at every syllable.

“Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth, and they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree—” He was at the door now; he paused, listening. “—but only those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads; they were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion, when it stings a man. And in those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death flies from them.”

He shivered, although he could not have said why; her words stirred and thrilled him. He lifted his front legs to the door and shoved it open, and clambered out into the blinding white heat of the day.

2.

The culvert was filled with garbage for half a mile, the combined trash of five towns. Garbage collection was Calliphora's

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main industry. Two of every five grown men in town had a job in trash; one out of five was in the army's radiological division and stationed at Camp Calliphora, a mile to the north; the other two stayed home to watch television, scratch lottery tickets, and eat the frozen dinners they bought with their food stamps. Francis's father was the rare exception, someone who owned his own business. Buddy called himself an entrepreneur. He had had an idea which he thought might revolutionize the filling station business. It was called self-serve. It meant you let the customer fill his own Goddamn tank, and you charged them just the same as they did at the full-service place.

Down in the culvert, it was difficult to see anything of Calliphora on the shelf of rock above. When Francis peered up the steep incline, he could make out just a single identifiable landmark, the top of the great flagpole in front of his father's gas station. The flag itself was reckoned to be the biggest in the state. It was easily large enough to drape over the cab of an eighteen-wheeler, and too heavy to move even in very strong winds. Francis had seen it rippling only once—in the gales that boomed across Calliphora after they dropped The Bomb.

His father got a lot of army business. Whenever he had to come out of his office for some reason, say, to look at someone's overheated Jeep, he usually threw the top half of his fatigues on over his T-shirt. Medals bounced and flashed on the left breast. None of them were his—he had bought them one afternoon at the pawn—but the uniform he had at least come by honestly, in World War II. His father had liked the war.

"There isn't any pussy like what you get in a country you just shelled into the dirt," he said one night, lifting a can of Buckhorn as if in a toast, his rheumy eyes glistening with fond memories.

Francis hid in the garbage, squeezing himself into a soft depression between bulging plastic bags, and waited fearfully for police cruisers, listening for the dreadful, thunderous beat of helicopters, his antennae twitching and erect. But there were no cruisers, and there were no helicopters. Once or twice a pickup came rattling down the dirt road winding between the trash heaps, and he'd squirm desperately backwards, burrowing so far into the garbage that only his antennae stuck out. But that

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was all. There was little traffic at this end of the dump, which was almost half a mile from the processing center where the real work was done.

Later, he scuttled up onto one of the great mounds of garbage, to make sure he wasn't quietly being encircled. He wasn't, and he didn't remain in the open for long. He didn't like the direct glare of the sun. After only a moment in it, he felt a numbing lassitude creeping over him, as if he had been pumped full of novocaine. In the very back of the dump, though, where the culvert narrowed, he spied a trailer on cement blocks. He climbed down and waddled over to it. He had thought it looked abandoned and it was. The space beneath it was filled with deliciously cool shadows. Climbing under the trailer was as refreshing as a dip into a lake.

He rested. It was Eric Hickman who woke him; not that Francis had been asleep in the literal sense. He had settled instead into a state of intensely felt stillness, in which he knew nothing and yet was completely alert. He heard the scrape and drag of Eric's feet from forty feet away, and lifted his head. Eric was squinting through his glasses in the afternoon sunlight. He was always squinting—to read things, or just when he was thinking hard—a habit which never failed to put a kind of simian grimace on his face. It was such an unpleasant expression, it just naturally made other people want to give him something to grimace about.

"Francis," Eric whispered loudly. He carried a grease-spattered brown paper bag that might've contained his lunch, and at the sight Francis felt a sharp twinge of hunger, but he didn't come out.

"Francis, are you down here somewhere?" Eric whispered one more time before he tracked on out of sight.

Francis had wanted to show himself, but couldn't. What had stopped him was the idea that Eric was only there to lure him out in the open. Francis imagined a team of snipers crouched on the hills of garbage, watching the road through their rifle sights for some sign of the giant killer cricket. He held his ground, crouched and tense, monitoring the mounds of trash for movement. He held his breath. A can fell clanking. It was only a crow.

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Eventually, he had to admit he had let anxiety get the better of him. Eric had come alone. This was followed a moment later by the understanding that no one was looking for him, because no one would believe his father when Buddy said what he had seen. If he tried to tell them he had discovered a giant insect in his son's bedroom, crouched beside the eviscerated body of his boy, he'd be lucky not to wind up in the back of a police car, on his way to the psychiatric ward in Tucson. They would not even believe him when he said his son was dead. After all, there was no body, and no discarded skin either. The milky excretion that had bubbled out of Francis's rear would've melted it away.

Only last Halloween, his father had sweated out the DTs in the county jail, and could hardly be considered a credible witness. Ella might back up his story, but her word was worth no more than his, and possibly less. She called the offices of the *Calliphora Happenings*, sometimes as often as once a month, to report seeing clouds that looked like Jesus. She had a whole photo album of clouds she said bore the face of Her Savior. Francis had flipped through it, but was unable to recognize any religious notables, although he was willing to admit there was one cloud that might've been a fat man in a fez.

The local police would be on the lookout for Francis himself, of course, but he wasn't sure how hard they'd actively search. He was eighteen—free to do as he chose—and often missed school without explanation. There were just four law enforcement officers in Calliphora: Sheriff George Walker, and three part-timers. That allowed for only a very limited search party, and besides, there were other things to do on a pretty, windless day like this one: hassle wetbacks for example, or sit in the speed-trap and wait for teenagers to burn by on their way to Phoenix.

It was getting hard, anyway, to worry much about whether anyone was looking for him. He was daydreaming about Little Debbie snacks again. He could not remember the last time he had been so hungry.

Although the sky was bright and hard, a blue enameled surface, afternoon shadows had eased out across the culvert, as the sun slipped behind the shelf of red rock to the west. He scuttled out from under the trailer, and picked through the litter, stop-

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ping at a bag that had split open and spilled its contents. He prodded the leavings with his antennae. Amidst the crushed papers, exploded Styrofoam cups, and balled-up diapers, he discovered a dirt-speckled red lollipop. He leaned forward and clumsily took the whole thing into his mouth, bent cardboard stick and all, grasping at it with his mandibles, drool spattering into the dust.

For an instant, the inside of his mouth was filled with an overpowering burst of sugary sweetness, and he felt blood rush to his heart. But an instant later he became conscious of an awful tickling in the thorax, and his throat seemed to close. His stomach lurched. He spat the lollipop out in disgust. It was no better with the half-eaten chicken wings he discovered. The few scraps of meat and fat on the bones tasted rancid and he gagged reflexively.

Bluebottle flies buzzed greedily around the pile of waste. He glared at them resentfully, considered snapping them up. Some bugs ate other bugs—but he didn't know how to catch them with no hands (although he sensed he was quick enough), and he could hardly ease his suffering with a half dozen bluebottles. Headachy and edgy with hunger, he thought of the candied crickets and all the other bugs he had eaten. It was because of them this had happened to him, he supposed, and his mind leaped to the sun rising at two A.M., and the way the wind came at the filling station in superheated blasts, slamming into the building so hard, dust trickled from the ceiling.

Huey Chester's father, Vern, had hit a rabbit in his driveway once, got out and discovered a thing with unnatural pink eyes—four of them. He brought it into town to show it off, but then a biologist, accompanied by a corporal and two privates with machine guns, turned up to claim it, and they paid Vern five hundred dollars to sign a statement agreeing he wouldn't talk about it. Then once, just a week after one of the tests in the desert, a dense, moist fog that smelled horribly of bacon had billowed over the entire town. It was so thick they cancelled school, and closed the supermarket and the post office. Owls flew in the daytime, and low booms and rumbles of thunder sounded at all hours, out in the roiling wet murk. The scientists in the desert were tearing holes through the sky and the earth

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out there, and maybe the tissue of the universe itself. They set fire to the clouds. For the first time Francis understood clearly that he was a contaminated thing, an aberration to be squashed and covered up, by a corporal with a government checkbook and a briefcase of binding legal documents. It had been hard for him to recognize this at first, perhaps because Francis had *always* felt contaminated, a thing others wanted not to see.

In frustration he shoved himself away from the split bag of garbage, moving without thought. His spring-loaded back legs launched him into the air, and the hardened petals on his back whipped furiously about him. His stomach plunged. The hard-baked, litter-strewn ground bobbed recklessly below him. He waited to fall, but didn't, found himself veering through the air, landing a moment later on one of the massive hills of trash, settling in a spot still in the sunlight. His breath exploded from his body; he didn't even know he had been holding it.

For a moment he balanced there, overcome by a sensation of shock that he felt a pins-and-needles prickling at the tips of his antennae. He had climbed, scrambled, swam—no, by Jesus, he had flown!—through thirty feet of Arizona air. He didn't consider what had happened for long, was afraid to think it over too closely. He fired himself into the air again. His wings made a buzzing sound that was almost mechanical, and he found himself swooping drunkenly through the sky, over the sea of decomposing disposable goods below. He forgot for a moment that he needed to eat. He forgot that only a few seconds before, he had felt close to hopelessness. He clutched his legs to his armored sides, and with the air rushing in his face, he stared down at the wasteland a hundred feet below, held entranced by the sight of his unlikely shadow skipping across it.

3.

After the sun went down, but while a little light remained in the sky, Francis returned home. He had nowhere else to go and he was so hungry. There was Eric's, of course, but to get to his house he would have to cross several streets, and his wings wouldn't carry him high enough not to be seen.

He crouched for a long time in the brush at the back edge

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of the lot around the filling station. The pumps were switched off, the lights above them turned out, the blinds down across the windows of the front office. His father had never closed the place so early. It was utterly still at this end of Estrella Avenue, and except for the occasional passing truck, there was no sign of life or movement anywhere. He wondered if his father was home, but could not imagine any other possibility. Buddy Kay had nowhere else to go.

Francis staggered, light-headed, across the gravel to the screen door. He lifted himself on his back legs, and peeked into the living room. What he saw there was so unlike anything he had ever seen before, it disorientated him, and he swayed as a sudden weak spell passed over him.

His father was sprawled on the couch, turned on his side, his face crushed into Ella's bosom. They seemed to be asleep. Ella clasped Buddy about the shoulders, her plump, ring-covered fingers folded across his back. He was barely on the couch—there wasn't room for him—and it looked as if he might suffocate with his face squashed against her tits like that. Francis could not remember the last time he had seen Buddy and Ella embracing one another, and he had forgotten how small his father seemed in comparison to Ella's bulk. With his face buried in her chest, he resembled a child who has cried himself to sleep against his mother's bosom. They were so old and friendless, so defeated looking even in sleep, and the sight of them that way—two figures huddled together against a shearing wind—gave him a wrenching sensation of regret. His next thought was that his life with them was over. If they woke and saw him, it would be shrieking and fainting again, it would be guns and police.

He despaired, was about to back away from the door and return to the dump, when he saw the bowl on the table, to the right of the door. Ella had made a taco salad. He couldn't see into the bowl, but knew what it was by the smell, he was smelling everything now, the rusty tang of the screen door, the mildew in the shag carpeting, and he could smell salty corn chips, hamburger that had simmered in taco sauce, the peppery zing of salsa. He imagined big flaps of lettuce, soggy with taco juices, and his mouth filled with saliva.

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Francis leaned forward, craning his neck for some kind of look into the bowl. The serrated hooks at the front of his forelegs were already pressed to the screen door, and before he realized what he was doing, the weight of his body had pushed it halfway open. He eased himself inside, casting a furtive glance at his father and Ella. Neither moved.

The spring on the inside of the door was old, and pulled out of shape. When he had slipped through it, the door did not smash shut behind him, but closed with a dry whine, thudding gently against the frame. That soft thud was loud enough to make Francis' heart rear up against the inside of his chest. But his father only seemed to squirm deeper into the wrinkled cleft between Ella's breasts. Francis crept to the side of the table, and bent over the bowl. There was almost nothing left, except for a greasy soup of taco sauces, and a few soggy pieces of romaine sticking to the inside of the dish. He tried to fish one out, but his hands weren't hands anymore. The trowel-like blade at the end of his foreleg rapped against the inside of the bowl, turning it onto its side. He tried to catch it as it went over the edge of the table, but it only deflected off the hook-shaped paw, and fell to the floor with a brittle crack.

Francis dropped low, stiffening. Ella made a muzzy, confused, waking sound behind him. It was followed by a steely snap. He looked back. His father was on his feet, not a yard away. He had been awake even before the bowl fell—Francis saw this immediately—had perhaps been feigning sleep from the beginning. Buddy held the shotgun in one hand, broke open to be loaded, the butt clenched in his armpit. In the other hand was a box of shells. He had been holding the gun all along, had been laying there with it hidden between his body and Ella's.

Buddy's upper lip curled back in a look of wondering disgust. He was missing some teeth, and the ones that were left were blackened and rotting out of his head.

"You fuckin' nasty thing," he said. He thumbed open the box of shells. "I guess they're gonna believe me now."

Ella shifted her weight, pushed herself up to look over the back of the couch, and let out a strangled cry. "Oh my God. Oh my Jesus."

Francis tried to speak. He tried to say no, not to hurt him,

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that he wouldn't hurt them. But what came out was that sound, like someone furiously shaking a flexible piece of metal.

"Why is it makin' that noise?" Ella cried. She was trying to get to her feet, but was sunk too deeply into the couch, couldn't pry herself out. "Get away from it, Buddy!"

Buddy glanced back at her. "What do you mean, get away? I'm gonna fuckin' blast the thing. I'll show that shithead George Walker . . . stan' there, laughin' at me." His father laughed himself, but his hands were shaking, and shells fell in a clattering shower to the floor. "They're gonna put my picture on the front page of the paper tomorrow mornin'."

His fingers found a shell at last, and he poked it into the shotgun. Francis gave up trying to talk and held his forelegs up in front of him, serrated hooks raised, in a gesture of surrender.

"It's doin' somethin'!" Ella screamed.

"Will you shut the fuck up, you noisy bitch?" Buddy said. "It's just a bug, I don't care how big it is. It doesn't have the faintest fuckin' idea what I'm doin'." He snapped his wrist, and the barrel locked into place.

Francis lunged, meant to shove Buddy back, burst for the door. His right foreleg fell, and the emerald scimitar at the end of it drew a red slash across the length of Buddy's face. The gash started at his right temple, skipped over his eye socket, dashed across the bridge of his nose, jumped the other eye socket, and then ran four inches across his left cheek. Buddy's mouth fell open, so he appeared to be gaping in surprise, a man accused of a shocking thing and at a loss for words. The gun discharged with a stunning boom that sent a white throb of pain down the sensitive wands of Francis's antennae. Some of the spray caught his shoulder in a stinging burst; most of the rest of the shot thumped into the plaster wall behind him. Francis shrieked in terror and pain: another of those distorted, singing-sheet-metal sounds, only urgent and shrill this time. His other hooked leg fell, a hatchet swung with all his weight straight down. It slammed into his father's chest. He felt the impact shiver all the way up into the first joint in his arm.

Francis tried to take it back, to yank his arm out of his father's torso. Instead he pulled him off the floor and into the

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air. Ella was screaming, clawing at her face with both hands. He swung his arm up and down, trying to shake his father off the scythe at the end of it. Buddy was suddenly boneless, arms and legs flopping uselessly about. The sound of Ella's shrieking was so painful, Francis thought he might pass out from it. He slammed his father against the wall. The filling station shook. This time when he pulled his arm away, Buddy came unpinned. He slid down the wall, hands folded over the puncture wound in his chest. He left a dark smear on the plaster behind him. Francis didn't know what had happened to the gun. Ella knelt on the couch, rocking back and forth, screeching and scratching at her face unconsciously. Francis fell upon her, chopping at her with his bladed hands. It sounded like a team of men driving shovels into wet mud. For several minutes the room was noisy with the sound of furious digging.

4.

For a long time after, Francis hid under the table and waited for someone to come and end it. His shoulder throbbed. His pulse was a hard rapid ticking in the throat. No one came.

Later, he scuttled out and squatted over his father. Buddy had slid all the way down the wall so only his head rested against it, his body sprawled across the floor. His father had always been a scrawny, half-starved man, but sitting like he was, with his chin resting against his chest, he suddenly seemed fat and unlike himself, with two chins and loose hanging jowls. Francis found he could cup his head in the curved, edged scoops that served as his hands now—the murder weapons. He couldn't bear to look at what he had done to Ella.

His stomach was upset. The sharp, gassy pressure of the early morning had returned. He wanted to tell someone he was sorry, it was awful, he wished he could take it back, but there was no one to tell, and no one could have understood his new grasshopper voice even if there was. He wanted to sob. He farted instead, and his rear end gushed the foaming white carbolic in a few spasmodic bursts. It splattered against his father's torso, soaking his T-shirt, eating through it with a sputtering hiss. Francis turned Buddy's face this way and that, hoping he

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would look more like himself from a different angle, but no matter which way Francis turned him, he was always unfamiliar, a stranger.

A smell, like burnt bacon fat, caught Francis's attention, and when he glanced down he saw his father's stomach had caved in and become a bowl overbrimming with watery pink chowder; the red bones of his ribs glistened, stringy knots of half-dissolved tissue clinging to them. Francis felt his stomach constrict in painful, desperate hunger. He bent closer to investigate the mess with his antennae; but he couldn't wait any longer, couldn't hold himself back. He swallowed his father's puddled innards in great gulping mouthfuls, his mandibles clicking wetly. Ate him from the outside in, then staggered away, half-drunk, his ears buzzing, his belly aching from fullness. He waddled under the table and rested.

Through the screen door he could see a piece of the highway. In an overstuffed daze, he watched the occasional truck shush past, racing into the desert, headlights skimming along the blacktop, over a small rise, then racing all heedless out of view. The sight of those headlights gliding effortlessly through the dark brought to mind what it had felt like to soar, climbing into the sky in a great leaping rush.

The thought of whistling through the warm fresh air made him want to breathe some. He swatted through the screen door. He was too full to fly. His belly still hurt. He walked to the middle of the gravel parking lot, tipped his head back, and regarded the night. The Milky Way was a frothing river of brilliance. He could hear very clearly the crickets in the weeds, the weird theremin music they made, a plaintive humming that rose and fell, rose and fell. They had always been calling to him, he supposed now.

He walked unafraid up the middle of the highway, waiting for a truck to come, for its headlights to pour over him . . . waited for the shriek of brakes, and the hoarsened, frightened shout. But no traffic passed along the road. He was very full and he went slowly. He wasn't worried about what would happen to him next. He didn't know where he was headed, and didn't care. His shoulder ached just slightly. The shotgun pellets hadn't punctured his armor—of course they couldn't—and had only lightly bruised the flesh beneath.

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Once, he and his father had gone to the dump together, with the shotgun, and took turns with it, picking off cans, rats, seagulls. “Imagine the fuckin’ krauts are coming,” his father said. Francis didn’t know what German soldiers looked like, so he pretended he was shooting the kids at school instead. The memory of that day in the dump made him a little sentimental for his father—they had had some good times together, and Buddy had made a decent meal in the end. Really, what else could you ask from a parent?

He found himself behind the school when the first flush of rose was bleeding into the east. He had come there without meaning to, brought perhaps by his memory of the afternoon he went shooting with his father. He studied the long brick edifice, with its rows of small windows, thought what an ugly little hive. Even wasps had it better, built their homes in the high branches of trees, where in the spring they would be hidden in sweet-smelling masses of blossoms, nothing to disturb them except the cool trickle of the breeze.

A car turned into the parking lot, and Francis scuttled to the side of the building, then edged around the corner to stay out of sight. He heard a car door slam. He continued to crawl backwards, then happened to glance down and to the side, and saw the line of windows looking into the basement. The first one he pushed his head against swung in on its forty-year-old hinges, and in a moment he fell through it.

Francis waited in perfect stillness in one corner of the cellar, behind some pipes beaded with icy water, while sunshine rose against the row of windows high up in the wall. First the light was weak and gray, then a delicate shade of lemon, and it lit slowly the basement world around him, revealing a lawn mower, rows of folding metal chairs, stacked cans of paint. For a long time he rested without sleeping, thoughtless but alert, as he had the day before when he took refuge beneath the old trailer in the dump. The sun was shining silver against the eastern-facing windows when he heard the first lockers slamming above him, feet tramping across the floors overhead, loud, exuberant voices.

He crossed to the stairs, and clambered up them. As he moved towards the sounds, though, they paradoxically fell away from

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him, as if he was rising into an envelope of silence. He thought of The Bomb, the red sun boiling off the desert floor at two in the morning, the wind hammering the filling station; then from the smoke came locusts on the earth. As he climbed, he felt a building exuberance of his own, a sudden, intense, thrilling sense of purpose. The door at the top was shut and he didn't know how to open it. He banged one of his hooks against it. The door shook thunderously in its frame. He waited.

At last the door opened. On the other side stood Eric Hickman. Behind him, the hall was thronged with kids, putting things away in their lockers, holding shouted conversations with one another, but it was like watching a movie without sound. A few kids glanced his way, saw him, and went rigid, fixing themselves into frozen, unnatural poses next to their lockers. A sandy-haired girl opened her mouth to scream; she was holding an armful of books, and one by one they slid out of her grasp and crashed noiselessly to the floor.

Eric peered at him through the grease-spotted lenses of his ridiculously thick glasses. He twitched in shock, and lurched back a step, but then his mouth opened in a disbelieving grin.

"Awesome," Eric said. Francis heard him distinctly.

Francis lunged, and snapped through Eric's neck with his mandibles, using them like an oversized pair of hedge-clippers. He killed him first—because he loved him. Eric fell with his legs kicking in a brainless dying jig, and his blood sprayed across the sandy-haired girl, who did not move but only stood there screaming. And all the sounds rushed in at once, in a roar of banging lockers, running feet, and cries to God. Francis scrambled forward, propelling himself with the great springs of his back legs, effortlessly knocking people aside, or driving them face-first to the floor. He caught Huey Chester at the end of the hall, trying to run for an exit, and pounded one shovel-blade claw through the small of his back and out the other side, thrust him into the air. Huey slid down along Francis's green-armored arm, making choking sounds. His feet went on pedaling comically through the air, as if he were still trying to run.

Francis went back the way he had come, slashing and snapping, although he left the sandy-haired girl, who had dropped to her knees and was praying over her folded hands. He killed

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four in the hall before he went upstairs. He found six more huddled under the tables in one of the biology labs, and killed them too. Then he thought he would kill the sandy-haired girl after all, but when he went back downstairs she had left.

Francis was tearing pieces off of Huey Chester and eating them when he heard the distorted echo of a bullhorn outside. He leaped onto the wall, and climbed upside down across the ceiling, scrambling to a dusty window. There were army trucks parked on the far side of the street, and soldiers throwing down sandbags. He heard a loud, steely clanking, and the sputter-and-rumble of a massive engine, and glanced up Estrella Avenue. They had a tank too. Well, he thought. They were going to need it.

Francis drove one spear-tipped claw through the window before him, and blades of glass whirled through the air. In the bright, dust-blowing day outside, men began to shout. The tank ground to a stop, and the turret began to turn. Someone was yelling orders through a megaphone. Soldiers were hitting the deck. Francis pitched himself out and up into the sky, his wings whirring with the mechanical sound of wood being fed to a buzzsaw. As he rose above the school, he began to sing.

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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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