

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

JOE HILL



The Cape

A STORY FROM THE COLLECTION

20TH CENTURY
GHOSTS

THE CAPE

A Story from the Collection

20TH CENTURY GHOSTS

JOE HILL

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To Leanora:

WE ARE MY FAVORITE STORY

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We were little.

I was the Red Bolt and I went up the dead elm in the corner of our yard to get away from my brother, who wasn't anyone, just himself. He had friends coming over and he wanted me not to exist, but I couldn't help it: I existed.

I had his mask and I said when his friends got there I was going to reveal his secret identity. He said I was lunch meat, and stood below, chucking stones at me, but he threw like a girl, and I quickly climbed out of range.

He was too old to play superheroes. It had happened all of a sudden, with no warning. He had spent whole days leading up to Halloween dressed as The Streak, who was so fast the ground melted under his feet as he ran. Then Halloween was over and he didn't want to be a hero anymore. More than that, he wanted everyone to forget he had ever been one, wanted to forget himself, only I wouldn't let him, because I was up in a tree with his mask, and his friends were coming over.

The elm had been dead for years. Whenever it was windy, the gusts sheared off branches and flung them across the lawn. The scaly bark splintered and snapped away under the toes of my sneakers. My brother wasn't inclined to follow—beneath his dignity—and it was intoxicating to escape from him.

At first I climbed without thought, scrambling higher than I ever had before. I went into a kind of tree-climbing trance,

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getting off on altitude and my own seven-year-old agility. Then I heard my brother shout up that he was ignoring me (sure proof that he wasn't) and I remembered what had sent me up the elm in the first place. I set my eye on a long, horizontal branch, a place where I could sit, dangle my feet, and taunt my brother into a frenzy without fear of repercussions. I swept the cape back over my shoulders and climbed on, with a purpose.

The cape had started life as my lucky blue blanket and had kept me company since I was two. Over the years, the color had faded from a deep, lustrous blue to a tired pigeon gray. My mother had cut it down to cape size and stitched a red felt lightning bolt in the center of it. Also sewn to it was a Marine's patch, one of my father's. It showed the number 9, speared through by a lightning bolt. It had come home from Vietnam in his foot locker. He hadn't come with it. My mother flew the black P.O.W. flag from the front porch, but even then I knew no one was holding my father prisoner.

I put the cape on as soon as I came home from school, sucked on the sateen hem while I watched TV, wiped my mouth with it at the dinner table, and most nights, fell asleep wrapped in it. It pained me to take it off. I felt undressed and vulnerable without it. It was just long enough to make trouble underfoot if I was incautious.

I reached the high branch, threw a leg over and straddled it. If my brother wasn't there to witness what happened next, I wouldn't have believed it myself. Later, I would've told myself it was a panicked fantasy, a delusion that gripped me in a moment of terror and shock.

Nicky was sixteen feet below, glaring up at me and talking about what he was going to do to me when I came down. I held up his mask, a black Lone Ranger thing with holes for the eyes, and wagged it.

"Come and get me, Streak," I said.

"You better be planning to live up there."

"I found streaks in my underwear that smell better than you."

"Okay. Now you're fucking dead," he said. My brother hurled comebacks like he hurled rocks: badly.

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“Streak, Streak, Streak,” I said, because the name was taunt enough.

I was crawling out along the branch as I chanted. I put my right hand down on the cape, which had slid off my shoulder. The next time I tried to move forward, the cape pulled taut and unbalanced me. I heard cloth tear. I toppled hard against the branch, scraping my chin, throwing my arms around it. The branch sank beneath me, sprang up, sank again . . . and I heard a crack, a brittle snap that carried sharply in the crisp November air. My brother blanched.

“Eric,” he shouted. “Hold on, Eric!”

Why did he tell me to hold on? The branch was breaking—I needed to get off it. Was he too shocked to know that, or did some unconscious part of him want to see me fall? I froze, struggling mentally to unscramble what to do, and in the moment I hesitated, the branch gave way.

My brother leaped back. The broken limb, all five feet of it, hit the ground at his feet and shattered, bark and twigs flying. The sky wheeled above me. My stomach did a nauseating somersault.

It took an instant to register that I wasn’t falling. That I was staring out over the yard as if still seated on a high tree branch.

I shot a nervous look at Nicky. He stared back—gaping up at me.

My knees were hitched to my chest. My arms were spread out to either side, as for balance. I floated in the air, nothing holding me up. I wobbled to the right. I rolled to the left. I was an egg that wouldn’t quite fall over.

“Eric?” my brother said, his voice weak.

“Nicky?” I said, my voice the same. A breeze wafted through the elm’s bare branches, so they clicked and clattered against one another. The cape stirred at my shoulders.

“Come down, Eric,” my brother said. “Come down.”

I gathered my nerve and forced myself to glance over my knees at the ground directly below. My brother stood holding his arms outstretched to the sky, as if to grab my ankles and pull me down, although he was too far below me and standing too far back from the tree for any hope of that.

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Something glittered at the edge of my vision and I lifted my gaze. The cape had been held around my neck by a golden safety pin, hooked through two opposing corners of the blanket. But the pin had ripped right through one of the corners, and hung uselessly from the other. I remembered, then, the tearing sound I had heard as I collapsed on the branch. Nothing was holding the cape on me.

The wind gusted again. The elm groaned. The breeze raced through my hair and snatched the cape off my back. I saw it dance away, as if being jerked along by invisible wires. My support danced away with it. In the next instant, I rolled forward, and the ground came at me in a hideous rush, so quickly there was no time even to scream.

I hit the hard earth, landing atop the shattered branch. One long skewer of wood punctured my chest, just beneath the collarbone. When it healed, it left a shiny scar in the shape of a crescent moon, my most interesting feature. I broke my fibula, pulverized my left kneecap and fractured my skull in two places. I bled from my nose, my mouth, my eyes.

I don't remember the ambulance, although I have heard I never truly lost consciousness. I do remember my brother's white and frightened face bending over mine, while we were still in the yard. My cape was balled up in his fists. He was twisting it, unconsciously, into knots.

If I had any doubts about whether it really happened, they were removed two days later. I was still in the hospital, when my brother tied the cape around his neck and leaped from the top of the front stairs, at home. He fell the whole way, eighteen steps in all, hit the last riser on his face. The hospital was able to place him in the same room with me, but we didn't talk. He spent most of the day with his back turned to me, staring at the wall. I don't know why he wouldn't look at me—maybe he was angry because the cape hadn't worked for him, or angry with himself for thinking it would, or just sick at the thought of how the other kids were going to make fun of him, when they learned he had smashed his face trying to be Superman—but at least I could understand why we didn't talk. His jaw was wired shut. It took six pins and two correc-

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tive surgeries to rebuild his face into something like its former appearance.

The cape was gone by the time we both got out of the hospital. My mother told us in the car. She had packed it into the trash and sent it to the dump to be incinerated. There would be no more flying in the Shooter household.

I was a different kid after my accident. My knee throbbed when I did too much walking, when it rained, when it was cold. Bright lights gave me explosive migraines. I had trouble concentrating for long stretches of time, found it difficult to follow a lecture from start to finish, sometimes drifted off into daydreams in the middle of tests. I couldn't run, so I was lousy at sports. I couldn't think, so I was worse at schoolwork.

It was misery to try and keep up with other kids, so I stayed inside after school and read comic books. I couldn't tell you who my favorite hero was. I don't remember any of my favorite stories. I read comics compulsively, without any particular pleasure, or any particular thought, read them only because when I saw one I couldn't not read it. I was in thrall to cheap newsprint, lurid colors, and secret identities. The comics had a druglike hold over me, with their images of men shooting through the sky, shredding the clouds as they passed through them. Reading them felt like life. Everything else was a little out of focus, the volume turned too low, the colors not quite bright enough.

I didn't fly again for over ten years.

I WASN'T A collector, and if not for my brother I would've just left my comics in piles. But Nick read them as compulsively as I did, was as much under their spell. For years, he kept them in slippery plastic bags, arranged alphabetically in long white boxes.

Then, one day, when I was fifteen, and Nick was beginning as a senior at Passos High, he came home with a girl, an unheard-of event. He left her in the living room with me, said he wanted to drop his backpack upstairs, and then ran up to our room and threw our comics away, all of them, his and mine, almost

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eight hundred issues. Dumped them in two big Glad bags and snuck them out back.

I understand why he did it. Dating was hard for Nick. He was insecure about his rebuilt face, which didn't look so bad really. His jaw and chin were maybe a bit too square, the skin stretched too tightly over them, so at times he resembled a caricature of some brooding comic book hero. He was hardly The Elephant Man, although there was something terrible about his pinched attempts to smile, the way it seemed to pain him to move his lips and show his white, strong, Clark Kent—straight false teeth. He was always looking at himself in the mirror, searching for some sign of disfigurement, for the flaw that made others avoid his company. He wasn't easy at being around girls. I had been in more relationships, and was three years younger. With all that against him, he couldn't afford to be uncool too. Our comics had to go.

Her name was Angie. She was my age, a transfer student, too new at school to know that my brother was a dud. She smelled of patchouli and wore a hand-knit cap in the red-gold-and-green of the Jamaican flag. We had an English class together and she recognized me. There was a test on *Lord of the Flies* the next day. I asked what she thought of the book, and she said she hadn't finished it yet, and I said I'd help her study if she wanted.

By the time Nick got back from disposing of our comic collection, we were lying on our stomachs, side by side in front of MTV's *Spring Break*. I had the novel out and was going through some passages I had highlighted . . . something I usually never did. As I said, I was a poor, unmotivated student, but *Lord of the Flies* had excited me, distracted my imagination for a week or so, made me want to live barefoot and naked on an island, with my own tribe of boys to dominate and lead in savage rituals. I read and reread the parts about Jack painting his face, smitten with a desire to smear colored muds on my own face, to be primitive and unknowable and free.

Nick sat on the other side of her, sulking because he didn't want to share her with me. Nick couldn't talk about the book with us—he had never read it. Nick had always been in Advanced English courses, where the assigned reading was Mil-

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ton and Chaucer. Whereas I was pulling Cs in Adventures in English!, a course for the world's future janitors and air conditioner repairmen. We were the dumb kids, going nowhere, and for our stupidity, we were rewarded with all the really fun books.

Now and then Angie would stop and check out what was on TV and ask a provocative question: *Do you guys think that girl is totally hot? Would it be embarrassing to be beaten by a female mud wrestler, or is that the whole point?* It was never clear who she was talking to, and usually I answered first, just to fill the silences. Nick acted like his jaw was wired shut again, and smiled his angry pinched smile when my answers made her laugh. Once, when she was laughing especially hard, she put a hand on my arm. He sulked about that too.

ANGIE AND I were friends for two years, before the first time we kissed, in a closet, both of us drunk at a party, with others laughing and shouting our names through the door. We made love for the first time three months later, in my room, with the windows open and a cool breeze that smelled sweetly of pines blowing in on us. After that first time, she asked what I wanted to do with myself when I grew up. I said I wanted to learn how to hang-glide. I was eighteen, she was eighteen. This was an answer that satisfied us both.

Later, not long after she finished nursing school, and we settled into an apartment together downtown, she asked me again what I wanted to do. I had spent the summer working as a house painter, but that was over. I hadn't found another job to replace it yet, and Angie said I ought to take the time to think about the long term.

She wanted me to get back into college. I told her I'd think about it, and while I was thinking, I missed the enrollment period for the next semester. She said why not learn to be an EMT, and spent several days collecting paperwork for me to fill out, so I could get in the program: applications, questionnaires, financial aid forms. The pile of them sat by the fridge, collecting coffee stains, until one of us threw them out. It wasn't laziness that held me back. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. My

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brother was studying to be a doctor in Boston. He'd think I was, in some needy way, trying to be like him, an idea that gave me shivers of loathing.

Angie said there had to be something I wanted to do with myself. I told her I wanted to live in Barrow, Alaska, at the edge of the arctic circle, with her, and raise children, and malamutes, and have a garden in a greenhouse: tomatoes, string beans, a plot of mellow weed. We'd earn our living taking tourists dog sledding. We would shun the world of supermarkets, broadband Internet, and indoor plumbing. We would leave the TV behind. In the winter, the northern lights would paint the sky above us all day long. In the summers, our children would live half-wild, skiing unnamed backcountry hills, feeding playful seals by hand from the dock behind our house.

We had only just set out on the work of being adults, and were in the first stages of making a life with one another. In those days, when I talked about our children feeding seals, Angie would look at me in a way that made me feel both faintly weak and intensely hopeful . . . hopeful about myself and who I might turn out to be. Angie had the too-large eyes of a seal herself, brown, with a ring of brilliant gold around her pupil. She'd stare at me without blinking, listening to me tell it, lips parted, as attentive as a child hearing her favorite bedtime story.

But after my D.U.I., any mention of Alaska would cause her to make faces. Getting arrested cost me my job, too—no great loss, I admit, since I was temping as a pizza delivery man at the time—and Angie was desperate trying to keep up with the bills. She worried, and she did her worrying alone, avoiding me as much as possible, no easy task, considering we shared a three-room apartment.

I brought up Alaska now and then, anyway, trying to draw her back to me, but it only gave her a place to concentrate her anger. She said if I couldn't keep the apartment clean, at home alone all day, what was our lodge going to be like? She saw our children playing amid piles of dogshit, the front porch caving in, rusting snowmobiles and deranged half-breed dogs scattered about the yard. She said hearing me talk about it made her want to scream, it was so pathetic, so disconnected from our lives. She said she was scared I had a problem, alcoholism

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maybe, or clinical depression. She wanted me to see someone, not that we had the money for that.

None of this explains why she walked out—fled without warning. It wasn't the court case, or my drinking, or my lack of direction. The real reason we split was more terrible than that, so terrible we could never talk about it. If she had brought it up, I would've ridiculed her. And I couldn't bring it up, because it was my policy to pretend it hadn't happened.

I was cooking breakfast for supper one night, bacon and eggs, when Angie arrived home from work. I always liked to have supper ready for her when she got back, part of my plan to show her I was down but not out. I said something about how we were going to have our own pigs up in the Yukon, smoke our own bacon, kill a shoat for Christmas dinner. She said I wasn't funny anymore. It was her tone more than what she said. I sang the song from *Lord of the Flies*—*kill the pig, drain her blood*—trying to squeeze a laugh out of what hadn't been funny in the first place, and she said *Stop it, very shrill, just stop it*. At this particular moment I happened to have a knife in my hand, what I had used to cut open the pack of bacon, and she was leaning with her rump resting against the kitchen counter a few feet away. I had a sudden, vivid picture in my head, imagined turning and slashing the knife across her throat. In my mind I saw her hand fly to her neck, her baby seal eyes springing open in astonishment, saw blood the bright red of cranberry juice gushing down her V-neck sweater.

As this thought occurred to me, I happened to glance at her throat—then at her eyes. And she was staring back at me and she was afraid. She set her glass of orange juice down, very gently, in the sink, and said she wasn't hungry and maybe she needed to lie down. Four days later I went around the corner for bread and milk and she was gone when I got back. She called from her parents to say we needed some time.

It was just a thought. Who doesn't have a thought like that now and then?

WHEN I WAS two months behind on the rent and my landlord was saying he could get an order to have me thrown out, I

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moved home myself. My mother was remodeling and I said I wanted to help. I did want to help. I was desperate for something to do. I hadn't worked in four months and had a court date in December.

My mother had knocked down the walls in my old bedroom, pulled out the windows. The holes in the wall were covered with plastic sheeting, and the floor was littered in chunks of plaster. I made a nest for myself in the basement, on a cot across from the washer and dryer. I put my TV on a milk crate at the foot of the bed. I couldn't leave it behind in the apartment, needed it for company.

My mother was no company. The first day I was home, she only spoke to me to tell me I couldn't use her car. If I wanted to get drunk and crash a set of wheels, I could buy my own. Most of her communication was nonverbal. She'd let me know it was time to wake up by stomping around over my head, feet booming through the basement ceiling. She told me I disgusted her by glaring at me over her crowbar, as she pulled boards out of my bedroom floor, yanking them up in a silent fury, as if she wanted to tear away all the evidence of my childhood in her home.

The cellar was unfinished, with a pitted cement floor and a maze of low pipes hanging from the ceiling. At least it had its own bathroom, an incongruously tidy room with a flower-pattern linoleum floor and a bowl of woodland-scented potpourri resting on the tank of the toilet. When I was in there taking a leak, I could shut my eyes and inhale that scent and imagine the wind stirring in the tops of the great pines of northern Alaska.

I woke one night, in my basement cell, to a bitter cold, my breath steaming silver and blue in the light from the TV, which I had left on. I had finished off a couple beers before bed and now I needed to urinate so badly it hurt.

Normally, I slept beneath a large quilt, hand-stitched by my grandmother, but I had spilled Chinese on it and tossed it in the wash, then never got around to drying it. To replace it, I had raided the linen closet, just before bed, gathering up a stack of old comforters from my childhood: a puffy blue bedspread decorated with characters from *The Empire Strikes Back*, a red

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blanket with fleets of Fokker triplanes soaring across it. None of them, singly, was large enough to cover me, but I had spread the different blankets over my body in overlapping patterns, one for my feet, another for my legs and crotch, a third for my chest.

They had kept me cozy enough to fall asleep, but now were in disarray, and I was huddled for warmth, my knees pulled almost to my chest, my arms wrapped around them, my bare feet sticking into the cold. I couldn't feel my toes, as if they had already been amputated for frostbite.

My head was muddy. I was only half-awake. I needed to pee. I had to get warm. I rose and floated to the bathroom through the dark, the smallest blanket thrown over my shoulders to keep the cold off. I had the sleep-addled idea that I was still balled up to stay warm, with my knees close to my chest, although I was nevertheless moving forward. It was only when I was over the toilet, fumbling with the fly of my boxers, that I happened to look down and saw my knees *were* hitched up, and that my feet weren't touching the floor. They dangled a full foot over the toilet seat.

The room swam around me and I felt momentarily light-headed, not with shock so much as a kind of dreaming wonder. Shock didn't figure into it. I suppose some part of me had been waiting, all that time, to fly again, had almost been expecting it.

Not that what I was doing could really be described as flying. It was more like controlled floating. I was an egg again, tippy and awkward. My arms waved anxiously at my sides. The fingertips of one hand brushed the wall and steadied me a little.

I felt fabric shift across my shoulders and carefully dropped my gaze, as if even a sudden movement of the eyes could send me sprawling to the ground. At the edge of my vision I saw the blue sateen hem of a blanket, and part of a patch, red and yellow. Another wave of dizziness rolled over me and I wobbled in the air. The blanket slipped, just as it had done that day almost fourteen years before, and slid off my shoulders. I dropped in the same instant, clubbed a knee against the side of the toilet, shoved a hand into the bowl, plunging it deep into freezing water.

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* * *

I SAT WITH the cape spread across my knees, studying it as the first silvery flush of dawn lit the windows high along the basement walls.

The cape was even smaller than I remembered, about the length of a large pillowcase. The red felt lightning bolt was still sewn to the back, although a couple of stitches had popped free, and one corner of the bolt was sticking up. My father's Marine patch was still sewn on as well, was what I had seen from the corner of my eye: a slash of lightning across a background like fire.

Of course my mother hadn't sent it to the dump to be incinerated. She never got rid of anything, on the theory she might find a use for it later. Hoarding what she had was a mania, not spending money an obsession. She didn't know anything about home renovation, but it never would've crossed her mind to pay anyone to do the work for her. My bedroom would be torn open to the elements and I would be sleeping in the basement until she was in diapers and I was in charge of changing them. What she thought of as self-reliance was really a kind of white-trash mulishness, and I had not been home long before it got under my skin and I had quit helping her out.

The sateen edge of the cape was just long enough for me to tie it around my neck.

I sat on the edge of my cot for a long time, perched with my feet up, like a pigeon on a ledge, and the blanket trailing to the small of my back. The floor was half a foot below, but I stared over the side as if looking at a forty-foot drop. At last, I pushed off.

And hung. Bobbled unsteadily, frontward and backways, but did not fall. My breath got caught behind my diaphragm and it was several moments before I could force myself to exhale, in a great equine snort.

I ignored my mother's wooden-heeled shoes banging overhead at nine in the morning. She tried again at ten, this time opening the door to shout down, *Are you ever getting up?* I yelled back that I *was* up. It was true: I was two feet off the ground.

By then I had been flying for hours . . . but again, describing

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it as flight probably brings to mind the wrong sort of image. You see Superman. Imagine, instead, a man sitting on a magic carpet, with his knees pulled to his chest. Now take away the magic carpet and you'll be close.

I had one speed, which I would call stately. I moved like a float in a parade. All I had to do to glide forward was look forward, and I was going, as if driven by a stream of powerful but invisible gas, the flatulence of the Gods.

For a while, I had trouble turning, but eventually, I learned to change direction in the same way one steers a canoe. As I moved across the room, I'd throw an arm in the air and pull the other in. And effortlessly, I'd veer to the right or left, depending on which metaphorical oar I stuck in the water. Once I got the hang of it, the act of turning became exhilarating, the way I seemed to accelerate into the curves, in a sudden rush that produced a ticklish feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I could rise by leaning back, as if into a recliner. The first time I tried it, I swooped upward so quickly, I bashed a head against a brass pipe, hard enough to make constellations of black dots wheel in front of my eyes. But I only laughed and rubbed at the stinging lump in the center of my forehead.

When I finally quit, at almost noon, I was exhausted, and I lay in bed, my stomach muscles twitching helplessly from the effort it had required to keep my knees hitched up all that time. I had forgotten to eat, and I felt light-headed from low blood sugar. And still, even lying down, under my sheets, in the slowly warming basement, I felt as if I were soaring. I shut my eyes and sailed away into the limitless reaches of sleep.

IN THE LATE afternoon, I took the cape off and went upstairs to make bacon sandwiches. The phone rang and I answered automatically. It was my brother.

"Mom tells me you aren't helping upstairs," he said.

"Hi. I'm good. How are you?"

"She also said you sit in the basement all day watching TV."

"That's not all I do," I said. I sounded more defensive than I liked. "If you're so worried about her, why don't you come home and play handyman one of these weekends?"

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“When you’re third-year premed, you can’t just take off whenever you feel like it. I have to schedule my BMs in advance. One day last week I was in the ER for ten hours. I should’ve left, but this old woman came in with heavy vaginal bleeding—” At this, I giggled, a reaction that was met with a long moment of disapproving silence. Then Nick went on, “I stayed at work another hour to make sure she was okay. That’s what I want for you. Get you doing something that will lift you up above your own little world.”

“I’ve got things I’m doing.”

“What things? For example, what have you done with yourself today?”

“Today—today isn’t a normal day. I didn’t sleep all night. I’ve just been—sort of—floating from here to there.” I couldn’t help it; I giggled again.

He was silent for a while. Then he said, “If you were in total freefall, Eric, do you think you’d even know it?”

I SLIPPED OFF the edge of the roof like a swimmer sliding from the edge of the pool into the water. My insides churned and my scalp prickled, icy-hot, my whole body clenching up, waiting for freefall. This is how it ends, I thought, and it crossed my mind that the entire morning, all that flying around the basement, had been a delusion, a schizophrenic fantasy, and now I would drop and shatter, gravity asserting its reality. Instead I dipped, then rose. My child’s cape fluttered at my shoulders.

While waiting for my mother to go to bed, I had painted my face. I had retreated into the basement bathroom, and used one of her lipsticks to draw an oily red mask, a pair of linked loops, around my eyes. I did not want to be spotted while I was out flying, and if I was, I thought the red circles would distract any potential witnesses from my other features. Besides, it felt good to paint my face, was oddly arousing, the sensation of the lipstick rolling hard and smooth across my skin. When I was done, I stood admiring myself in front of the bathroom mirror for a while. I liked my red mask. It was a simple thing, but made my features strange and unfamiliar. I was curious about

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this new person staring back at me out of the mirror glass. About what he wanted. About what he could do.

After my mother closed herself in her bedroom for the night, I had crept upstairs, out the hole in my bedroom wall where the dormer window had been, and onto the roof. A few of the black tar shingles were missing, and others were loose, hanging askew. Something else my mother could try and fix herself in the interest of saving a few nickels. She would be lucky not to slide off the roof and snap her neck. Anything could happen out there where the world touches the sky. No one knew that better than me.

The cold stung my face, numbed my hands. I had sat flexing my fingers for a long time, building up the nerve to overcome a hundred thousand years of evolution, screaming at me that I would die if I went over the edge. Then I was over the edge, and suspended in the clear, frozen air, thirty feet above the lawn.

You want to hear now that I felt a rush of excitement, whooped at the thrill of flight. I didn't. What I felt was something much more subtle. My pulse quickened. I caught my breath for a moment. Then I felt a stillness settling into me, like the stillness of the air. I was drawn completely into myself, concentrating on staying balanced atop the invisible bubble beneath me (which perhaps gives the impression that I could feel something beneath me, some unseen cushion of support; I could not, which was why I was constantly squirming around for balance). Out of instinct, as much as habit, I held my knees up to my chest, and kept my arms out to the side.

The moon was only a little bigger than a quarter full, but bright enough to etch intensely dark, sharp-edged shadows on the ground, and to make the frosty yards below shine as if the grass were blades of chrome.

I glided forward. I did some loops around the leafless crown of a red maple. The dead elm was long gone, had split in two in a windstorm almost eight years before. The top half had come down against the house, a long branch shattering one of my bedroom windows, as if reaching in for me, still trying to kill me.

It was cold, and the chill intensified as I climbed. I didn't care. I wanted to get above everything.

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The town was built on the slopes of a valley, a crude black bowl, a-glitter with lights. I heard a mournful honking in my left ear, and my heart gave a lunge. I looked through the inky dark and saw a mallard, with a liquid black head and a throat of startling emerald, beating its wings and staring curiously back at me. He did not remain by my side for long, but dove, swooped to the south, and was gone.

For a while I didn't know where I was going. I had a nervous moment, when I wasn't sure how I'd get back down without falling eight hundred feet. But when I couldn't bend my fingers anymore, or feel any sensation in my face, I tilted forward slightly and began to sink back to earth, gently descending, in the way I had practiced hour on hour in the basement.

By the time I leveled off over Powell Avenue, I knew where I was headed. I floated three blocks, rising once to clear the wire suspending a stoplight, then hung a left and soared on, dream-like, to Angie's house. She would just be getting off her shift at the hospital.

Only she was almost an hour late. I was sitting on the roof of the garage when she turned into the driveway in the old bronze Civic we had shared, bumper missing and hood battered from where I had crashed it into a Dumpster, at the end of my low-speed attempt to evade the police.

Angie was made up and dressed in her lime-colored skirt with tropical flowers printed on it, the one she only wore to staff meetings at the end of the month. It wasn't the end of the month. I sat on the tin roof of the garage and watched her totter to the front door in her heels and let herself in.

Usually she showered when she got home. I didn't have anything else to do.

I slid off the peak of the garage roof, bobbed and rose like a black balloon toward the third floor of her parents' tall, narrow Victorian. Her bedroom was dark. I leaned toward the glass, peering in, looking toward her door and waiting for it to open. But she was already there, and in the next moment she snapped on a lamp, just to the left of the window, on a low dresser. She stared out the window at me and I stared right back, didn't move—couldn't move, was too shocked to make a sound. She regarded me wearily, without interest or surprise. She didn't see

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me. She couldn't make me out past her own reflection. I wondered if she had ever been able to see me.

I floated outside the window while she stripped her skirt off over her head and wiggled out of plain girdle underwear. A bathroom adjoined her bedroom, and she considerably left the door open between the two. I watched her shower through the clear glass of the shower cabinet. She showered a long time, lifting her arms to throw her honey-colored hair back, hot water pelting her breasts. I had watched her shower before, but it hadn't been this interesting in a long time. I wished she'd masturbate with the flexible showerhead, something she said she had done as a teenager, but she didn't.

In a while the window steamed over and I couldn't see as clearly. I watched her pink pale form move here and there. Then I heard her voice. She was on the phone. She asked someone why they were studying on a Saturday night. She said she was bored, she wanted to play a game. She pleaded in tones of erotic petulance.

A circle of clear glass appeared in the center of the window and began to expand as the condensation in her room evaporated, giving me a slow reveal. She was in a clinging white halter and a pair of black cotton panties, sitting at a small desk, hair wrapped in a towel. She had hung up the phone, but was playing cribbage on her computer, typing occasionally to send an instant message. She had a glass of white wine. I watched her drink it. In movies, voyeurs watch models prance about in French lingerie, but the banal is kinky enough, lips on a wineglass, the band of simple panties against a white buttock.

When she got off-line she seemed happy with herself but restless. She got into bed, switched on her little TV and flipped through the channels. She stopped on the Think! channel to watch seals fucking. One climbed on the back of the other and began humping away, blubber shaking furiously. She looked longingly at the computer.

"Angie," I said.

It seemed to take her a moment to register she had heard anything. Then she sat up and leaned forward, listening to the house. I said her name again. Her eyelashes fluttered nervously. She turned her head to the window almost reluctantly, but

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again, didn't see me past her reflection . . . until I tapped on the glass.

Her shoulders jumped in a nervous reflex. Her mouth opened in a cry, but she didn't make a sound. After a moment, she came off the bed and approached the window on stiff legs. She stared out. I waved hello. She looked beneath me for the ladder, then lifted her gaze back to my face. She swayed, put her hands on her dresser to steady herself.

"Unlock it," I said.

Her fingers struggled with the locks for a long time. She pulled the window up.

"Oh my God," she said. "Oh my God. Oh my God. How are you doing that?"

"I don't know. Can I come in?"

I eased myself up onto the windowsill, turning and shifting, so one arm was in her room, but my legs hung out.

"No," she said. "I don't believe it."

"Yes. Real."

"How?"

"I don't know. Honest." I picked at the edge of the cape. "But I did it once before. A long time back. You know my knee and the scar on my chest? I told you I did all that falling out of a tree, you remember?"

A look of surprise, mingled with sudden understanding, spread across her face. "The branch broke and fell. But you didn't. Not at first. You stayed in the air. You were in your cape and it was like magic and you didn't fall."

She already knew. She already knew and I didn't know how, because I had never told her. I could fly; she was psychic.

"Nicky told me," she said, seeing my confusion. "He said when the tree branch fell, he thought he saw you fly. He said he was so sure he tried to fly himself and that's what happened to his face. We were talking and he was trying to explain how he wound up with false teeth. He said he was crazy back then. He said you both were."

"When did he tell you about his teeth?" I asked. My brother never got over being insecure about his face, his mouth especially, and he didn't like people to know about the teeth.

She shook her head. "I don't remember."

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I turned on the windowsill and put my feet up on her dresser. “Do you want to see what it’s like to fly?”

Her eyes were glassy with disbelief. Her mouth was open in a blank, dazed smile. Then she tilted her head to one side and narrowed her eyes.

“How are you doing it?” she asked. “Really.”

“It’s something about the cape. I don’t know what. Magic, I guess. When I put it on, I can fly. That’s all.”

She touched the corner of one of my eyes, and I remembered the mask I had drawn with lipstick. “What about this stuff on your face? What’s that do?”

“Makes me feel sexy.”

“Holy shit, you’re weird. And I lived with you for two years.” She was laughing, though.

“Do you want to fly?”

I slid the rest of the way into the room, toward her, and hung my legs over the side of the dresser.

“Sit in my lap. I’ll ride you around the room.”

She looked from my lap to my face, her smile sly and distrustful now. A breeze trickled in through the window behind me, stirring the cape. She hugged herself and shivered, then glanced down at herself and noticed she was in her underwear. She shook her head, twisted the towel off her still-damp hair.

“Hold on a minute,” she said.

She went to her closet and folded back the door and dug in a cubby for sweats. While she was looking, there came a pitiful shriek from the television, and my gaze shifted toward the screen. One seal was biting the neck of another, furiously, while his victim wailed. A narrator said dominant males would use all the natural weapons at their disposal to drive off any rival that might challenge them for access to the females of the herd. The blood looked like a splash of cranberry juice on the ice.

Angie had to clear her throat to get my attention again, and when I glanced at her, her mouth was, for a moment, thin and pinched, the corners crimped downward in a look of irritation. It only took a moment sometimes for me to drift away from myself and into some television program, even something I had no interest in at all. I couldn’t help myself. It’s like I’m a negative, and the TV is a positive. Together we make a circuit, and

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nothing outside the circuit matters. It was the same way when I read comics. It's a weakness, I admit, but it darkened my mood to catch her there, judging me.

She tucked a strand of wet hair behind one ear and showed me a quick, elfin grin, tried to pretend she hadn't just been giving me The Look. I leaned back, and she pulled herself up, awkwardly, onto my thighs.

"Why do I think this is some perverted prank to get me in your lap?" she asked. I leaned forward, made ready to push off. She said, "We're going to fall on our a—"

I slipped off the side of the dresser and into the air. I wobbled forward and back and forward again, and she wrapped her arms around my neck and cried out, a happy, laughing, frightened sort of cry.

I'm not particularly strong, but it wasn't like picking her up . . . it was really as if she were sitting on my lap and we were together in an invisible rocking chair. All that had changed was my center of gravity, and now I felt tippy, a canoe with too many people in it.

I floated her around her bed, then up and over it. She screamed-laughed-screamed again.

"This is the craziest—" she said. "Oh my God no one will believe it," she said. "Do you know you're going to be the most famous person in human history?" Then she just stared into my face, her wide eyes shining, the way they used to when I talked about Alaska.

I made as if to fly back to my perch on the dresser, but when I got to it, I just kept going, ducked my head and carried us right out the open window.

"No! What are you doing? Holy Jesus it's cold!" She was squeezing me so tightly around the neck it was hard to breathe.

I rose toward the slash of silver moon.

"Be cold," I said. "Just for a minute. Isn't it worth it—for this? To fly like this? Like you do in dreams?"

"Yes," she said. "Isn't this the most incredible thing?"

"Yes."

She shivered furiously, which set off an interesting vibration in her breasts, under the thin shirt. I kept climbing, toward a

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flotilla of clouds, edged in mercury. I liked the way she clung to me, and I liked the way it felt when she trembled.

“I want to go back,” she said.

“Not yet.”

My shirt was open a little, and she snuggled into it, her icy nose touching my flesh.

“I’ve wanted to talk to you,” she said. “I wanted to call you tonight. I was thinking about you.”

“Who did you call instead?”

“Nobody,” she said, and then realized I had been outside the window listening. “Hannah. You know. From work.”

“Is she studying for something? I heard you ask why she was studying on a Saturday.”

“Let’s go back.”

“Sure.”

She buried her face against my chest again. Her nose grazed my scar, a silver slash like the silver slash of the moon. I was still climbing toward the moon. It didn’t seem so far away. She fingered the old scar.

“It’s unbelievable,” she whispered. “Think how lucky you were. A few inches lower and that branch might’ve gone right through your heart.”

“Who said it didn’t?” I said, and leaned forward and let her go.

She held onto my neck, kicking, and I had to peel her fingers off, one at a time, before she fell.

WHENEVER MY BROTHER and I played superheroes, he always made me be the bad guy.

Someone has to be.

MY BROTHER HAS been telling me I ought to fly down to Boston one of these nights, so we can do some drinking together. I think he wants to share some big-brother advice, tell me I have to pick myself up, have to move on. Maybe he also wants to share some grief. I’m sure he’s in grief too.

One of these nights, I think I will . . . fly on down to see him.

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Show him the cape. See if he'll try it on. See if he wants to take a leap out his fifth-floor window.

He might not want to. Not after what happened last time. He might need some encouragement; a little nudge from little brother.

And who knows? Maybe if he goes out the window in my cape, he will rise instead of fall, float away into the cool, still embrace of the sky.

But I don't think so. It didn't work for him when we were children. Why would it now? Why would it ever?

It's my cape.

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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

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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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