

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

# JOE HILL



**Best New Horror**

A STORY FROM THE COLLECTION

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

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HarperCollins e-books

*To Leanora:*

WE ARE MY FAVORITE STORY

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## BEST NEW HORROR

A month before his deadline, Eddie Carroll ripped open a manila envelope, and a magazine called *The True North Literary Review* slipped out into his hands. Carroll was used to getting magazines in the mail, although most of them had titles like *Cemetery Dance* and specialized in horror fiction. People sent him their books, too. Piles of them cluttered his Brookline townhouse, a heap on the couch in his office, a stack by the coffee maker. Books of horror stories, all of them.

No one had time to read them all, although once—when he was in his early thirties and just starting out as the editor of *America's Best New Horror*—he had made a conscientious effort to try. Carroll had guided sixteen volumes of *Best New Horror* to press, had been working on the series for over a third of his life now. It added up to thousands of hours of reading and proofing and letter-writing, thousands of hours he could never have back.

He had come to hate the magazines especially. So many of them used the cheapest ink, and he had learned to loathe the way it came off on his fingers, the harsh stink of it.

He didn't finish most of the stories he started anymore, couldn't bear to. He felt weak at the thought of reading another story about vampires having sex with other vampires. He tried to struggle through Lovecraft pastiches, but at the first painfully serious reference to the Elder Gods, he felt some important part

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of him going numb inside, the way a foot or a hand will go to sleep when the circulation is cut off. He feared the part of him being numbed was his soul.

At some point following his divorce, his duties as the editor of *Best New Horror* had become a tiresome and joyless chore. He thought sometimes, hopefully almost, of stepping down, but he never indulged the idea for long. It was twelve thousand dollars a year in the bank, the cornerstone of an income patched together from other anthologies, his speaking engagements and his classes. Without that twelve grand, his personal worst-case scenario would become inevitable: he would have to find an actual job.

*The True North Literary Review* was unfamiliar to him, a literary journal with a cover of rough-grained paper, an ink print on it of leaning pines. A stamp on the back reported that it was a publication of Katahdin University in upstate New York. When he flipped it open, two stapled pages fell out, a letter from the editor, an English professor named Harold Noonan.

The winter before, Noonan had been approached by a part-time man with the university grounds crew, a Peter Kilrue. He had heard that Noonan had been named the editor of *True North* and was taking open submissions, and asked him to look at a short story. Noonan promised he would, more to be polite than anything else. But when he finally read the manuscript, “Buttonboy: A Love Story,” he was taken aback by both the supple force of its prose and the appalling nature of its subject matter. Noonan was new in the job, replacing the just-retired editor of twenty years, Frank McDane, and wanted to take the journal in a new direction, to publish fiction that would “rattle a few cages.”

“In that I was perhaps too successful,” Noonan wrote. Shortly after “Buttonboy” appeared in print, the head of the English department held a private meeting with Noonan to verbally assail him for using *True North* as a showcase for “juvenile literary practical jokes.” Nearly fifty people cancelled their subscriptions—no laughing matter for a journal with a circulation of just a thousand copies—and the alumna who provided most of *True North*’s funding withdrew her financial support in outrage. Noonan himself was removed as editor, and Frank McDane agreed to oversee the magazine from retirement, in response to the popular outcry for his return.

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Noonan's letter finished:

*I remain of the opinion that (whatever its flaws), "Buttonboy" is a remarkable, if genuinely distressing, work of fiction, and I hope you'll give it your time. I admit I would find it personally vindicating if you decided to include it in your next anthology of the year's best horror fiction.*

*I would tell you to enjoy, but I'm not sure that's the word.*

*Best,*

*Harold Noonan*

Eddie Carroll had just come in from outside, and read Noonan's letter standing in the mudroom. He flipped to the beginning of the story. He stood reading for almost five minutes before noticing he was uncomfortably warm. He tossed his jacket at a hook and wandered into the kitchen.

He sat for a while on the stairs to the second floor, turning through the pages. Then he was stretched on the couch in his office, head on a pile of books, reading in a slant of late October light, with no memory of how he had got there.

He rushed through to the ending, then sat up, in the grip of a strange, bounding exuberance. He thought it was possibly the rudest, most awful thing he had ever read, and in his case that was saying something. He had waded through the rude and awful for most of his professional life, and in those fly-blown and diseased literary swamps had discovered flowers of unspeakable beauty, of which he was sure this was one. It was cruel and perverse and he had to have it. He turned to the beginning and started reading again.

IT WAS ABOUT a girl named Cate—an introspective seventeen-year-old at the story's beginning—who one day is pulled into a car by a giant with jaundiced eyeballs and teeth in tin braces. He ties her hands behind her back and shoves her onto the backseat floor of his station wagon . . . where she discovers a boy about her age, whom she at first takes for dead and who



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has suffered an unspeakable disfiguration. His eyes are hidden behind a pair of round, yellow, smiley-face buttons. They've been pinned right through his eyelids—which have also been stitched shut with steel wire—and the eyeballs beneath.

As the car begins to move, though, so does the boy. He touches her hip and Cate bites back a startled scream. He moves his hand over her body, touching her face last. He whispers that his name is Jim, and that he's been traveling with the giant for a week, ever since the big man killed his parents.

"He made holes in my eyes and he said after he did it he saw my soul rush out. He said it made a sound like when you blow on an empty Coke bottle, real pretty. Then he put these over my eyes to keep my life trapped inside." As he speaks, Jim touches the smiley-face buttons. "He wants to see how long I can live without a soul inside me."

The giant drives them both to a desolate campground, in a nearby state park, where he forces Cate and Jim to fondle one another sexually. When he feels that Cate is failing to kiss Jim with convincing passion, he slashes her face, and removes her tongue. In the ensuing chaos—Jim shrieking in alarm, staggering about blindly, blood everywhere—Cate is able to escape into the trees. Three hours later she staggers out onto a highway, hysterical, drenched in blood.

Her kidnapper is never apprehended. He and Jim drive out of the national park and off the edge of the world. Investigators are unable to determine a single useful fact about the two. They don't know who Jim is or where he's from, and know even less about the giant.

Two weeks after her release from the hospital, a single clue turns up by U.S. mail. Cate receives an envelope containing a pair of smiley-face buttons—steel pins caked with dry blood—and a Polaroid of a bridge in Kentucky. The next morning a diver finds a boy there, on the river bottom, horribly decomposed, fish darting in and out of his empty eye sockets.

Cate, who was once attractive and well liked, finds herself the object of pity and horror among those who know her. She understands the way other people feel. The sight of her own face in the mirror repels her as well. She attends a special school for a time and learns sign language, but she doesn't stay long.

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The other cripples—the deaf, the lame, the disfigured—disgust her with their neediness, their dependencies.

Cate tries, without much luck, to resume a normal life. She has no close friends, no employable skills, and is self-conscious about her looks, her inability to speak. In one particularly painful scene, Cate drinks her way into courage, and makes a pass at a man in a bar, only to be ridiculed by him and his friends.

Her sleep is troubled by regular nightmares, in which she relives unlikely and dreadful variations on her abduction. In some, Jim is not a fellow victim, but in on the kidnapping, and rapes her with vigor. The buttons stuck through his eyes are mirrored discs that show a distorted image of her own screaming face, which, with perfect dream logic, has already been hacked into a grotesque mask. Infrequently, these dreams leave her aroused. Her therapist says this is common. She fires the therapist when she discovers he's doodled a horrid caricature of her in his notebook.

Cate tries different things to help her sleep: gin, painkillers, heroin. She needs money for drugs and goes looking for it in her father's dresser. He catches her at it and chases her out. That night her mother calls to tell her Dad is in the hospital—he had a minor stroke—and please don't come to see him. Not long after, at a day care center for disabled children, where Cate is part-timing, one child pokes a pencil into another child's eye, blinding him. The incident clearly isn't Cate's fault, but in the aftermath, her assorted addictions become public knowledge. She loses her job and, even after kicking her habit, finds herself nearly unemployable.

Then, one cool fall day, she comes out of a local supermarket, and walks past a police car parked out back. The hood is up. A policeman in mirrored sunglasses is studying an overheated radiator. She happens to glance in the backseat—and there, with his hands cuffed behind his back, is her giant, ten years older and fifty pounds heavier.

She struggles to stay calm. She approaches the trooper working under the hood, writes him a note, asks him if he knows who he has in the backseat.

He says it's a guy who was arrested at a hardware store on

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Pleasant Street, trying to shoplift a hunting knife and a roll of heavy-duty duct tape.

Cate knows the hardware store in question. She lives around the corner from it. The officer takes her arm before her legs can give out on her.

She begins to write frantic notes, tries to explain what the giant did to her when she was seventeen. Her pen can't keep pace with her thoughts, and the notes she writes hardly make sense, even to her, but the officer gets the gist. He guides her around to the passenger seat, and opens the door. The thought of getting in the same car with her abductor makes her dizzy with fear—she begins to shiver uncontrollably—but the police officer reminds her the giant is handcuffed in the back, unable to hurt her, and that it's important for her to come with them to the precinct house.

At last she settles into the passenger seat. At her feet is a winter jacket. The police officer says it's his coat, and she should put it on, it'll keep her warm, help with her shivering. She looks up at him, prepares to scribble a thank you on her notepad—then goes still, finds herself unable to write. Something about the sight of her own face, reflected in his sunglasses, causes her to freeze up.

He closes the door and goes around to the front of the car to shut the hood. With numb fingers she reaches down to get his coat. Pinned to the front, one on each breast, are two smiley-face buttons. She reaches for the door, but it won't unlock. The window won't roll down. The hood slams. The man behind the sunglasses who is not a police officer is grinning a hideous grin. Buttonboy continues around the car, past the driver's side door, to let the giant out of the back. After all, a person needs eyes to drive.

In thick forest, it's easy for a person to get lost and walk around in circles, and for the first time, Cate can see this is what happened to her. She escaped Buttonboy and the giant by running into the woods, but she never made her way out—not really—has been stumbling around in the dark and the brush ever since, traveling in a great and pointless circle back to them. She's arrived where she was always headed, at last, and this thought, rather than terrifying her, is oddly soothing. It seems

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to her she belongs with them, and there is a kind of relief in that, in belonging somewhere. Cate relaxes into her seat, unconsciously pulling Buttonboy's coat around her against the cold.

IT DIDN'T SURPRISE Eddie Carroll to hear Noonan had been excoriated for publishing "Buttonboy." The story lingered on images of female degradation, and the heroine had been written as a somewhat willing accomplice to her own emotional, sexual, and spiritual mistreatment. This was bad . . . but Joyce Carol Oates wrote stories just like it for journals no different than *The True North Review*, and won awards for them. The really unforgivable literary sin was the shock ending.

Carroll had seen it coming—after reading almost ten thousand stories of horror and the supernatural, it was hard to sneak up on him—but he had enjoyed it nonetheless. Among the literary cognoscenti, though, a surprise ending (no matter how well executed) was the mark of childish, commercial fiction and bad TV. The readers of *The True North Review* were, he imagined, middle-aged academics, people who taught Grendel and Ezra Pound and who dreamed heartbreaking dreams about someday selling a poem to *The New Yorker*. For them, coming across a shock ending in a short story was akin to hearing a ballerina rip a noisy fart during a performance of *Swan Lake*—a faux pas so awful it bordered on the hilarious. Professor Harold Noonan either had not been rooming in the ivory tower for long or was subconsciously hoping someone would hand him his walking papers.

Although the ending was more John Carpenter than John Updike, Carroll hadn't come across anything like it in any of the horror magazines, either, not lately. It was, for twenty-five pages, the almost completely naturalistic story of a woman being destroyed a little at a time by the steady wear of survivor's guilt. It concerned itself with tortured family relationships, shitty jobs, the struggle for money. Carroll had forgotten what it was like to come across the bread of everyday life in a short story. Most horror fiction didn't bother with anything except rare bleeding meat.

He found himself pacing his office, too excited to settle,

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“Buttonboy” folded open in one hand. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window behind the couch and saw himself grinning in a way that was almost indecent, as if he had just heard a particularly good dirty joke.

Carroll was eleven years old when he saw *The Haunting* in The Oregon Theater. He had gone with his cousins, but when the lights went down, his companions were swallowed by the dark and Carroll found himself essentially alone, shut tight into his own suffocating cabinet of shadows. At times, it required all his will not to hide his eyes, yet his insides churned with a nervous-sick frisson of pleasure. When the lights finally came up, his nerve endings were ringing, as if he had for a moment grabbed a copper wire with live current in it. It was a sensation for which he had developed a compulsion.

Later, when he was a professional and it was his business, his feelings were more muted—not gone, but experienced distantly, more like the memory of an emotion than the thing itself. More recently, even the memory had fled, and in its place was a deadening amnesia, a numb disinterest when he looked at the piles of magazines on his coffee table. Or no—he was overcome with dread, but the wrong kind of dread.

This, though, here in his office, fresh from the depredations of “Buttonboy” . . . this was the authentic fix. It had clanged that inner bell and left him vibrating. He couldn’t settle, wasn’t used to exuberance. He tried to think when, if ever, he had last published a story he liked as much as “Buttonboy.” He went to the shelf and pulled down the first volume of *Best New Horror* (still the best), curious to see what he had been excited about then. But looking for the table of contents, he flipped it open to the dedication, which was to his then-wife, Elizabeth. “Who helps me find my way in the dark,” he had written, in a dizzy fit of affection. Looking at it now caused the skin on his arms to crawl.

Elizabeth had left him after he discovered she had been sleeping with their investment banker for over a year. She went to stay with her mother, and took Tracy with her.

“In a way I’m almost glad you caught us,” she said, talking to him on the phone, a few weeks after her flight from his life. “To have it over with.”

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“The affair?” he asked, wondering if she was about to tell him she had broken it off.

“No,” Lizzie said. “I mean all your horror shit, and all those people who are always coming to see you, the horror people. Sweaty little grubs who get hard over corpses. That’s the best part of this. Thinking maybe now Tracy can have a normal childhood. Thinking I’m finally going to get to have a life with healthy, ordinary grown-ups.”

It was bad enough she had fucked around like she had, but that she would throw Tracy in his face that way made him short of breath with hatred, even now. He flung the book back at the shelf and slouched away for the kitchen and lunch, his restless excitement extinguished at last. He had been looking to use up all that useless distracting energy. Good old Lizzie—still doing him favors, even from forty miles away and another man’s bed.

THAT AFTERNOON HE e-mailed Harold Noonan, asking for Kilrue’s contact information. Noonan got back to him less than an hour later, very much pleased to hear that Carroll wanted “Buttonboy” for *Best New Horror*. He didn’t have an e-mail address for Peter Kilrue, but he did have an address of the more ordinary variety, and a phone number.

But the letter Carroll wrote came back to him, stamped RETURN TO SENDER, and when he rang the phone number, he got a recording: *This line has been disconnected*. Carroll called Harold Noonan at Katahdin University.

“I can’t say I’m shocked,” Noonan said, voice rapid and soft, hitching with shyness. “I got the impression he’s something of a transient. I think he patches together part-time jobs to pay his bills. Probably the best thing would be to call Morton Boyd in the grounds department. I imagine they have a file on him.”

“When’s the last time you saw him?”

“I dropped in on him last March. I went by his apartment just after ‘Buttonboy’ was published, when the outrage was running at full boil. People saying his story was misogynistic hate speech, saying there should be a published apology and such nonsense. I wanted to let him know what was happening.

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I guess I was hoping he'd want to fire back in some way, write a defense of his story for the student paper or something . . . although he didn't. Said it would be weak. Actually, it was a strange kind of visit. He's a strange kind of guy. It isn't just his stories. It's him."

"What do you mean?"

Noonan laughed. "I'm not sure. What am I saying? You know how when you're running a fever, you'll look at something totally normal—like the lamp on your desk—and it'll seem somehow unnatural? Like it's melting or getting ready to waddle away? Encounters with Peter Kilrue can be kind of like that. I don't know why. Maybe because he's so intense about such troubling things."

Carroll hadn't even got in touch with him yet, and liked him already. "What things?"

"When I went to see him, his older brother answered the door. Half-dressed. I guess he was staying with him. And this guy was—I don't want to be insensitive—but I would say disturbingly fat. And tattooed. Disturbingly tattooed. On his stomach there was a windmill, with rotted corpses hanging from it. On his back, there was a fetus with—scribbled-over eyes. And a scalpel in one fist. And fangs."

Carroll laughed, but he wasn't sure it was funny.

Noonan went on, "But he was a good guy. Friendly as all get-out. Led me in, got me a can of soda, we all sat on the couch in front of the TV. And—this is very amusing—while we were talking, and I was catching them up on the outcry, the older brother sat on the floor, while Peter gave him a home-made piercing."

"He what?"

"Oh God, yes. Right in the middle of the conversation he forces a hot needle through the upper part of his brother's ear. Blood like you wouldn't believe. When the fat guy got up, it looked like he had been shot in the side of the head. His head is pouring blood. It's like the end of *Carrie*, like he just took a bath in it, and he asks if he can get me another Coke."

This time they laughed together, and after, for a moment, a friendly silence passed between them.

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“Also they were watching about Jonestown,” Noonan said suddenly—blurted it, really.

“Hm?”

“On the TV. With the sound off. While we talked and Peter stuck holes in his brother. In a way that was really the thing, the final weird touch that made it all seem so absolutely unreal. It was footage of the bodies in French Guyana. After they drank the Kool-Aid. Streets littered with corpses, and all the birds, you know . . . the birds picking at them.” Noonan swallowed thickly. “I think it was a loop, because it seems like they watched the same footage more than once. They were watching like . . . like in a trance.”

Another silence passed between them. On Noonan’s part, it seemed to be an uncomfortable one. *Research*, Carroll thought—with a certain measure of approval.

“Didn’t you think it was a remarkable piece of American fiction?” Noonan asked.

“I did. I do.”

“I don’t know how he’ll feel about getting in your collection, but speaking for myself, I’m delighted. I hope I haven’t creeped you out about him.”

Carroll smiled. “I don’t creep easy.”

BOYD IN THE grounds department wasn’t sure where he was either. “He told me he had a brother with public works in Poughkeepsie. Either Poughkeepsie or Newburgh. He wanted to get in on that. Those town jobs are good money, and the best thing is, once you’re in, they can’t fire you, it doesn’t matter if you’re a homicidal maniac.”

Mention of Poughkeepsie stirred Carroll’s interest. There was a small fantasy convention running there at the end of the month—Dark Wonder-con, or Dark Dreaming-con, or something. Dark Masturbati-con. He had been invited to attend, but had been ignoring their letters, didn’t bother with the little cons anymore, and besides, the timing was all wrong, coming just before his deadline.

He went to the World Fantasy Awards every year, though,



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and Camp NeCon, and a few of the other more interesting get-togethers. The conventions were one part of the job he had not come entirely to loathe. His friends were there. And also, a part of him still liked *the stuff*, and the memories the stuff sometimes kicked loose.

Such as one time, when he had come across a bookseller offering a first edition of *I Love Galesburg in the Springtime*. He had not seen or thought of *Galesburg* in years, but as he stood turning through its browned and brittle pages, with their glorious smell of dust and attics, a whole vertiginous flood of memory poured over him. He had read it when he was thirteen, and it had held him rapt for two weeks. He had climbed out of his bedroom window onto the roof to read; it was the only place he could go to get away from the sounds of his parents fighting. He remembered the sandpaper texture of the roof shingles, the rubbery smell of them baking in the sun, the distant razz of a lawnmower, and most of all, his own blissful sense of wonder as he read about Jack Finney's impossible Woodrow Wilson dime.

Carroll rang public works in Poughkeepsie, was transferred to Personnel.

"Kilrue? Arnold Kilrue? He got the ax six months ago," said a man with a thin and wheezy voice. "You know how hard it is to get fired from a town job? First person I let go in years. Lied about his criminal record."

"No, not Arnold Kilrue. Peter. Arnold is maybe his brother. Was he overweight, lot of tattoos?"

"Not at all. Thin. Wiry. Only one hand. His left hand got ate up by a baler, said he."

"Oh," Carroll said, thinking this still somehow sounded like one of Peter Kilrue's relations. "What kind of trouble was he in?"

"Violatin' his restraining order."

"Oh," Carroll said. "Marital dispute?" He had sympathy for men who had suffered at the hands of their wives' lawyers.

"Hell no," Personnel replied. "Try his own mother. How the fuck do you like that?"

"Do you know if he's related to Peter Kilrue, and how to get in touch with him?"

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“I ain’t his personal secretary, buddy. Are we all through talking?”

They were all through.

HE TRIED INFORMATION, started calling people named Kilrue in the greater Poughkeepsie area, but no one he spoke to would admit to knowing a Peter, and finally he gave up. Carroll cleaned his office in a fury, jamming papers into the trash basket without looking at them, picking up stacks of books in one place and slamming them down in another, out of ideas and out of patience.

In the late afternoon, he flung himself on the couch to think, and fell into a furious doze. Even dreaming he was angry, chasing a little boy who had stolen his car keys through an empty movie theater. The boy was black and white and flickered like a ghost, or a character in an old movie, and was having himself a hell of a time, shaking the keys in the air and laughing hysterically. Carroll lurched awake, feeling a touch of feverish heat in his temples, thinking, *Poughkeepsie*.

Peter Kilrue lived somewhere in that part of New York, and on Saturday he would be at the Dark FutureCon in Poughkeepsie, would not be able to resist such an event. Someone there would know him. Someone would point him out. All Carroll needed was to be there, and they would find each other.

HE WASN’T GOING to stay overnight—it was a four-hour drive, he could go and come back late—and by six A.M. he was doing 80 in the left-hand lane on I-90. The sun rose behind him, filling his rearview mirror with blinding light. It felt good to squeeze the pedal to the floor, to feel the car rushing west, chasing the long thin line of its own shadow. Then he had the thought that his little girl belonged beside him, and his foot eased up on the pedal, his excitement for the road draining out of him.

Tracy loved the conventions, any kid would. They offered the spectacle of grown-ups making fools of themselves, dressed up as Pinhead or Elvira. And what child could resist the inevitable market, that great maze of tables and macabre exhibits to

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get lost in, a place where a kid could buy a rubber severed hand for a dollar. Tracy had once spent an hour playing pinball with Neil Gaiman at the World Fantasy Convention in Washington, D.C. They still wrote each other.

It was just noon when he found the Mid-Hudson Civic Center and made his way in. The marketplace was packed into a concert hall, and the floor was densely crowded, the concrete walls echoing with laughter and the steady hollow roar of overlapping conversations. He hadn't let anyone know he was coming, but it didn't matter, one of the organizers found him anyway, a chubby woman with frizzy red hair, in a pinstripe suit-jacket with tails.

"I had no idea—" she said, and, "We didn't hear from you!" and, "Can I get you a drink?"

Then there was a rum-and-Coke in one hand, and a little knot of the curious around him, chattering about movies and writers and *Best New Horror*, and he wondered why he had ever thought of not coming. Someone was missing for the 1:30 panel on the state of short horror fiction, and wouldn't that be perfect—? Wouldn't it, he said.

He was led to a conference room, rows of folding chairs, a long table at one end with a pitcher of ice water on it. He took a seat behind it, with the rest of the panel: a teacher who had written a book about Poe, the editor of an online horror magazine, a local writer of fantasy-themed children's books. The red-head introduced them to the two dozen people or so who filed in, and then everyone at the table had a chance to make some opening remarks. Carroll was the last to speak.

First he said that every fictional world was a work of fantasy, and whenever writers introduce a threat or a conflict into their story, they create the possibility of horror. He had been drawn to horror fiction, he said, because it took the most basic elements of literature and pushed them to their extremes. All fiction was make-believe, which made fantasy more valid (and honest) than realism.

He said that most horror and fantasy was worse than awful: exhausted, creatively bankrupt imitations of what was shit to begin with. He said sometimes he went for months without

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coming across a single fresh idea, a single memorable character, a single striking sentence.

Then he told them it had never been any different. It was probably true of any endeavor—artistic or otherwise—that it took a lot of people creating a lot of bad work to produce even a few successes. Everyone was welcome to struggle, get it wrong, learn from their mistakes, try again. And always there were rubies in the sand. He talked about Clive Barker and Kelly Link and Stephen Gallagher and Peter Kilrue, told them about “Buttonboy.” He said for himself, anyway, nothing beat the high of discovering something thrilling and fresh, he would always love it, the happy horrible shock of it. As he spoke, he realized it was true. When he was done talking, a few in the back row began clapping, and the sound spread outward, a ripple in a pool, and as it moved across the room, people began to stand.

He was sweating as he came out from behind the table to shake a few hands, after the panel discussion was over. He took off his glasses to wipe his shirttail across his face, and before he had put them back on, he had taken the hand of someone else, a thin, diminutive figure. As he settled his glasses on his nose, he found he was shaking hands with someone he was not entirely pleased to recognize, a slender man with a mouthful of crooked, nicotine-stained teeth, and a mustache so small and tidy it looked penciled on.

His name was Matthew Graham and he edited an odious horror fanzine titled *Rancid Fantasies*. Carroll had heard that Graham had been arrested for sexually abusing his underage stepdaughter, although apparently the case had never gone to court. He tried not to hold that against the writers Graham published, but had still never found anything in *Rancid Fantasies* even remotely worth reprinting in *Best New Horror*. Fiction about drug-addled morticians raping the corpses in their care, moronic hicks giving birth to shit-demons in outhouses located on ancient Indian burial grounds, work riddled with misspellings and grievous offenses to grammar.

“Isn’t Peter Kilrue just something else?” Graham asked. “I published his first story. Didn’t you read it? I sent you a copy, dear.”

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“Must’ve missed it,” said Carroll. He had not bothered to look at *Rancid Fantasies* in over a year, although he had recently used an issue to line his catbox.

“You’d like him,” Graham said, showing another flash of his few teeth. “He’s one of us.”

Carroll tried not to visibly shudder. “You’ve talked with him?”

“Talked with him? I had drinks with him over lunch. He was here this morning. You only just missed him.” Graham opened his mouth in a broad grin. His breath stank. “If you want, I can tell you where he lives. He isn’t far you know.”

OVER A BRIEF late lunch, he read Peter Kilrue’s first short story, in a copy of *Rancid Fantasies* that Matthew Graham was able to produce. It was titled “Piggies,” and it was about an emotionally disturbed woman who gives birth to a litter of piglets. The pigs learn to talk, walk on their hind legs, and wear clothes, à la the swine in *Animal Farm*. At the end of the story, though, they revert to savagery, using their tusks to slash their mother to ribbons. As the story comes to a close, they are locked in mortal combat to see who will get to eat the tastiest pieces of her corpse.

It was a corrosive, angry piece, and while it was far and away the best thing *Rancid Fantasies* had ever published—written with care and psychological realism—Carroll didn’t like it much. One passage, in which the piggies all fight to suckle at their mother’s breasts, read like an unusually horrid and grotesque bit of pornography.

Matthew Graham had folded a blank piece of typing paper into the back of the magazine. On it he had drawn a crude map to Kilrue’s house, twenty miles north of Poughkeepsie, in a little town called Piecliff. It was on Carroll’s way home, up a scenic parkway, the Taconic, which would take him naturally back to I-90. There was no phone number. Graham had mentioned that Kilrue was having money troubles, and the phone company had shut him off.

By the time Carroll was on the Taconic, it was already getting dark, gloom gathering beneath the great oaks and tall firs

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that crowded the side of the road. He seemed to be the only person on the parkway, which wound higher and higher into hills and wood. Sometimes, in the headlights, he saw families of deer standing at the edge of the road, their eyes pink in the darkness, watching him pass with a mixture of fear and alien curiosity.

Piecliff wasn't much: a strip mall, a church, a graveyard, a Texaco, a single blinking yellow light. Then he was through it and following a narrow state highway through piney woods. By then it was full night and cold enough so he needed to switch on the heat. He turned off onto Tarheel Road, and his Civic labored through a series of switchbacks, up a hill so steep the engine whined with effort. He closed his eyes for a moment, and almost missed a hairpin turn, had to yank at the wheel to keep from crashing through brush and plunging down the side of the slope.

A half mile later the asphalt turned to gravel and he trolled through the dark, tires raising a luminescent cloud of chalky dust. His headlights rose over a fat man in a bright orange knit cap, shoving a hand into a mailbox. On the side of the mailbox, letters printed on reflective decals spelled **KIL U**. Carroll slowed.

The fat man held up a hand to shield his eyes, peering at Carroll's car. Then he grinned, tipped his head in the direction of the house, in a *follow-me* gesture, as if Carroll were an expected visitor. He started up the driveway, and Carroll rolled along behind him. Hemlocks leaned over the narrow dirt track. Branches swatted at the windshield, raked at the sides of his Civic.

At last the drive opened into a dusty dooryard before a great yellow farmhouse, with a turret and a sagging porch that wrapped around two sides. A plywood sheet had been nailed into a broken window. A toilet bowl lay in the weeds. At the sight of the place, Carroll felt the hairs stirring on his forearms. *Journeys end in lovers meeting*, he thought, and grinned at his own uneasy imagination. He parked next to an ancient tractor with wild stalks of Indian corn growing up through its open hood.

He shoved his car keys in his coat pocket and climbed out,

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started toward the porch, where the fat man waited. His walk took him past a brightly lit carriage house. The double doors were pulled shut, but from within he heard the shriek of a bandsaw. He glanced up at the house and saw a black, backlit figure staring down at him from one of the second-floor windows.

Eddie Carroll said he was looking for Peter Kilrue. The fat man inclined his head toward the door, the same *follow-me* gesture he had used to invite Carroll up the driveway. Then he turned and let him in.

The front hall was dim, the walls lined with picture frames that hung askew. A narrow staircase climbed to the second floor. There was a smell in the air, a humid, oddly male scent . . . like sweat, but also like pancake batter. Carroll immediately identified it, and just as immediately decided to pretend he hadn't noticed anything.

"Bunch of shit in this hall," the fat man said. "Let me hang up your coat. Never be seen again." His voice was cheerful and piping. As Carroll handed him his coat, the fat man turned and hollered up the stairs, "*Pete! Someone here!*" The sudden shift from a conversational voice to a furious scream gave Carroll a bad jolt.

A floorboard creaked above them, and then a thin man, in a corduroy jacket and glasses with square, black plastic frames, appeared at the top of the steps.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"My name is Edward Carroll. I edit a series of books, *America's Best New Horror?*" He looked for some reaction on the thin man's face, but Kilrue remained impassive. "I read one of your stories, 'Buttonboy,' in *True North*, and I liked it quite a bit. I was hoping to use it in this year's collection." He paused, then added, "You haven't been so easy to get in touch with."

"Come up," Kilrue said, and stepped back from the top of the stairs.

Carroll started up the steps. Below, the fat brother began to wander down the hall, Carroll's coat in one hand, the Kilrue family mail in the other. Then, abruptly, the fat man stopped, looked up the stairwell, waggled a manila envelope.

"Hey, Pete! Mom's social security came!" His voice wavering with pleasure.

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By the time Carroll reached the top of the staircase, Peter Kilrue was already walking down the hall, to an open door at the end. The corridor itself seemed crooked somehow. The floor felt tilted underfoot, so much so that once Carroll had to touch the wall to steady himself. Floorboards were missing. A chandelier hung with crystal pendants floated above the stairwell, furred with lint and cobwebs. In some distant, echoing room of Carroll's mind, a hunchback played the opening bars of *The Addams Family* on a glockenspiel.

Kilrue had a small bedroom located under the pitch of the roof. A card table with a chipped wooden surface stood against one wall, with a humming Selectric typewriter set upon it, a sheet of paper rolled into the platen.

"Were you working?" Carroll asked.

"I can't stop," Kilrue said.

"Good."

Kilrue sat on the cot. Carroll came a step inside the door, couldn't go any further without ducking his head. Peter Kilrue had oddly colorless eyes, the lids red-rimmed as if irritated, and he regarded Carroll without blinking.

Carroll told him about the collection. He said he could pay two hundred dollars, plus a percentage of shared royalties. Kilrue nodded, seemed neither surprised nor curious about the details. His voice was breathy and girlish. He said thank you.

"What did you think of my ending?" Kilrue asked, without forewarning.

"Of 'Buttonboy'? I liked it. If I didn't, I wouldn't want to reprint it."

"They hated it down at Katahdin University. All those coeds with their pleated skirts and rich daddies. They hated a lot of stuff about the story, but especially my ending."

Carroll nodded. "Because they didn't see it coming. It probably gave a few of them a nasty jolt. The shock ending is out of fashion in mainstream literature."

Kilrue said, "The way I wrote it at first, the giant is strangling her, and just as she's passing out, she can feel the other one using buttons to pin her twat shut. But I lost my nerve and cut it out. Didn't think Noonan would publish it that way."

"In horror, it's often what you leave out that gives a story its



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power,” Carroll said, but it was just something to say. He felt a cool tingle of sweat on his forehead. “I’ll go get a permissions form from my car.” He wasn’t sure why he said that either. He didn’t have a permissions form in the car, just felt a sudden intense desire to catch a breath of cold fresh air.

He ducked back through the door into the hall. He found it took an effort to keep from breaking into a trot.

At the bottom of the staircase, Carroll hesitated in the hall, wondering where Kilrue’s obese older brother had gone with his jacket. He started down the corridor. The way grew darker the further he went.

There was a small door beneath the stairs, but when he tugged on the brass handle it wouldn’t open. He proceeded down the hall, looking for a closet. From somewhere nearby he heard grease sizzling, smelled onions, and heard the whack of a knife. He pushed open a door to his right and looked into a formal dining room, the heads of animals mounted on the walls. An oblong shaft of wan light fell across the table. The tablecloth was red and had a swastika in the center.

Carroll eased the door shut. Another door, just down the hall and to the left, was open, and offered a view of the kitchen. The fat man stood behind a counter, bare-chested and tattooed, chopping what looked like liver with a meat cleaver. He had iron rings through his nipples. Carroll was about to call to him, when the fat Kilrue boy came around the counter and walked to the gas range, to stir what was in the pan. He wore only a jock strap now, and his surprisingly scrawny, pale buttocks trembled with each step. Carroll shifted further back into the darkness of the hall, and after a moment continued on, treading silently.

The corridor was even more crooked than the one upstairs, visibly knocked out of true, as if the house had been jarred by some seismic event, and the front end no longer lined up with the back. He didn’t know why he didn’t turn back; it made no sense just wandering deeper and deeper into a strange house. Still his feet carried him on.

Carroll opened a door to the left, close to the end of the hall. He flinched from the stink and the furious humming of flies. An unpleasant human warmth spilled out and over him. It was the

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darkest room yet, a spare bedroom, and he was about to close the door when he heard something shifting under the sheets of the bed. He covered his mouth and nose with one hand and willed himself to take a step forward, and to wait for his eyes to adjust to the light.

A frail old woman was in the bed, the sheet tangled at her waist. She was naked, and he seemed to have caught her in the act of stretching, her skeletal arms raised over her head.

“Sorry,” Carroll muttered, looking away. “So sorry.”

Once more he began to push the door shut, then stopped, looked back into the room. The old woman stirred again beneath the sheets. Her arms were still stretched over her head. It was the smell, the human reek of her, that made him hold up, staring at her.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw the wire around her wrists, holding her arms to the headboard. Her eyes were slitted and her breath rattled. Beneath the wrinkled, small sacks of her breasts, he could see her ribs. The flies whirred. Her tongue popped out of her mouth and moved across her dry lips, but she didn't speak.

Then he was moving down the hall, going at a fast walk on stiff legs. As he passed the kitchen, he thought the fat brother looked up and saw him, but Carroll didn't slow down. At the edge of his vision he saw Peter Kilrue standing at the top of the stairs, looking down at him, head cocked at a questioning angle.

“Be right back with that thing,” Carroll called up to him, without missing a step. His voice was surprisingly casual.

He hit the front door, banged through it. He didn't leap the stairs, but took them one at a time. When you were running from someone, you never jumped the stairs; that was how you twisted an ankle. He had seen it happen in a hundred horror movies. The air was so frosty it burned his lungs.

One of the carriage house doors was open now. He had a look into it on his way past. He saw a smooth dirt floor, rusted chains and hooks dangling from the beams, a chain saw hanging from the wall. Behind a table saw stood a tall, angular man with one hand. The other was a stump, the tormented skin shiny with scar tissue. He regarded Carroll without speaking,

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his colorless eyes judging and unfriendly. Carroll smiled and nodded.

He opened the door of his Civic and heaved himself in behind the wheel . . . and in the next moment felt a spoke of panic pierce him through the chest. His keys were in his coat. His coat was inside. He almost cried out at the awful shock of it, but when he opened his mouth what came out was a frightened sob of laughter instead. He had seen this in a hundred horror movies too, had read this moment in three hundred stories. They never had the keys, or the car wouldn't start, or—

The brother with one hand appeared at the door of the carriage house, and stared across the drive at him. Carroll waved. His other hand was disconnecting his cell phone from the charger. He glanced at it. There was no reception up here. Somehow he wasn't surprised. He laughed again, a choked, nerve-jangling sound.

When he looked up, the front door of the house was open, and two figures stood in it, staring down at him. All the brothers were staring at him now. He climbed out of the car and started walking swiftly down the driveway. He didn't start to run until he heard one of them shout.

At the bottom of the driveway, he did not turn to follow the road, but went straight across it and crashed through the brush, into the trees. Whip-thin branches lashed at his face. He tripped and tore the knee of his pants, got up, kept going.

The night was clear and cloudless, the sky filled to its limitless depth with stars. He paused, on the side of a steep slope, crouching among rocks, to catch his breath, a stitch in one side. He heard voices up the hill from him, branches breaking. He heard someone pull the ripcord on a small engine, once, twice, then the noisy unmuffled scream-and-roar of a chain saw coming to life.

He got up and ran on, pitching himself down the hill, flying through the branches of the firs, leaping roots and rocks without seeing them. As he went, the hill got steeper and steeper, until it was really like falling. He was going too fast and he knew when he came to a stop, it would involve crashing into something, and shattering pain.

Only as he went on, picking up speed all the time, until

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with each leap he seemed to sail through yards of darkness, he felt a giddy surge of emotion, a sensation that might have been panic but felt strangely like exhilaration. He felt as if at any moment his feet might leave the ground and never come back down. He knew this forest, this darkness, this night. He knew his chances: not good. He knew what was after him. It had been after him all his life. He knew where he was—in a story about to unfold an ending. He knew better than anyone how these stories went, and if anyone could find their way out of these woods, it was him.

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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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