Heart-Shaped Box

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Extract

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Jude had a private collection.

He had framed sketches of the seven dwarves 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 centre 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 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 LA. 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 onto 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 did he want 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 hundred-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-five 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 do it, 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 he 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 his time. 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 which 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 travelled 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 any more, 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 any more. 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 had a poke 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 a while, then gives a yowl like her tail got stepped on and runs away.

'My stepfather was a lifelong spiritualist and I believe he is here now 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 in mine. The only thing I can think is to try and find "Pop" another home and of course 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 to 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 a ghost, looks like it 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 which 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 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 it.

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 guessed 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 Goddamn— 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 email about it.'

'From who?'

'From the auction site. They sent us an email 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.