

Volume 3 of
THE GREEN MILE

STEPHEN KING

**COFFEY'S
HANDS**



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VOLUME III

COFFEY'S
HANDS



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LOOKING BACK through what I've written, I see that I called Georgia Pines, where I now live, a nursing home. The folks who run the place wouldn't be very happy with that! According to the brochures they keep in the lobby and send out to prospective clients, it's a "state-of-the-art retirement complex for the elderly." It even has a Resource Center—the brochure says so. The folks who have to live here (the brochure doesn't call us "inmates," but sometimes I do) just call it the TV room.

Folks think I'm stand-offy because I don't go down to the TV room much in the day, but it's the programs I can't stand, not the folks. Oprah, Ricki Lake, Carnie Wilson, Rolanda—the world is falling down around our ears, and all these people care for is talking about fucking to women in short skirts and men with their shirts hanging open. Well, hell—judge not, lest ye be judged, the Bible says, so I'll get down off my soapbox. It's just that if I wanted to spend time with trailer trash, I'd move two miles down to the Happy Wheels Motor Court, where the police cars always seem to be headed on Friday and Saturday nights with their sirens screaming and their blue lights flashing. My special friend, Elaine Connelly, feels the same way. Elaine is eighty, tall and slim, still erect and clear-eyed, very intelligent and refined. She walks very slowly because there's something wrong with her hips, and I know that the arthritis in her hands gives her terrible misery, but she has a beautiful long neck—a swan neck, almost—and long, pretty hair that falls to her shoulders when she lets it down.

Best of all, she doesn't think I'm peculiar, or stand-offy. We spend a lot of time together, Elaine and I. If I hadn't reached such a grotesque age, I suppose I might speak of her as my ladyfriend. Still, having a special friend—just that

—is not so bad, and in some ways, it's even better. A lot of the problems and heartaches that go with being boyfriend and girlfriend have simply burned out of us. And although I know that no one under the age of, say, fifty would believe this, sometimes the embers are better than the campfire. It's strange, but it's true.

So I don't watch TV during the day. Sometimes I walk; sometimes I read; mostly what I've been doing for the last month or so is writing this memoir among the plants in the solarium. I think there's more oxygen in that room, and it helps the old memory. It beats the hell out of Geraldo Rivera, I can tell you that.

But when I can't sleep, I sometimes creep downstairs and put on the television. There's no Home Box Office or anything at Georgia Pines—I guess that's a resource just a wee bit too expensive for our Resource Center—but we have the basic cable services, and that means we have the American Movie Channel. That's the one (just in case you don't have the basic cable services yourself) where most of the films are in black and white and none of the women take their clothes off. For an old fart like me, that's sort of soothing. There have been a good many nights when I've slipped right off to sleep on the ugly green sofa in front of the TV while Francis the Talking Mule once more pulls Donald O'Connor's skillet out of the fire, or John Wayne cleans up Dodge, or Jimmy Cagney calls someone a dirty rat and then pulls a gun. Some of them are movies I saw with my wife, Janice (not just my ladyfriend but my *best* friend), and they calm me. The clothes they wear, the way they walk and talk, even the music on the soundtrack—all those things calm me. They remind me, I suppose, of when I was a man still walking on the skin of the world, instead of a moth-eaten relic mouldering away in an old folks' home where many of the residents wear diapers and rubber pants.

There was nothing soothing about what I saw this morning, though. Nothing at all.

Elaine sometimes joins me for AMC's so-called Early Bird Matinee, which starts at 4:00 a.m.—she doesn't say much about it, but I know her arthritis hurts her something terrible, and that the drugs they give her don't help much anymore.

When she came in this morning, gliding like a ghost in her white terrycloth robe, she found me sitting on the lumpy sofa, bent over the scrawny sticks that used to be legs, and clutching my knees to try and still the shakes that were running through me like a high wind. I felt cold all over, except for my groin, which seemed to burn with the ghost of the urinary infection which had so troubled my life in the fall of 1932—the fall of John Coffey, Percy Wetmore, and Mr. Jingles, the trained mouse.

The fall of William Wharton, it had been, too.

“Paul!” Elaine cried, and hurried over to me—hurried as fast as the rusty nails and ground glass in her hips would allow, anyway. “Paul, what’s wrong?”

“I’ll be all right,” I said, but the words didn’t sound very convincing—they came out all uneven, through teeth that wanted to chatter. “Just give me a minute or two, I’ll be right as rain.”

She sat next to me and put her arm around my shoulders. “I’m sure,” she said. “But what happened? For heaven’s sake, Paul, you look like you saw a ghost.”

I did, I thought, and didn’t realize until her eyes widened that I’d said it out loud.

“Not really,” I said, and patted her hand (gently—so gently!). “But for a minute, Elaine—God!”

“Was it from the time when you were a guard at the prison?” she asked. “The time that you’ve been writing about in the solarium?”

I nodded. “I worked on our version of Death Row—”

“I know—”

“Only we called it the Green Mile. Because of the linoleum on the floor. In the fall of ’32, we got this fellow—we got this *wildman*—named William Wharton. Liked to think of himself as Billy the Kid, even had it tattooed on his arm. Just a kid, but dangerous. I can still remember what Curtis Anderson—he was the assistant warden back in those days—wrote about him. ‘Crazy-wild and proud of it. Wharton is nineteen years old, and *he just doesn’t care.*’ He’d underlined that part.”

The hand which had gone around my shoulders was now rubbing my back. I was beginning to calm. In that moment I loved Elaine Connelly, and could have kissed her all over her face as I told her so. Maybe I should have. It’s

terrible to be alone and frightened at any age, but I think it's worse when you're old. But I had this other thing on my mind, this load of old and still unfinished business.

"Anyway," I said, "you're right—I've been scribbling about how Wharton came on the block and almost killed Dean Stanton—one of the guys I worked with back then—when he did."

"How could he do that?" Elaine asked.

"Meanness and carelessness," I said grimly. "Wharton supplied the meanness, and the guards who brought him in supplied the carelessness. The real mistake was Wharton's wrist-chain—it was a little too long. When Dean unlocked the door to E Block, Wharton was behind him. There were guards on either side of him, but Anderson was right—Wild Billy just didn't care about such things. He dropped that wrist-chain down over Dean's head and started choking him with it."

Elaine shuddered.

"Anyway, I got thinking about all that and couldn't sleep, so I came down here. I turned on AMC, thinking you might come down and we'd have us a little date—"

She laughed and kissed my forehead just above the eyebrow. It used to make me prickle all over when Janice did that, and it still made me prickle all over when Elaine did it early this morning. I guess some things don't ever change.

"—and what came on was this old black-and-white gangster movie from the forties. *Kiss of Death*, it's called."

I could feel myself wanting to start shaking again and tried to suppress it.

"Richard Widmark's in it," I said. "It was his first big part, I think. I never went to see it with Jan—we gave the cops and robbers a miss, usually—but I remember reading somewhere that Widmark gave one hell of a performance as the punk. He sure did. He's pale . . . doesn't seem to walk so much as go *gliding* around . . . he's always calling people 'squirt' . . . talking about squealers . . . how much he hates the squealers . . ."

I was starting to shiver again in spite of my best efforts. I just couldn't help it.

"Blond hair," I whispered. "Lank blond hair. I watched until the part where he pushed this old woman in a wheelchair down a flight of stairs, then I turned

it off.”

“He reminded you of Wharton?”

“He *was* Wharton,” I said. “To the life.”

“Paul—” she began, and stopped. She looked at the blank screen of the TV (the cable box on top of it was still on, the red numerals still showing 10, the number of the AMC channel), then back at me.

“What?” I asked. “What, Elaine?” Thinking, *She’s going to tell me I ought to quit writing about it. That I ought to tear up the pages I’ve written so far and just quit on it.*

What she said was “Don’t let this stop you.”

I gawped at her.

“Close your mouth, Paul—you’ll catch a fly.”

“Sorry. It’s just that . . . well . . .”

“You thought I was going to tell you just the opposite, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

She took my hands in hers (gently, so gently—her long and beautiful fingers, her bunched and ugly knuckles) and leaned forward, fixing my blue eyes with her hazel ones, the left slightly dimmed by the mist of a coalescing cataract. “I may be too old and brittle to live,” she said, “but I’m not too old to think. What’s a few sleepless nights at our age? What’s seeing a ghost on the TV, for that matter? Are you going to tell me it’s the only one you’ve ever seen?”

I thought about Warden Moores, and Harry Terwilliger, and Brutus Howell; I thought about my mother, and about Jan, my wife, who died in Alabama. I knew about ghosts, all right.

“No,” I said. “It wasn’t the first ghost I’ve ever seen. But Elaine—it *was* a shock. Because it was *him*.”

She kissed me again, then stood up, wincing as she did so and pressing the heels of her hands to the tops of her hips, as if she were afraid they might actually explode out through her skin if she wasn’t very careful.

“I think I’ve changed my mind about the television,” she said. “I’ve got an extra pill that I’ve been keeping for a rainy day . . . or night. I think I’ll take it and go back to bed. Maybe you should do the same.”

“Yes,” I said. “I suppose I should.” For one wild moment I thought of suggesting that we go back to bed together, and then I saw the dull pain in her eyes and thought better of it. Because she might have said yes, and she would only have said that for me. Not so good.

We left the TV room (I won’t dignify it with that other name, not even to be ironic) side by side, me matching my steps to hers, which were slow and painfully careful. The building was quiet except for someone moaning in the grip of a bad dream behind some closed door.

“Will you be able to sleep, do you think?” she asked.

“Yes, I think so,” I said, but of course I wasn’t able to; I lay in my bed until sunup, thinking about *Kiss of Death*. I’d see Richard Widmark, giggling madly, tying the old lady into her wheelchair and then pushing her down the stairs—“This is what we do to squealers,” he told her—and then his face would merge into the face of William Wharton as he’d looked on the day when he came to E Block and the Green Mile—Wharton giggling like Widmark, Wharton screaming, *Ain’t this a party, now? Is it, or what?* I didn’t bother with breakfast, not after that; I just came down here to the solarium and began to write.

Ghosts? Sure.

I know all about ghosts.