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

JOE HILL

Abraham's Boys

A STORY FROM THE COLLECTION

20TH CENTURY GHOSTS

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To Leanora:

We Are My Favorite Story

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ABRAHAM'S BOYS

Maximilian searched for them in the carriage house and the cattle shed, even had a look in the springhouse, although he knew almost at first glance he wouldn't find them there. Rudy wouldn't hide in a place like that, dank and chill, no windows and so no light, a place that smelled of bats. It was too much like a basement. Rudy never went in their basement back home if he could help it, was afraid the door would shut behind him, and he'd find himself trapped in the suffocating dark.

Max checked the barn last, but they weren't hiding there either, and when he came into the dooryard, he saw with a shock that dusk had come. He had never imagined it could be so late.

"No more this game," he shouted. "Rudolf! We have to go." Only when he said *have* it came out *hoff*, a noise like a horse sneezing. He hated the sound of his own voice, envied his younger brother's confident American pronunciations. Rudolf had been born here, had never seen Amsterdam. Max had lived the first five years of his life there, in a dimly lit apartment that smelled of mildewed velvet curtains and the latrine stink of the canal below.

Max hollered until his throat was raw, but in the end, all his shouting brought only Mrs. Kutchner, who shuffled slowly across the porch, hugging herself for warmth, although it was not cold. When she reached the railing she took it in both hands and sagged forward, using it to hold herself up.

This time last fall, Mrs. Kutchner had been agreeably plump, dimples in her fleshy cheeks, her face always flushed from the heat of the kitchen. Now her face was starved, the skin pulled tight across the skull beneath, her eyes feverish and bird-bright in their bony hollows. Her daughter, Arlene—who at this very moment was hiding with Rudy somewhere—had whispered that her mother kept a tin bucket next to the bed, and when her father carried it to the outhouse in the morning to empty it, it sloshed with a quarter inch of bad-smelling blood.

"You'n go on if you want, dear," she said. "I'll tell your brother to run on home when he crawls out from whatever hole he's in."

"Did I wake you, Mrs. Kutchner?" he asked. She shook her head, but his guilt was not eased. "I'm sorry to get you out of bed. My loud mouth." Then, his tone uncertain: "Do you think you should be up?"

"Are you doctorin me, Max Van Helsing? You don't think I get enough of that from your daddy?" she asked, one corner of her mouth rising in a weak smile.

"No, ma'am. I mean, yes, ma'am."

Rudy would've said something clever to make her whoop with laughter and clap her hands. Rudy belonged on the radio, a child star on someone's variety program. Max never knew what to say, and anyway, wasn't suited to comedy. It wasn't just his accent, although that was a source of constant discomfort for him, one more reason to speak as little as possible. But it was also a matter of temperament; he often found himself unable to fight his way through his own smothering reserve.

"He's pretty strict about havin you two boys in before dark, isn't he?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"There's plenty like him," she said. "They brung the old country over with them. Although I would have thought a doctor wouldn't be so superstitious. Educated and all."

Max suppressed a shudder of revulsion. Saying that his father was superstitious was an understatement of grotesquely funny proportions.

"You wouldn't think he'd worry so much about one like

you," she went on. "I can't imagine you've ever been any trouble in your life."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Max, when what he really wanted to say was he wished more than anything she'd go back inside, lie down and rest. Sometimes it seemed to him he was allergic to expressing himself. Often, when he desperately wanted to say a thing, he could actually feel his windpipe closing up on him, cutting off his air. He wanted to offer to help her in, imagined taking her elbow, leaning close enough to smell her hair. He wanted to tell her he prayed for her at night, not that his prayers could be assumed to have value; Max had prayed for his own mother, too, but it hadn't made any difference. He said none of these things. *Thank you, ma'am* was the most he could manage.

"You go on," she said. "Tell your father I asked Rudy to stay behind, help me clean up a mess in the kitchen. I'll send him along."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am. Tell him hurry, please."

When he was in the road he looked back. Mrs. Kutchner clutched a handkerchief to her lips, but she immediately removed it, and flapped it in a gay little wave, a gesture so endearing it made Max sick to his bones. He raised his own hand to her and then turned away. The sound of her harsh, barking coughs followed him up the road for a while—an angry dog, slipped free of its tether and chasing him away.

When he came into the yard, the sky was the shade of blue closest to black, except for a faint bonfire glow in the west where the sun had just disappeared, and his father was sitting on the porch waiting with the quirt. Max paused at the bottom of the steps, looking up at him. His father's eyes were hooded, impossible to see beneath the bushy steel-wool tangles of his eyebrows.

Max waited for him to say something. He didn't. Finally, Max gave up and spoke himself. "It's still light."

"The sun is down."

"We are just at Arlene's. It isn't even ten minutes away."

"Yes, Mrs. Kutchner's is very safe. A veritable fortress. Protected by a doddering farmer who can barely bend over, his

rheumatism pains him so, and an illiterate peasant whose bowels are being eaten by cancer."

"She is not illiterate," Max said. He heard how defensive he sounded, and when he spoke again, it was in a tone of carefully modulated reason. "They can't bear the light. You say so yourself. If it isn't dark there is nothing to fear. Look how bright the sky."

His father nodded, allowing the point, then said, "And where is Rudolf?"

"He is right behind me."

The old man craned his head on his neck, making an exaggerated show of searching the empty road behind Max.

"I mean, he is coming," Max said. "He stops to help clean something for Mrs. Kutchner."

"Clean what?"

"A bag of flour, I think. It breaks open, scatters on everything. She's going to clean herself, but Rudy say no, he wants to do it. I tell them I will run ahead so you will not wonder where we are. He'll be here any minute."

His father sat perfectly still, his back rigid, his face immobile. Then, just when Max thought the conversation was over, he said, very slowly, "And so you left him?"

Max instantly saw, with a sinking feeling of despair, the corner he had painted himself into, but it was too late now, no talking his way back out of it. "Yes, sir."

"To walk home alone? In the dark?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see. Go in. To your studies."

Max made his way up the steps, towards the front door, which was partly open. He felt himself clenching up as he went past the rocking chair, expecting the quirt. Instead, when his father lunged, it was to clamp his hand on Max's wrist, squeezing so hard Max grimaced, felt the bones separating in the joint.

His father sucked at the air, a hissing indraw of breath, a sound Max had learned was often prelude to a right cross. "You know our enemies? And still you dally with your friends until the night come?"

Max tried to answer, but couldn't, felt his windpipe closing,

felt himself choking again on the things he wanted, but didn't have the nerve, to say.

"Rudolf I expect not to learn. He is American. Here they believe the child should teach the parent. I see how he look at me when I talk. How he try not to laugh. This is bad. But you. At least when Rudolf disobey, it is deliberate, I feel him *engaging* me. You disobey in a stupor, without considering, and then you wonder why sometime I can hardly stand to look at you. Mr. Barnum has a horse that can add small numbers. It is considered one of the great amazements of his circus. If you were once to show the slightest comprehension of what things I tell you, it would be wonder on the same order." He let go of Max's wrist, and Max took a drunken step backwards, his arm throbbing. "Go inside and out of my sight. You will want to rest. That uncomfortable buzzing in your head is the hum of thought. I know the sensation must be quite unfamiliar." Tapping his own temple to show where the thoughts were.

"Yes, sir," Max said, in a tone—he had to admit—which sounded stupid and churlish. Why did his father's accent sound cultured and worldly, while the same accent made himself sound like a dull-witted Dutch farmhand, someone good at milking the cows maybe, but who would goggle in fear and confusion at an open book? Max turned into the house, without looking where he was going, and batted his head against the bulbs of garlic hanging from the top of the door frame. His father snorted at him.

Max sat in the kitchen, a lamp burning at the far end of the table, not enough to dispel the darkness gathering in the room. He waited, listening, his head cocked so he could see through the window and into the yard. He had his English Grammar open in front of him, but he didn't look at it, couldn't find the will to do anything but sit and watch for Rudy. In a while it was too dark to see the road, though, or anyone coming along it. The tops of the pines were black cutouts etched across a sky that was a color like the last faint glow of dying coals. Soon even that was gone, and into the darkness was cast a handful of stars, a scatter of bright flecks. Max heard his father in the rocker, the soft whine-and-thump of the curved wooden runners going back and forth over the boards of the porch. Max

shoved his hands through his hair, pulling at it, chanting to himself, *Rudy, come on*, wanting more than anything for the waiting to be over. It might've been an hour. It might've been fifteen minutes.

Then he heard him, the soft chuff of his brother's feet in the chalky dirt at the side of the road; he slowed as he came into the yard, but Max suspected he had just been running, a hypothesis that was confirmed as soon as Rudy spoke. Although he tried for his usual tone of good humor, he was winded, could only speak in bursts.

"Sorry, sorry. Mrs. Kutchner. An accident. Asked me to help. I know. Late."

The rocker stopped moving. The boards creaked, as their father came to his feet.

"So Max said. And did you get the mess clean up?"

"Yuh. Uh-huh. Arlene and I. Arlene ran through the kitchen. Wasn't looking. Mrs. Kutchner—Mrs. Kutchner dropped a stack of plates—"

Max shut his eyes, bent his head forward, yanking at the roots of his hair in anguish.

"Mrs. Kutchner shouldn't tire herself. She's unwell. Indeed, I think she can hardly rise from bed."

"That's what—that's what I thought. Too." Rudy's voice at the bottom of the porch. He was beginning to recover his air. "It's not really all the way dark yet."

"It isn't? Ah. When one get to my age, the vision fail some, and dusk is often mistake for night. Here I was thinking sunset has come and gone twenty minutes ago. What time—?" Max heard the steely snap of his father opening his pocket watch. He sighed. "But it's too dark for me to read the hands. Well. Your concern for Mrs. Kutchner, I admire."

"Oh it—it was nothing—" Rudy said, putting his foot on the first step of the porch.

"But really, you should worry more about your own well-being, Rudolf," said their father, his voice calm, benevolent, speaking in the tone Max often imagined him employing when addressing patients he knew were in the final stages of a fatal illness. It was after dark and the doctor was in.

Rudy said, "I'm sorry, I'm—"

"You're sorry now. But your regret will be more palpable momentarily."

The quirt came down with a meaty smack, and Rudy, who would be ten in two weeks, screamed. Max ground his teeth, his hands still digging in his hair; pressed his wrists against his ears, trying vainly to block out the sounds of shrieking, and of the quirt striking at flesh, fat and bone.

With his ears covered he didn't hear their father come in. He looked up when a shadow fell across him. Abraham stood in the doorway to the hall, hair disheveled, collar askew, the quirt pointed at the floor. Max waited to be hit with it, but no blow came.

"Help your brother in."

Max rose unsteadily to his feet. He couldn't hold the old man's gaze so he lowered his eyes, found himself staring at the quirt instead. The back of his father's hand was freckled with blood. Max drew a thin, dismayed breath.

"You see what you make me do."

Max didn't reply. Maybe no answer was necessary or expected.

His father stood there for a moment longer, then turned, and strode away into the back of the house, towards the private study he always kept locked, a room in which they were forbidden to enter without his permission. Many nights he nodded off there, and could be heard shouting in his sleep, cursing in Dutch.

"Stop running," Max shouted. "I catch you eventually."

Rudolf capered across the corral, grabbed the rail and heaved himself over it, sprinted for the side of the house, his laughter trailing behind him.

"Give it back," Max said, and he leaped the rail without slowing down, hit the ground without losing a step. He was angry, really angry, and in his fury possessed an unlikely grace; unlikely because he was built along the same lines as his father, with the rough dimensions of a water buffalo taught to walk on its back legs.

Rudy, by contrast, had their mother's delicate build, to go with her porcelain complexion. He was quick, but Max was closing in anyway. Rudy was looking back over his shoulder

too much, not concentrating on where he was going. He was almost to the side of the house. When he got there, Max would have him trapped against the wall, could easily cut off any attempt to break left or right.

But Rudy didn't break to the left or right. The window to their father's study was pushed open about a foot, revealing a cool library darkness. Rudy grabbed the windowsill over his head—he still held Max's letter in one hand—and with a giddy glance back, heaved himself into the shadows.

However their father felt about them arriving home after dark, it was nothing compared to how he would feel to discover that either one of them had gained entry to his most private sanctum. But their father was gone, had taken the Ford somewhere, and Max didn't slow down to think what would happen if he suddenly returned. He jumped and grabbed his brother's ankle, thinking he would drag the little worm back out into the light, but Rudy screamed, twisted his foot out of Max's grasp. He fell into darkness, crashed to the floorboards with an echoing thud that caused glass to rattle softly against glass somewhere in the office. Then Max had the windowsill and he yanked himself into the air—

"Go slow, Max, it's a . . ." his brother cried.

—and he thrust himself through the window.

"Big drop," Rudy finished.

Max had been in his father's study before, of course (sometimes Abraham invited them in for "a talk," by which he meant he would talk and they would listen), but he had never entered the room by way of the window. He spilled forward, had a startling glance of the floor almost three feet below him, and realized he was about to dive into it face-first. At the edge of his vision he saw a round end table, next to one of his father's armchairs, and he reached for it to stop his fall. His momentum continued to carry him forward, and he crashed to the floor. At the last moment, he turned his face aside and most of his weight came down on his right shoulder. The furniture leaped. The end table turned over, dumping everything on it. Max heard a bang, and a glassy crack that was more painful to him than the soreness he felt in either head or shoulder.

Rudy sprawled a yard away from him, sitting on the floor, still grinning a little foolishly. He held the letter half-crumpled in one hand, forgotten.

The end table was on its side, fortunately not broken. But an empty inkpot had smashed, lay in gleaming chunks close to Max's knee. A stack of books had been flung across the Persian carpet. A few papers swirled overhead, drifting slowly to the floor with a swish and a scrape.

"You see what you make me do," Max said, gesturing at the inkpot. Then he flinched, realizing that this was exactly what his father had said to him a few nights before; he didn't like the old man peeping out from inside him, talking through him like a puppet, a hollowed-out, empty-headed boy of wood.

"We'll just throw it away," Rudy said.

"He knows where everything in his office is. He will notice it missing."

"My balls. He comes in here to drink brandy, fart in his couch and fall asleep. I've been in here lots of times. I took his lighter for smokes last month and he still hasn't noticed."

"You what?" Max asked, staring at his younger brother in genuine surprise, and not without a certain envy. It was the older brother's place to take foolish risks and be casually detached about it later.

"Who's this letter to, that you had to go and hide somewhere to write it? I was watching you work on it over your shoulder. 'I still remember how I held your hand in mine.' " Rudy's voice swooping and fluttering in mock-romantic passion.

Max lunged at his brother, but was too slow, Rudy had flipped the letter over and was reading the beginning. The smile began to fade, thought lines wrinkling the pale expanse of his forehead; then Max had ripped the sheet of paper away.

"Mother?" Rudy asked, thoroughly nonplussed.

"It was assignment for school. We were ask if you wrote a letter to anyone, who would it be? Mrs. Louden tell us it could be someone imaginary or—or historic figure. Someone dead."

"You'd turn that in? And let Mrs. Louden read it?"

"I don't know. I am not finish yet." But as Max spoke, he was already beginning to realize he had made a mistake, al-

lowed himself to get carried away by the fascinating possibilities of the assignment, the irresistible *what if* of it, and had written things too personal for him to show anyone. He had written *you were the only one I knew how to talk to* and *I am sometimes so lonely*. He had really been imagining her reading it, somehow, somewhere—perhaps as he wrote it, some astral form of her staring over his shoulder, smiling sentimentally as his pen scratched across the page. It was a mawkish, absurd fantasy and he felt a withering embarrassment to think he had given in to it so completely.

His mother had already been weak and ill when the scandal drove their family from Amsterdam. They lived for a while in England, but word of the terrible thing their father had done (whatever it was—Max doubted he would ever know) followed them. On they had gone to America. His father believed he had acquired a position as a lecturer at Vassar College, was so sure of this he had ladled much of his savings into the purchase of a handsome nearby farm. But in New York City they were met by the dean, who told Abraham Van Helsing that he could not, in good conscience, allow the doctor to work unsupervised with young ladies who were not yet at the age of consent. Max knew now his father had killed his mother as surely as if he had held a pillow over her face in her sickbed. It wasn't the travel that had done her in, although that was bad enough, too much for a woman who was both pregnant and weak with a chronic infection of the blood which caused her to bruise at the slightest touch. It was humiliation. Mina had not been able to survive the shame of what he had done, what they were all forced to run from.

"Come on," Max said. "Let's clean up and get out of here."

He righted the table and began gathering the books, but turned his head when Rudy said, "Do you believe in vampires, Max?"

Rudy was on his knees in front of an ottoman across the room. He had hunched over to collect a few papers which had settled there, then stayed to look at the battered doctor's bag tucked underneath it. Rudy tugged at the rosary knotted around the handles.

"Leave that alone," Max said. "We need to clean, not make bigger mess."

"Do you?"

Max was briefly silent. "Mother was attacked. Her blood was never the same after. Her illness."

"Did *she* ever say she was attacked, or did he?"

"She died when I was six. She would not confide in a child about such a thing."

"But . . . do you think we're in danger?" Rudy had the bag open now. He reached in to remove a bundle, carefully wrapped in royal purple fabric. Wood clicked against wood inside the velvet. "That vampires are out there, waiting for a chance at us. For our guard to drop?"

"I would not discount possibility. However unlikely."

"However unlikely," his brother said, laughing softly. He opened the velvet wrap and looked in at the nine-inch stakes, skewers of blazing white wood, handles wrapped in oiled leather. "Well, I think it's all bullshit. *Bullll*-shit." Singing a little.

The course of the discussion unnerved Max. He felt, for an instant, light-headed with vertigo, as if he suddenly found himself peering over a steep drop. And perhaps that wasn't too far off. He had always known the two of them would have this conversation someday and he feared where it might take them. Rudy was never happier than when he was making an argument, but he didn't follow his doubts to their logical conclusion. He could say it was all bullshit, but didn't pause to consider what that meant about their father, a man who feared the night as a person who can't swim fears the ocean. Max almost *needed* it to be true, for vampires to be real, because the other possibility—that their father was, and always had been, in the grip of a psychotic fantasy—was too awful, too overwhelming.

He was still considering how to reply when his attention was caught by a picture frame, slid halfway in under his father's armchair. It was facedown, but he knew what he'd see when he turned it over. It was a sepia-toned calotype print of his mother, posed in the library of their townhouse in Amsterdam. She wore a white straw hat, her ebon hair fluffed in airy curls beneath it. One gloved hand was raised in an enigmatic gesture,

so that she almost appeared to be waving an invisible cigarette in the air. Her lips were parted. She was saying something, Max often wondered what. He for some reason imagined himself to be standing just out of the frame, a child of four, staring solemnly up at her. He felt that she was raising her hand to wave him back, keep him from wandering into the shot. If this was so, it seemed reasonable to believe she had been caught forever in the act of saying his name.

He heard a scrape and tinkle of falling glass as he picked the picture frame up and turned it over. The plate of glass had shattered in the exact center. He began wiggling small gleaming fangs of glass out of the frame and setting them aside, concerned that none should scratch the glossy calotype beneath. He pulled a large wedge of glass out of the upper corner of the frame, and the corner of the print came loose with it. He reached up to poke the print back into place . . . and then hesitated, frowning, feeling for a moment that his eyes had crossed and he was seeing double. There appeared to be a second print behind the first. He tugged the photograph of his mother out of the frame, then stared without understanding at the picture that had been secreted behind it. An icy numbness spread through his chest, crawling into his throat. He glanced around and was relieved to see Rudy still kneeling at the ottoman, humming to himself, rolling the stakes back up into their shroud of velvet.

He looked back at the secret photograph. The woman in it was dead. She was also naked from the waist up, her gown torn open and yanked to the curve of her waist. She was sprawled in a four-poster bed—pinned there by ropes wound around her throat, and pulling her arms over her head. She was young and maybe had been beautiful, it was hard to tell; one eye was shut, the other open in a slit that showed the unnatural glaze on the eyeball beneath. Her mouth was forced open, stuffed with an obscene misshapen white ball. She was actually biting down on it, her upper lip drawn back to show the small, even row of her upper teeth. The side of her face was discolored with bruises. Between the milky, heavy curves of her breasts was a spoke of white wood. Her left rib cage was painted with blood.

Even when he heard the car in the drive, he couldn't move, couldn't pry his gaze from the photograph. Then Rudy was up, pulling at Max's shoulder, telling him they had to go. Max clapped the photo to his chest to keep his brother from seeing. He said go, I'll be right behind you, and Rudy took his hand off his arm and went on.

Max fumbled with the picture frame, struggling to fit the calotype of the murdered woman back into place . . . then saw something else, went still again. He had not until this instant taken note of the figure to the far left in the photograph, a man on the near side of the bed. His back was to the photographer, and he was so close in the foreground that his shape was a blurred, vaguely rabbinical figure, in a flat-brimmed black hat and black overcoat. There was no way to be sure who this man was, but Max *was* sure, knew him from the way he held his head, the careful, almost stiff way it was balanced on the thick barrel of his neck. In one hand he held a hatchet. In the other a doctor's bag.

The car died with an emphysemic wheeze and tinny clatter. He squeezed the photograph of the dead woman into the frame, slid the portrait of Mina back on top of it. He set the picture, with no glass in it, on the end table, stared at it for a beat, then saw with horror that he had stuck Mina in upside down. He started to reach for it.

"Come on!" Rudy cried. *"Please, Max."* He was outside, standing on his tiptoes to look back into the study.

Max kicked the broken glass under the armchair, stepped to the window, and screamed. Or tried to—he didn't have the air in his lungs, couldn't force it up his throat.

Their father stood behind Rudy, staring in at Max over Rudy's head. Rudy didn't see, didn't know he was there, until their father put his hands on his shoulders. Rudolf had no trouble screaming at all, and leaped as if he meant to jump back into the study.

The old man regarded his eldest son in silence. Max stared back, head half out the window, hands on the sill.

"If you like," his father said, "I could open the door and you could effect your exit by the hallway. What it lacks in drama, it makes up in convenience."

"No," Max said. "No thank you. Thank you. I'm—we're—this is—mistake. I'm sorry."

"Mistake is not knowing capital of Portugal on a geography test. This is something else." He paused, lowering his head, his face stony. Then he released Rudy, and turned away, opening a hand and pointing it at the yard in a gesture that seemed to mean, *step this way*. "We will discuss what at later date. Now if it is no trouble, I will ask you to leave my office."

Max stared. His father had never before delayed punishment—breaking and entering his study at the least deserved a vigorous lashing—and he tried to think why he would now. His father waited. Max climbed out, dropped into the flower bed. Rudy looked at him, eyes helpless, pleading, asking him what they ought to do. Max tipped his head towards the stables—their own private study—and started walking slowly and deliberately away. His little brother fell into step beside him, trembling continuously.

Before they could get away, though, his father's hand fell on Max's shoulder.

"My rules are to protect you always, Maximilian," he said. "Maybe you are tell me now you don't want to be protect any longer? When you were little I cover your eyes at the theater, when come the murderers to slaughter Clarence in *Richard*. But then, later, when we went to *Macbeth*, you shove my hand away, you *want* to see. Now I feel history repeats, nuh?"

Max didn't reply. At last his father released him.

They had not gone ten paces when he spoke again. "Oh I almost forget. I did not tell you where or why I was gone and I have piece of news I know will make sad the both of you. Mr. Kutchner run up the road while you were in school, shouting doctor, doctor, come quick, my wife. As soon as I see her, burning with fever, I know she must travel to Dr. Rosen's infirmary in town, but alas, the farmer come for me too late. Walking her to my car, her intestines fall out of her with a *slop*." He made a soft clucking sound with his tongue, as of disapproval. "I will have our suits cleaned. The funeral is on Friday."

Arlene Kutchner wasn't in school the next day. They walked past her house on the way home, but the black shut-

ters were across the windows, and the place had a too-silent, abandoned feel to it. The funeral would be in town the next morning, and perhaps Arlene and her father had already gone there to wait. They had family in the village. When the two boys tramped into their own yard, the Ford was parked alongside the house, and the slanted double doors to the basement were open.

Rudy pointed himself towards the barn—they owned a single horse, a used-up nag named Rice, and it was Rudy's day to muck out her stable—and Max went into the house alone. He was at the kitchen table when he heard the doors to the cellar crash shut outside. Shortly afterwards his father climbed the stairs, appeared in the basement doorway.

"Are you work on something down there?" Max asked.

His father's gaze swept across him, but his eyes were deliberately blank.

"Later I shall unfold to you," he said, and Max watched him while he removed a silver key from the pocket of his waistcoat and turned it in the lock to the basement door. It had never been used before, and until that moment, Max had not even known a key existed.

Max was on edge the rest of the afternoon, kept looking at the basement door, unsettled by his father's promise: *Later I shall unfold to you*. There was of course no opportunity to talk to Rudy about it over dinner, to speculate on just *what* might be unfolded, but they were also unable to talk afterwards, when they remained at the kitchen table with their schoolbooks. Usually, their father retired early to his study to be alone, and they wouldn't see him again until morning. But tonight he seemed restless, always coming in and out of the room, to wash a glass, to find his reading spectacles, and finally, to light a lantern. He adjusted the wick, so a low red flame wavered at the bottom of the glass chimney, and then set it on the table before Max.

"Boys," he said, turning to the basement, unlocking the bolt. "Go downstairs. Wait for me. Touch nothing."

Rudy threw a horrified, whey-faced look at Max. Rudy couldn't bear the basement, its low ceiling and its smell, the lacy veils of cobwebs in the corners. If Rudy was ever given

a chore there, he always begged Max to go with him. Max opened his mouth to question their father, but he was already slipping away, out of the room, disappearing down the hall to his study.

Max looked at Rudy. Rudy was shaking his head in wordless denial.

"It will be all right," Max promised. "I will take care of you."

Rudy carried the lantern, and let Max go ahead of him down the stairs. The reddish-bronze light of the lamp threw shadows that leaned and jumped, a surging darkness that lapped at the walls of the stairwell. Max descended to the basement floor and took a slow, uncertain look around. To the left of the stairs was a worktable. On top of it was a pile of something, covered in a piece of grimy white tarp—stacks of bricks maybe, or heaps of folded laundry, it was hard to tell in the gloom without going closer. Max crept in slow, shuffling steps until he had crossed most of the way to the table, and then he stopped, suddenly knowing what the sheet covered.

"We need to go, Max," Rudy peeped, right behind him. Max hadn't known he was there, had thought he was still standing on the steps. "We need to go right now." And Max knew he didn't mean just get out of the basement, but get out of the house, run from the place where they had lived ten years and not come back.

But it was too late to pretend they were Huck and Jim and light out for the territories. Their father's feet fell heavily on the dusty wood planks behind them. Max glanced up the stairs at him. He was carrying his doctor's bag.

"I can only deduce," their father began, "from your ransack of my private study, you have finally develop interest in the secret work to which I sacrifice so much. I have in my time kill six of the Undead by my own hand, the last the diseased bitch in the picture I keep hid in my office—I believe you have both see it." Rudy cast a panicked look at Max, who only shook his head, *Be silent*. Their father went on: "I have train others in the art of destroying the vampire, including your mother's unfortunate first husband, Jonathan Harker, Gott

bless him, and so I can be held indirectly responsible for the slaughter of perhaps fifty of their filthy, infected kind. And it is now, I see, time my own boys learn how it is done. How to be sure. So you may know how to strike at those who would strike at you."

"I don't want to know," Rudy said.

"He didn't see picture," Max said at the same time.

Their father appeared not to hear either of them. He moved past them to the worktable, and the canvas-covered shape upon it. He lifted one corner of the tarp and looked beneath it, made a humming sound of approval, and pulled the covering away.

Mrs. Kutchner was naked, and hideously withered, her cheeks sunken, her mouth gaping open. Her stomach was caved impossibly in beneath her ribs, as if everything in it had been sucked out by the pressure of a vacuum. Her back was bruised a deep bluish violet by the blood that had settled there. Rudy moaned and hid his face against Max's side.

Their father set his doctor's bag beside her body, and opened it.

"She isn't, of course, Undead. Merely dead. True vampires are uncommon, and it would not be practicable, or advisable, for me to find one for you to rehearse on. But she will suit for purposes of demonstration." From within his bag he removed the bundle of stakes wrapped in velvet.

"What is she doing here?" Max asked. "They bury her tomorrow."

"But today I am to make autopsy, for purposes of my private research. Mr. Kutchner understand, is happy to cooperate, if it mean one day no other woman die in such a way." He had a stake in one hand, a mallet in the other.

Rudy began to cry.

Max felt he was coming unmoored from himself. His body stepped forward, without him in it; another part of him remained beside Rudy, an arm around his brother's heaving shoulders. Rudy was saying, *Please I want to go upstairs*. Max watched himself walk, flat-footed, to his father, who was staring at him with an expression that mingled curiosity with a certain quiet appreciation.

He handed Max the mallet, and that brought him back. He was in his own body again, conscious of the weight of the hammer, tugging his wrist downwards. His father gripped Max's other hand and lifted it, drawing it towards Mrs. Kutchner's meager breasts. He pressed Max's fingertips to a spot between two ribs, and Max looked into the dead woman's face. Her mouth open as to speak. *Are you doctorin' me, Max Van Helsing?*

"Here," his father said, folding one of the stakes into his hand. "You drive it in here. To the hilt. In an actual case, the first blow will be follow by wailing, profanity, a frantic struggle to escape. The accursed never go easily. Bear down. Do not desist from your work until you have impale her and she has give up her struggle against you. It will be over soon enough."

Max raised the mallet. He stared into her face and wished he could say he was sorry, that he didn't want to do it. When he slammed the mallet down, with an echoing bang, he heard a high, piercing scream and almost screamed himself, believing for an instant it was her, still somehow alive; then realized it was Rudy. Max was powerfully built, with his deep water-buffalo chest and Dutch farmer's shoulders. With the first blow he had driven the stake over two-thirds of the way in. He only needed to bring the mallet down once more. The blood that squelched up around the wood was cold and had a sticky, viscous consistency.

Max swayed, his head light. His father took his arm.

"*Goot*," Abraham whispered into his ear, his arms around him, squeezing him so tightly his ribs creaked. Max felt a little thrill of pleasure—an automatic reaction to the intense, unmistakable affection of his father's embrace—and was sickened by it. "To do offense to the house of the human spirit, even after its tenant depart, is no easy thing, I know."

His father went on holding him. Max stared at Mrs. Kutchner's gaping mouth, the delicate row of her upper teeth, and found himself remembering the girl in the calotype print, the ball of garlic jammed in her mouth.

"Where were her fangs?" Max said.

"*Hm?* Whose? What?" his father said.

"In the photograph of the one you kill," Max said, turning his head and looking into his father's face. "She didn't have fangs."

His father stared at him, his eyes blank, uncomprehending. Then he said, "They disappear after the vampire die. *Poof*."

He released him, and Max could breathe normally again. Their father straightened.

"Now, there remain one thing," he said. "The head must be remove, and the mouth stuff with garlic. Rudolf!"

Max turned his head slowly. His father had moved back a step. In one hand he held a hatchet, Max didn't know where it had come from. Rudy was on the stairs, three steps from the bottom. He stood pressed against the wall, his left wrist shoved in his mouth to quell his screaming. He shook his head, back and forth, frantically.

Max reached for the hatchet, grabbed it by the handle. "I do it." He would too, was confident of himself. He saw now he had always had it in him: his father's brusque willingness to puncture flesh and toil in blood. He saw it clear, and with a kind of dismay.

"No," his father said, wrenching the hatchet away, pushing Max back. Max bumped the worktable, and a few stakes rolled off, clattering to the dust. "Pick those up."

Rudy bolted, but slipped on the steps, falling to all fours and banging his knees. Their father grabbed him by the hair and hauled him backwards, throwing him to the floor. Rudy thudded into the dirt, sprawling on his belly. He rolled over. When he spoke, his voice was unrecognizable.

"Please!" he screamed. *"Please don't! I'm scared. Please, Father, don't make me."*

The mallet in one hand, half a dozen stakes in the other, Max stepped forward, thought he would intervene, but his father swiveled, caught his elbow, shoved him at the stairs.

"Up. Now." Giving him another push as he spoke.

Max fell on the stairs, barking one of his own shins.

Their father bent to grab Rudy by the arm, but he squirmed away, crabwalking over the dirt for a far corner of the room.

"Come. I help you," their father said. "Her neck is brittle. It won't take long."

Rudy shook his head, backed further into the corner by the coal bin.

His father flung the axe in the dirt. "Then you will remain here until you are in a more complaisant state of mind."

He turned, took Max's arm and thrust him towards the top of the steps.

"No!" Rudy screamed, getting up, lunging for the stairs.

The handle of the hatchet got caught between his feet, though, and he tripped on it, crashed to his knees. He got back up, but by then their father was pushing Max through the door at the top of the staircase, following him through. He slammed it behind them. Rudy hit the other side a moment later, as their father was turning that silver key in the lock.

"Please!" Rudy cried. "I'm scared! I'm scared! I want to come out!"

Max stood in the kitchen. His ears were ringing. He wanted to say stop it, open the door, but couldn't get the words out, felt his throat closing. His arms hung at his sides, his hands heavy, as if cast from lead. No—not lead. They were heavy from the things in them. The mallet. The stakes.

His father panted for breath, his broad forehead resting against the shut door. When he finally stepped back, his hair was scrambled, and his collar had popped loose.

"You see what he make me do?" he said. "Your mother was also so, just as unbending and hysterical, just as in need of firm instruction. I tried, I—"

The old man turned to look at him, and in the instant before Max hit him with the mallet, his father had time to register shock, even wonder. Max caught him across the jaw, a blow that connected with a bony clunk, and enough force to drive a shivering feeling of impact up into his elbow. His father sagged to one knee, but Max had to hit him again to sprawl him on his back.

Abraham's eyelids sank as he began to slide into unconsciousness, but they came up again when Max sat down on top of him. His father opened his mouth to say something, but Max had heard enough, was through talking, had never been much when it came to talk anyway. What mattered now was

the work of his hands; work he had a natural instinct for, had maybe been born to.

He put the tip of the stake where his father had showed him and struck the hilt with the mallet. It turned out it was all true, what the old man had told him in the basement. There was wailing and profanity and a frantic struggle to get away, but it was over soon enough.

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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

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.

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 distate. "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

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 appilances. 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 postmortem 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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