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A NOVEL

JOE HILL

"A masterwork of horror." — *TIME*

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A NOVEL

JOE HILL

  
WILLIAM MORROW  
*An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers*

## **DEDICATION**

*To my mom—here's a mean machine for the story queen*

## EPIGRAPH

*Die Todten reiten schnell.*  
(For the dead travel fast.)

—“LENORE,” GOTTFRIED BÜRGER

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**PROLOGUE:  
SEASON'S GREETINGS  
DECEMBER 2008**

## FCI Englewood, Colorado

NURSE THORNTON DROPPED INTO THE LONG-TERM-CARE WARD A little before eight with a hot bag of blood for Charlie Manx.

She was coasting on autopilot, her thoughts not on her work. She had finally made up her mind to buy her son, Josiah, the Nintendo DS he wanted, and was calculating whether she could get to Toys “R” Us after her shift, before they closed.

She had been resisting the impulse for a few weeks, on philosophical grounds. She didn’t really care if all his friends had one. She just didn’t like the idea of those handheld video-game systems that the kids carried with them everywhere. Ellen Thornton resented the way little boys disappeared into the glowing screen, ditching the real world for some province of the imagination where fun replaced thought and inventing creative new kills was an art form. She had fantasized having a child who would love books and play Scrabble and want to go on snowshoeing expeditions with her. What a laugh.

Ellen had held out as long as she could, and then, yesterday afternoon, she had come across Josiah sitting on his bed pretending an old wallet was a Nintendo DS. He had cut out a picture of Donkey Kong and slipped it into the clear plastic sleeve for displaying photographs. He pressed imaginary buttons and made explosion sounds, and her heart had hurt a little, watching him make believe he already had something he was certain he would get on the Big Day. Ellen could have her theories about what was healthy for boys and what wasn’t. That didn’t mean Santa had to share them.

Because she was preoccupied, she didn’t notice what was different about Charlie Manx until she was easing around his cot to reach the IV rack. He happened to sigh heavily just then, as if bored, and she looked down and saw him staring up at her, and she was so startled to see him with his eyes open that she bobbled the sack of blood and almost dumped it on her feet.

He was hideous-old, not to mention hideous. His great bald skull was a globe mapping an alien moon, continents marked by liver spots and bruise-colored sarcomas. Of all the men in the long-term-care ward—a.k.a. the

Vegetable Patch—there was something particularly awful about Charlie Manx with his eyes open at *this* time of year. Manx liked children. He'd made dozens of them disappear back in the nineties. He had a house below the Flatirons where he did what he liked with them and killed them and hung Christmas ornaments in their memory. The papers called the place the Sleigh House. Ho, ho, ho.

For the most part, Ellen could shut off the mother side of her brain while she was at work, could keep her mind away from thoughts of what Charlie Manx had probably done with the little girls and boys who had crossed his path, little girls and boys no older than her Josiah. Ellen didn't muse on what *any* of her charges had done, if she could help it. The patient on the other side of the room had tied up his girlfriend and her two children, set fire to their house, and left them to burn. He was arrested in a bar down the street, drinking Bushmills and watching the White Sox play the Rangers. Ellen didn't see how dwelling on it was ever going to do her any favors, and so she had taught herself to think of her patients as extensions of the machines and drip bags they were hooked up to: meat peripherals.

In all the time she'd been working at FCI Englewood, in the Supermax prison infirmary, she had never seen Charlie Manx with his eyes open. She'd been on staff for three years, and he had been comatose all that time. He was the frailest of her patients, a fragile coat of skin with bones inside. His heart monitor blipped like a metronome set to the slowest possible speed. The doc said he had as much brain activity as a can of creamed corn. No one had ever determined his age, but he looked older than Keith Richards. He even looked a little *like* Keith Richards—a bald Keith with a mouthful of sharp little brown teeth.

There were three other coma patients in the ward, what the staff called "gorks." When you were around them long enough, you learned that all the gorks had their quirks. Don Henry, the man who burned his girl and her kids to death, went for "walks" sometimes. He didn't get up, of course, but his feet pedaled weakly under the sheets. There was a guy named Leonard Potts who'd been in a coma for five years and was never going to wake up—another prisoner had jammed a screwdriver through his skull and into his brain. But sometimes he cleared his throat and would shout "I know!" as if he were a small child who wanted to answer the teacher's question. Maybe opening his eyes was Manx's quirk and she'd just never caught him doing it before.

“Hello, Mr. Manx,” Ellen said automatically. “How are you feeling today?”

She smiled a meaningless smile and hesitated, still holding the sack of body-temperature blood. She didn’t expect a reply but thought it would be considerate to give him a moment to collect his nonexistent thoughts. When he didn’t say anything, she reached forward with one hand to slide his eyelids closed.

He caught her wrist. She screamed—couldn’t help it—and dropped the bag of blood. It hit the floor and exploded in a crimson gush, the hot spray drenching her feet.

“Ugh!” she cried. “Ugh! Ugh! Oh, God!”

It smelled like fresh-poured iron.

“Your boy, Josiah,” Charlie Manx said to her, his voice grating and harsh. “There’s a place for him in Christmasland, with the other children. I could give him a new life. I could give him a nice new smile. I could give him nice new teeth.”

Hearing him say her son’s name was worse than having Manx’s hand on her wrist or blood on her feet. (*Clean blood*, she told herself, *clean*.) Hearing this man, convicted murderer and child molester, speak of her son made her dizzy, genuinely dizzy, as if she were in a glass elevator rushing quickly into the sky, the world dropping away beneath her.

“Let go,” she whispered.

“There’s a place for Josiah John Thornton in Christmasland, and there’s a place for you in the House of Sleep,” Charlie Manx said. “The Gasmask Man would know just what to do with you. Give you the gingerbread smoke and teach you to love him. Can’t bring you with us to Christmasland. Or I *could*, but the Gasmask Man is better. The Gasmask Man is a mercy.”

“Help,” Ellen screamed, except it didn’t come out as a scream. It came out as a whisper. “Help me.” She couldn’t find her voice.

“I’ve seen Josiah in the Graveyard of What Might Be. Josiah should come for a ride in the Wraith. He’d be happy forever in Christmasland. The world can’t ruin him there, because it isn’t *in* the world. It’s in my *head*. They’re all safe in my head. I’ve been dreaming about it, you know. Christmasland. I’ve been dreaming about it, but I walk and walk and I can’t get to the end of the tunnel. I hear the children singing, but I can’t get to them. I hear them shouting for me, but the tunnel doesn’t end. I need the Wraith. Need my ride.”

His tongue slipped out of his mouth, brown and glistening and obscene, and wet his dry lips, and he let her go.

“Help,” she whispered. “Help. Help. Help.” She had to say it another time or two before she could say it loud enough for anyone to hear her. Then she was batting through the doors into the hall, running in her soft flat shoes, screaming for all she was worth. Leaving bright red footprints behind her.

Ten minutes later a pair of officers in riot gear had strapped Manx down to his cot, just in case he opened his eyes and tried to get up. But the doctor who eventually arrived to examine him said to unlash him.

“This guy has been in a bed since 2001. He has to be turned four times a day to keep from getting sores. Even if he wasn’t a gork, he’s too weak to go anywhere. After seven years of muscle atrophy, I doubt he could sit up on his own.”

Ellen was listening from over next to the doors—if Manx opened his eyes again, she planned to be the first one out of the room—but when the doctor said that, she walked across the floor on stiff legs and pulled her sleeve back from her right wrist to show the bruises where Manx had grabbed her.

“Does that look like something done by a guy too weak to sit up? I thought he was going to yank my arm out of the socket.” Her feet stung almost as badly as her bruised wrist. She had stripped off her blood-soaked pantyhose and gone at her feet with scalding water and antibiotic soap until they were raw. She was in her gym sneakers now. The other shoes were in the garbage. Even if they could be saved, she didn’t think she’d ever be able to put them on again.

The doctor, a young Indian named Patel, gave her an abashed, apologetic look and bent to shine a flashlight in Manx’s eyes. His pupils did not dilate. Patel moved the flashlight back and forth, but Manx’s eyes remained fixed on a point just beyond Patel’s left ear. The doctor clapped his hands an inch from Manx’s nose. Manx did not blink. Patel gently closed Manx’s eyes and examined the reading from the EKG they were running.

“There’s nothing here that’s any different from any of the last dozen EKG readings,” Patel said. “Patient scores a nine on the Glasgow scale, shows slow alpha-wave activity consistent with alpha coma. I think he was just talking in his sleep, Nurse. It even happens to gorks like this guy.”

“His eyes were *open*,” she said. “He looked right at me. He knew my name. He knew my son’s name.”

Patel said, “Ever had a conversation around him with one of the other nurses? No telling what the guy might’ve unconsciously picked up. You tell another nurse, ‘Oh, hey, my son just won the spelling bee.’ Manx hears it and regurgitates it mid-dream.”

She nodded, but a part of her was thinking, *He knew Josiah’s middle name*, something she was sure she had never mentioned to anyone here in the hospital. *There’s a place for Josiah John Thornton in Christmasland*, Charlie Manx had said to her, *and there’s a place for you in the House of Sleep*.

“I never got his blood in,” she said. “He’s been anemic for a couple weeks. Picked up a urinary-tract infection from his catheter. I’ll go get a fresh pack.”

“Never mind that. I’ll get the old vampire his blood. Look. You’ve had a nasty little scare. Put it behind you. Go home. You only have, what? An hour left on your shift? Take it. Take tomorrow, too. Got some last-minute shopping to finish? Go do it. Stop thinking about this and relax. It’s Christmas, Nurse Thornton,” the doctor said, and winked at her. “Don’t you know it’s the most wonderful time of the year?”

**SHORTER WAY**  
**1986–1989**

## Haverhill, Massachusetts

THE BRAT WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD THE FIRST TIME SHE RODE OVER THE covered bridge that crossed the distance between Lost and Found.

It happened like this: They were only just back from The Lake, and the Brat was in her bedroom, putting up a poster of David Hasselhoff—black leather jacket, grinning in that way that made dimples in his cheeks, standing with his arms crossed in front of K.I.T.T.—when she heard a sobbing cry of shock in her parents’ bedroom.

The Brat had one foot up on the headboard of her bed and was holding the poster to the wall with her chest while she pinned down the corners with brown tape. She froze, tilted her head to listen, not with any alarm, just wondering what her mother was worked up about now. It sounded like she had lost something.

“—had it, I know I had it!” she cried.

“You think you took it off down by the water? Before you went in the lake?” asked Chris McQueen. “Yesterday afternoon?”

“I told you already I didn’t go swimming.”

“But maybe you took it off when you put on suntan lotion.”

They continued to go back and forth along these lines, but the Brat decided for the time being that she could tune them out. At the age of eight, the Brat—Victoria to her second-grade teacher, Vicki to her mother, but the Brat to her father and in her heart—was well beyond being alarmed by her mother’s outbursts. Linda McQueen’s gales of laughter and overwrought cries of disappointment were the soundtrack of the Brat’s everyday life and were only occasionally worth noticing.

She smoothed the poster flat, finished taping it, and stepped back to admire it. David Hasselhoff; so cool. She was frowning, trying to decide if it was crooked, when she heard a door slam and another anguished cry—her mother again—and then her father’s voice.

“Didn’t I know we were headed here?” he said. “Right on cue.”

“I asked if you checked the bathroom, and you said you did. You said you had *everything*. Did you check the bathroom or not?”



“I don’t know. No. Probably not. But it doesn’t matter ’cause you didn’t leave it in the bathroom, Linda. Do you know *why* I know you didn’t leave your bracelet in the bathroom? Because you left it on the *beach* yesterday. You and Regina Roeson had yourselves a bunch of sun and a bucketful of margaritas, and you got so relaxed you kind of forgot you had a daughter and dozed off. And then when you woke up and you realized you were going to be an hour late to pick her up from day camp—”

“I was *not* an hour late.”

“—you left in a panic. You forgot the suntan lotion, and you forgot your towel, and you forgot your bracelet, too, and now—”

“And I wasn’t drunk either, if that’s what you’re implying. I don’t drive our daughter drunk, Chris. That’s your specialty—”

“—and now you’re pulling your usual shit and making it someone else’s fault.”

The Brat was hardly aware she was moving, wandering into the dim front hall and toward her parents’ bedroom. The door was open about half a foot, revealing a slice of her parents’ bed and the suitcase lying on top of it. Clothes had been pulled out and scattered across the floor. The Brat knew that her mother had, in a spasm of strong feeling, started yanking things out and throwing them, looking for the lost bracelet: a golden hoop with a butterfly mounted upon it, made from glittering blue sapphires and ice-chip diamonds.

Her mother paced back and forth, so every few seconds she flicked into view, passing through the sliver that the Brat could see of the bedroom.

“This has nothing to do with yesterday. I told you I didn’t lose it at the beach. I *didn’t*. It was next to the sink this morning, right beside my earrings. If they don’t have it at the front desk, then one of the maids took it. That’s what they do, the way they supplement their incomes. They help themselves to whatever the summer people leave around.”

The Brat’s father was silent for a while, and then he said, “Jesus. What an ugly fuckin’ person you are inside. And I had a kid with you.”

The Brat flinched. A prickling heat rose to the backs of her eyes, but she did not cry. Her teeth automatically went to her lip, sinking deep into it, producing a sharp twinge of pain that kept the tears at bay.

Her mother showed no such restraint and began to weep. She wandered into sight again, one hand pressed over her face, her shoulders hitching. The Brat didn’t want to be seen and retreated down the hallway.

She continued past her room, along the corridor, and out the front door. The thought of remaining indoors was suddenly intolerable. The air in the house was stale. The air conditioner had been off for a week. All the plants were dead and smelled it.

She didn't know where she was going until she got there, although from the moment she heard her father dish out his worst—*What an ugly fuckin' person you are inside*—her destination was inevitable. She let herself through the side door of the garage and got her Raleigh.

Her Raleigh Tuff Burner had been her birthday gift in May and was also, quite simply, her favorite birthday gift of all time . . . then and forever. Even at thirty, if her own son asked her the nicest thing she had ever been given, she would think immediately of the Day-Glo blue Raleigh Tuff Burner with banana yellow rims and fat tires. It was her favorite thing she owned, better than her Magic 8 Ball, her KISS Colorforms set, even her ColecoVision.

She had spotted it in the window of Pro Wheelz downtown, three weeks before her birthday, when she was out with her father, and gave a big *ooh* at the sight. Her father, amused, walked her inside and talked the dealer into letting her ride it around the showroom. The salesman had strongly encouraged her to look at other bikes, felt that the Tuff Burner was too big for her, even with the seat dropped to its lowest position. She didn't know what the guy was talking about. It was like witchcraft; she could've been riding a broom, slicing effortlessly through Halloween darkness, a thousand feet off the ground. Her father had pretended to agree with the shopkeeper, though, and told Vic she could have something like it when she was older.

Three weeks later it was in the driveway, with a big silver bow stuck on the handlebars. "You're older now, ain'tcha?" her father said, and winked.

She slipped into the garage, where the Tuff Burner leaned against the wall to the left of her father's bike—not a bicycle but a black 1979 Harley-Davidson shovelhead, what he still rode to work in the summer. Her father was a blaster, had a job on a road crew shearing apart ledge with high explosives, ANFO mostly, sometimes straight TNT. He had told Vic once that it took a clever man to figure out a way to make a profit off his bad habits. When she asked him what he meant, he said most guys who liked to set off bombs wound up in pieces or doing time. In his case it earned him sixty grand a year and was good for even more if he ever managed to frag himself; he had a hell of an insurance package. His pinkie alone was worth

twenty thou if he blew it off. His motorcycle had an airbrushed painting of a comically sexy blonde in an American-flag bikini straddling a bomb, against a backdrop of flame. Vic's father was badass. Other dads built things. Hers blew shit up and rode away on a Harley, smoking the cigarette he used to light the fuse. Top that.

The Brat had permission to ride her Raleigh on the trails in the Pittman Street Woods, the unofficial name of a thirty-acre strip of scrub pine and birch that lay just beyond their backyard. She was allowed to go as far as the Merrimack River and the covered bridge before she had to turn back.

The woods continued on the other side of that covered bridge—also known as the Shorter Way Bridge—but Vic had been forbidden to cross it. The Shorter Way was seventy years old, three hundred feet long, and beginning to sag in the middle. Its walls sloped downriver, and it looked like it would collapse in a strong wind. A chain-link fence barred entrance, although kids had peeled the steel wire up at one corner and gone in there to smoke bud and make out. The tin sign on the fence said DECLARED UNSAFE BY ORDER OF HAVERHILL PD. It was a place for delinquents, derelicts, and the deranged.

She had been in there, of course (no comment on which category she belonged to), never mind her father's threats, or the UNSAFE sign. She had dared herself to slip under the fence and walk ten steps, and the Brat had never been able to back down on a dare, even one she made to herself. *Especially* on the dares she made to herself.

It was five degrees cooler in there, and there were gaps between the floorboards that looked down a hundred feet, toward the wind-roughened water. Holes in the black tar-paper roof let in dust-filled shafts of golden light. Bats peeped shrilly in the dark.

It had made Vic's breath quicken, to walk out into the long, shadowed tunnel that bridged not just a river but death itself. She was eight, and she believed she was faster than anything, even a bridge collapse. But she believed it a little less when she was actually taking baby steps across the old, worn, creaky planks. She had made not just ten steps but *twenty*. At the first loud pop, though, she rabbited, scrambled back and out under the chain-link fence, feeling as if she were half choking on her own heart.

Now she pointed her bike across the backyard and in another moment was rattling downhill, over root and rock, into the forest. She plunged away

from her house and straight into one of her patented make-believe *Knight Rider* stories.

She was in the Knight 2000, and they were riding, soaring effortlessly along beneath the trees as the summer day deepened into lemony twilight. They were on a mission to retrieve a microchip, containing the secret location of every single one of America's missile silos. It was hidden in her mother's bracelet; the chip was a part of the gemstone butterfly, cleverly disguised as a diamond. Mercenaries had it and planned to auction the information to the highest bidder: Iran, the Russians, maybe Canada. Vic and Michael Knight were approaching their hideout by a back road. Michael wanted Vic to promise him she wouldn't take unnecessary chances, wouldn't be a stupid kid, and she scoffed at him and rolled her eyes, but they both understood, owing to the exigencies of the plot, that at some point she would have to act like a stupid kid, endangering both of their lives and forcing them to take desperate maneuvers to escape the bad guys.

Only this narrative wasn't entirely satisfying. For starters, she clearly *wasn't* in a car. She was on a bike, thumping over roots, pedaling fast, fast enough to keep off the mosquitoes. Also, she couldn't relax and let herself daydream the way she usually could. She kept thinking, *Jesus. What an ugly fuckin' person you are inside.* She had a sudden, stomach-twisting thought that when she got home, her father would be gone. The Brat lowered her head and pedaled faster, the only way to leave such a terrible idea behind.

She was on the bike, was her next thought—not the Tuff Burner but her father's Harley. Her arms were around him, and she was wearing the helmet he had bought for her, the black full-head helmet that made her feel like she was half dressed in a space suit. They were heading back to Lake Winnepesaukee, to get her mother's bracelet; they were going to surprise her with it. Her mother would shout when she saw it in her father's hand, and her father would laugh, and hook an arm around Linda McQueen's waist, and kiss her cheek, and they wouldn't be mad at each other anymore.

The Brat glided through flickering sunlight, beneath the overhanging boughs. She was close enough to 495 to hear it: the grinding roar of an eighteen-wheeler downshifting, the hum of the cars, and yes, even the rumbling blast of a motorcycle making its way south.

When she shut her eyes, she was on the highway herself, making good time, enjoying the feeling of weightlessness as the bike tilted into the