

JOE HILL

Heart-
Shaped
Box

A NOVEL

Sooner or later the dead catch up...

HEART-SHAPED BOX

JOE HILL

 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

For my dad, one of the good ones

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HOW MAY THE DEAD HAVE DESTINATIONS?

—Alan Moore, *Voice of the Fire*

BLACK DOG

Jude had a private collection.

He had framed sketches of the Seven Dwarfs on the wall of his studio, in between his platinum records. John Wayne Gacy had drawn them while he was in jail and sent them to him. Gacy liked golden-age Disney almost as much as he liked molesting little kids; almost as much as he liked Jude's albums.

Jude had the skull of a peasant who had been trepanned in the sixteenth century, to let the demons out. He kept a collection of pens jammed into the hole in the center of the cranium.

He had a three-hundred-year-old confession, signed by a witch. "I did spake with a black dogge who sayd hee wouldst poison cows, drive horses mad and sicken children for me if I wouldst let him have my soule, and I sayd aye, and after did give him sucke at my breast." She was burned to death.

He had a stiff and worn noose that had been used to hang a man in England at the turn of the nineteenth century, Aleister Crowley's childhood chessboard, and a snuff film. Of all the items in Jude's collection, this last was the thing he felt most uncomfortable about possessing. It had come to him by way of a police officer, a man who had worked security at some shows in L.A. The cop had said the video was diseased. He said it with some enthusiasm. Jude had watched it and felt that he was right. It was diseased. It had also, in an indirect way, helped hasten the end of Jude's marriage. Still he held on to it.

Many of the objects in his private collection of the grotesque and the bizarre were gifts sent to him by his fans. It was rare for him to actually buy something for the collection himself. But when Danny Wooten, his personal assistant, told him there was a ghost for sale on the Internet and asked if he wanted to buy it, Jude didn't even need to think. It was like going out to eat, hearing the special, and deciding you wanted it without even looking at the menu. Some impulses required no consideration.

Danny's office occupied a relatively new addition, extending from the northeastern end of Jude's rambling, 110-year-old farmhouse. With its climate control, OfficeMax furniture, and coffee-and-cream industrial carpet, the office was coolly impersonal, nothing at all like the rest of the house. It might have been a dentist's waiting room, if not for the concert posters in stainless-steel frames. One of them showed a jar crammed with staring eyeballs, bloody knots of nerves dangling from the backs of them. That was for the All Eyes On You tour.

No sooner had the addition been built than Jude had come to regret it. He had not wanted to drive

forty minutes from Piecliff to a rented office in Poughkeepsie to see to his business, but that would've probably been preferable to having Danny Wooten right here at the house. Here Danny and Danny's work were too close. When Jude was in the kitchen, he could hear the phones ringing in there, both of the office lines going off at once sometimes, and the sound was maddening to him. He had not recorded an album in years, had hardly worked since Jerome and Dizzy had died (and the band with them), but still the phones rang and rang. He felt crowded by the steady parade of petitioners for his time, and by the never-ending accumulation of legal and professional demands, agreements and contracts, promotions and appearances, the work of Judas Coyne Incorporated, which was never done always ongoing. When he was home, he wanted to be himself, not a trademark.

For the most part, Danny stayed out of the rest of the house. Whatever his flaws, he was protective of Jude's private space. But Danny considered him fair game if Jude strayed into the office—something Jude did, without much pleasure, four or five times a day. Passing through the office was the fastest way to the barn and the dogs. He could've avoided Danny by going out through the front door and walking all the way around the house, but he refused to sneak around his own home just to avoid Danny Wooten.

Besides, it didn't seem possible Danny could always have something to bother him with. But he always did. And if he didn't have anything that demanded immediate attention, he wanted to talk. Danny was from Southern California originally, and there was no end to his talk. He would boast to total strangers about the benefits of wheatgrass, which included making your bowel movements as fragrant as a freshly mowed lawn. He was thirty years old but could talk skateboarding and PlayStation with the pizza-delivery kid like he was fourteen. Danny would get confessional with air-conditioner repairmen, tell them how his sister had OD'd on heroin in her teens and how as a young man he had been the one to find his mother's body after she killed herself. He was impossible to embarrass. He didn't know the meaning of shy.

Jude was coming back inside from feeding Angus and Bon and was halfway across Danny's field of fire—just beginning to think he might make it through the office unscathed—when Danny said, “Hey, Chief, check this out.” Danny opened almost every demand for attention with just this line, a statement Jude had learned to dread and resent, a prelude to half an hour of wasted time, forms to fill out, faxes to look at. Then Danny told him someone was selling a ghost, and Jude forgot all about begrudging him. He walked around the desk so he could look over Danny's shoulder at his computer screen.

Danny had discovered the ghost at an online auction site, not eBay but one of the wannabes. Jude moved his gaze over the item description while Danny read aloud. Danny would've cut his food for him if Jude gave him the chance. He had a streak of subservience that Jude found, frankly, revolting in a man.

“ ‘Buy my stepfather's ghost,’ ” Danny read. “ ‘Six weeks ago my elderly stepfather died, very suddenly. He was staying with us at the time. He had no home of his own and traveled from relative to relative, visiting for a month or two before moving on. Everyone was shocked by his passing, especially my daughter, who was very close to him. No one would've thought. He was active to the end of his life. Never sat in front of the TV. Drank a glass of orange juice every day. Had all his own teeth.’ ”

“This is a fuckin' joke,” Jude said.

“I don’t think so,” Danny said. He went on, “ ‘Two days after his funeral, my little girl saw him sitting in the guest room, which is directly across from her own bedroom. After she saw him, my girl didn’t like to be alone in her room anymore, or even to go upstairs. I told her that her grandfather wouldn’t ever hurt her, but she said she was scared of his eyes. She said they were all black scribbles and they weren’t for seeing anymore. So she has been sleeping with me ever since.

“ ‘At first I thought it was just a scary story she was telling herself, but there is more to it than that. The guest room is cold all the time. I poked around in there and noticed it was worst in the closet where his Sunday suit was hung up. He wanted to be buried in that suit, but when we tried it on him at the funeral home, it didn’t look right. People shrink up a little after they die. The water in them dries up. His best suit was too big for him, so we let the funeral home talk us into buying one of theirs. I don’t know why I listened.

“ ‘The other night I woke up and heard my stepfather walking around overhead. The bed in his room won’t stay made, and the door opens and slams shut at all hours. The cat won’t go upstairs either, and sometimes she sits at the bottom of the steps looking at things I can’t see. She stares awhile, then gives a yowl like her tail got stepped on and runs away.

“ ‘My stepfather was a lifelong spiritualist, and I believe he is only here to teach my daughter that death is not the end. But she is eleven and needs a normal life and to sleep in her own room, not mine. The only thing I can think is to try and find Pop another home, and the world is full of people who want to believe in the afterlife. Well, I have your proof right here.

“ ‘I will “sell” my stepfather’s ghost to the highest bidder. Of course a soul cannot really be sold but I believe he will come to your home and abide with you if you put out the welcome mat. As I said when he died, he was with us temporarily and had no place to call his own, so I am sure he would go where he was wanted. Do not think this is a stunt or a practical joke and that I will take your money and send you nothing. The winning bidder will have something solid to show for their investment. I will send you his Sunday suit. I believe if his spirit is attached to anything, it has to be that.

“ ‘It is a very nice old-fashioned suit made by Great Western Tailoring. It has a fine silver pinstripe,’ blah-blah, ‘satin lining,’ blah-blah...” Danny stopped reading and pointed at the screen. “Check out the measurements, Chief. It’s just your size. High bid is eighty bucks. If you want to own the ghost, looks like he could be yours for a hundred.”

“Let’s buy it,” Jude said.

“Seriously? Put in a bid for a hundred dollars?”

Jude narrowed his eyes, peering at something on the screen, just below the item description, a button that said **YOURS NOW: \$1,000**. And beneath that: *Click to Buy and End Auction Immediately*. He put his finger on it, tapping the glass.

“Let’s just make it a grand and seal the deal,” he said.

Danny rotated in his chair. He grinned and raised his eyebrows. Danny had high, arched, Jack Nicholson eyebrows, which he used to great effect. Maybe he expected an explanation, but Jude wasn’t sure he could’ve explained, even to himself, why it seemed reasonable to pay a thousand

dollars for an old suit that probably wasn't worth a fifth of that. Later he thought it might be good publicity: *Judas Coyne buys a poltergeist*. The fans ate up stories like that. But that was later. Right then, in the moment, he just knew he wanted to be the one who bought the ghost.

Jude started on, thinking he would head upstairs to see if Georgia was dressed yet. He had told her to put on her clothes half an hour ago but expected to find her still in bed. He had the sense she planned to stay there until she got the fight she was looking for. She'd be sitting in her underwear, carefully painting her toenails black. Or she'd have her laptop open, surfing Goth accessories, looking for the perfect stud to poke through her tongue, like she needed any more goddam... And then the thought of surfing the Web caused Jude to hold up, wondering something. He glanced back at Danny.

"How'd you come across that anyway?" he asked, nodding at the computer.

"We got an e-mail about it."

"From who?"

"From the auction site. They sent us an e-mail that said 'We notice you've bought items like this before and thought you'd be interested.'"

"We've bought items like this before?"

"Occult items, I assume."

"I've never bought anything off that site."

"Maybe you did and just don't remember. Maybe I bought something for you."

Jude said, "Fuckin' acid. I had a good memory once. I was in the chess club in junior high."

"You were? That's a hell of a thought."

"What? The idea that I was in the chess club?"

"I guess. It seems so...geeky."

"Yeah. But I used severed fingers for pieces."

Danny laughed—a little too hard, convulsing himself and wiping imaginary tears from the corners of his eyes. The sycophantic little suck-ass.

The suit came early Saturday morning. Jude was up and outside with the dogs.

Angus lunged as soon as the UPS truck ground to a halt, and the leash was yanked out of Jude's hand. Angus leaped against the side of the parked truck, spit flying, paws scuffling furiously against the driver's-side door. The driver remained behind the wheel, peering down at him with the calm but intent expression of a doctor considering a new strain of Ebola through a microscope. Jude caught the leash and pulled on it, harder than he meant to. Angus sprawled on his side in the dirt, then twisted and sprang back up, snarling. By now Bon was in on the act, straining at the end of her leash, which Jude held in his other hand, and yapping with a shrillness that hurt his head.

Because it was too far to haul them all the way back to the barn and their pen, Jude dragged them across the yard and up to the front porch, both of them fighting him the whole time. He shoveled them in through the front door and slammed it behind them. Immediately they set to flinging themselves against it, barking hysterically. The door shuddered as they slammed into it. Fucking dogs.

Jude shuffled back down into the driveway, and reached the UPS truck just as the rear door slid open with a steely clatter. The deliveryman stood inside. He hopped down, holding a long, flat box under his arm.

“Ozzy Osbourne has Pomeranians,” the UPS guy said. “I saw them on TV. Cute little dogs like house cats. You ever think about getting a couple cute little dogs like that?”

Jude took the box without a word and went inside.

He brought the box through the house and into the kitchen. He put it on the counter and poured coffee. Jude was an early riser by instinct and conditioning. When he was on the road, or recording, he had become accustomed to rolling into bed at five in the morning and sleeping through most of the daylight hours, but staying up all night had never come naturally. On the road he would wake at four in the afternoon, bad-tempered and headachy, confused about where the time had gone. Everyone he knew would seem to him clever impostors, unfeeling aliens wearing rubber skin and the faces of friends. It took a liberal quantity of alcohol to make them seem like themselves again.

Only it had been three years since he'd last gone on tour. He didn't have much interest in drinking when he was home, and was ready for bed most nights by nine. At the age of fifty-four, he had settled back into the rhythms that had guided him since his name was Justin Cowzynski and he was a boy on his father's hog farm. The illiterate son of a bitch would have dragged him out of bed b

the hair if he'd found him in it when the sun came up. It was a childhood of mud, barking dogs, barbed wire, dilapidated farm buildings, squealing pigs with their flaking skin and squashed-in faces, and little human contact, beyond a mother who sat most of the day at the kitchen table wearing the slack, staring aspect of someone who had been lobotomized, and his father, who ruled their acres of pig shit and ruin with his angry laughter and his fists.

So Jude had been up for several hours already but had not eaten breakfast yet, and he was frying bacon when Georgia wandered into the kitchen. She was dressed only in a pair of black panties, her arms folded across her small, white, pierced breasts, her black hair floating around her head in a soft, tangly nest. Her name wasn't really Georgia. It wasn't Morphine either, although she had stripped under that name for two years. Her name was Marybeth Kimball, a handle so simple, so plain, she'd laughed when she first told him, as if it embarrassed her.

Jude had worked his way through a collection of Goth girlfriends who stripped, or told fortunes, or stripped *and* told fortunes, pretty girls who wore ankhs and black fingernail polish, and whom he always called by their state of origin, a habit few of them cared for, because they didn't like to be reminded of the person they were trying to erase with all their living-dead makeup. She was twenty-three.

"Goddam stupid dogs," she said, shoving one of them out of her way with her heel. They were whisking around Jude's legs, excited by the perfume of the bacon. "Woke me the fuck up."

"Maybe it was time to get the fuck up. Ever think?" She never rose before ten if she could help it.

She bent into the fridge for the orange juice. He enjoyed the view, the way the straps of her underwear cut into the almost-too-white cheeks of her ass, but he looked away while she drank from the carton. She left it on the counter, too. It would spoil there if he didn't put it away for her.

He was glad for the adoration of the Goths. He appreciated the sex even more, their limber, athletic, tattooed bodies and eagerness for kink. But he had been married once, to a woman who used glass and put things away when she was done, who read the paper in the morning, and he missed their talk. It was grown-up talk. She hadn't been a stripper. She didn't believe in fortune-telling. It was grown-up companionship.

Georgia used a steak knife to slice open the UPS box, then left the knife on the counter, with tape stuck to it.

"What's this?" she asked.

A second box was contained within the first. It was a tight fit, and Georgia had to tug for a while to slide the inner box out onto the counter. It was large, and shiny, and black, and it was shaped like a heart. Candies sometimes came in boxes like that, although this was much too big for candies, and candy boxes were pink or sometimes yellow. A lingerie box, then—except he hadn't ordered anything of the kind for her. He frowned. He didn't have any idea what might be in it and at the same time felt somehow he *should* know, that the heart-shaped box contained something he'd been expecting.

"Is this for me?" she asked.

She pried the lid loose and took out what was inside, lifting it for him to see. A suit. Someone had sent him a suit. It was black and old-fashioned, the details blurred by the plastic dry-cleaning bag pulled over it. Georgia held it up by the shoulders, in front of her body, almost as if it were a dress she was thinking of trying on but she wanted his opinion of it first. Her gaze was questioning, a pretty furrow between her eyebrows. For a moment he didn't remember, didn't know why it had come.

He opened his mouth to tell her he had no clue, but then instead heard himself say, "The dead man's suit."

"What?"

"The ghost," he said, remembering as he spoke. "I bought a ghost. Some woman was convinced her stepfather was haunting her. So she put his restless spirit up for sale on the Internet, and I bought for a grand. That's his suit. She thinks it might be the source of the haunting."

"Oh, cool," Georgia said. "So are you going to wear it?"

His own reaction surprised him. His skin crawled, went rough and strange with gooseflesh. For one unconsidered moment, the idea struck him as obscene.

"No," he said, and she flicked a surprised glance at him, hearing something cold and flat in his voice. Her smirk deepened a little, and he realized he had sounded...well, not frightened but momentarily weak. He added, "It wouldn't fit." Although, in truth, it looked as if the poltergeist had been about his height and weight in life.

Georgia said, "Maybe I'll wear it. I'm a bit of a restless spirit myself. And I look hot in men's clothing."

Again: a sensation of revulsion, a crawling of the skin. She shouldn't put it on. It unsettled him that she would even joke about it, although he couldn't have said why. He wasn't going to let her put on. In that one instant, he could not imagine anything more repellent.

And that was saying something. There wasn't much that Jude found too distasteful to contemplate. He was unused to feeling disgust. The profane didn't trouble him; it had made him a good living for thirty years.

"I'll stick it upstairs until I figure out what to do with it," he said, trying for a dismissive tone—and not quite making it.

She stared at him, interested at this wavering of his usual self-possession, and then she pulled out the plastic dry-cleaning bag. The coat's silver buttons flashed in the light. The suit was somber, as dark as crow feathers, but those buttons, the size of quarters, gave it something of a rustic character. Add a string tie and it was the sort of thing Johnny Cash might've worn onstage.

Angus began to bark, high, shrill, panicked barking. He shoved himself back on his haunches, tail lowered, rearing away from the suit. Georgia laughed.

"It *is* haunted," she said.

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