

Volume 5 of
THE GREEN MILE

STEPHEN KING

NIGHT JOURNEY



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THE GREEN MILE

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KING**

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VOLUME V

NIGHT
JOURNEY



1

MR. H. G. WELLS once wrote a story about a man who invented a time machine, and I have discovered that, in the writing of these memoirs, I have created my own time machine. Unlike Wells's, it can only travel into the past—back to 1932, as a matter of fact, when I was the bull-goose screw in E Block of Cold Mountain State Penitentiary—but it's eerily efficient, for all that. Still, this time machine reminds me of the old Ford I had in those days: you could be sure that it would start eventually, but you never knew if a turn of the key would be enough to fire the motor, or if you were going to have to get out and crank until your arm practically fell off.

I've had a lot of easy starts since I started telling the story of John Coffey, but yesterday I had to crank. I think it was because I'd gotten to Delacroix's execution, and part of my mind didn't want to have to relive that. It was a bad death, a *terrible* death, and it happened the way it did because of Percy Wetmore, a young man who loved to comb his hair but couldn't stand to be laughed at—not even by a half-bald little Frenchman who was never going to see another Christmas.

As with most dirty jobs, however, the hardest part is just getting started. It doesn't matter to an engine whether you use the key or have to crank; once you get it going, it'll usually run just as sweet either way. That's how it worked for me yesterday. At first the words came in little bursts of phrasing, then in whole sentences, then in a torrent. Writing is a special and rather terrifying form of remembrance, I've discovered—there is a totality to it that seems almost like rape. Perhaps I only feel that way because I've become a very old man (a thing that happened behind my own back, I sometimes feel), but I don't think so. I believe that the combination of pencil and memory creates a kind of practical

magic, and magic is dangerous. As a man who knew John Coffey and saw what he could do—to mice and to men—I feel very qualified to say that.

Magic is dangerous.

In any case, I wrote all day yesterday, the words simply flooding out of me, the sunroom of this glorified old folks' home gone, replaced by the storage room at the end of the Green Mile where so many of my problem children took their last sit-me-downs, and the bottom of the stairs which led to the tunnel under the road. That was where Dean and Harry and Brutal and I confronted Percy Wetmore over Eduard Delacroix's smoking body and made Percy renew his promise to put in for transfer to the Briar Ridge state mental facility.

There are always fresh flowers in the sunroom, but by noon yesterday all I could smell was the noxious aroma of the dead man's cooked flesh. The sound of the power mower on the lawn down below had been replaced by the hollow plink of dripping water as it seeped slowly through the tunnel's curved roof. The trip was on. I had travelled back to 1932, in soul and mind, if not body.

I skipped lunch, wrote until four o'clock or so, and when I finally put my pencil down, my hand was aching. I walked slowly down to the end of the second-floor corridor. There's a window there that looks out on the employee parking lot. Brad Dolan, the orderly who reminds me of Percy—and the one who is altogether too curious about where I go and what I do on my walks—drives an old Chevrolet with a bumper sticker that says I HAVE SEEN GOD AND HIS NAME IS NEWT. It was gone; Brad's shift was over and he'd taken himself off to whatever garden spot he calls home. I envision an Airstream trailer with *Hustler* gatefolds Scotch-taped to the walls and Dixie Beer cans in the corners.

I went out through the kitchen, where dinner preparations were getting started. "What you got in that bag, Mr. Edgecombe?" Norton asked me.

"It's an empty bottle," I said. "I've discovered the Fountain of Youth down there in the woods. I pop down every afternoon about this time and draw a little. I drink it at bedtime. Good stuff, I can tell you."

"May be keepin you young," said George, the other cook, "but it ain't doin *shit* for your looks."

We all had a laugh at that, and I went out. I found myself looking around for Dolan even though his car was gone, called myself a chump for letting him

get so far under my skin, and crossed the croquet course. Beyond it is a scraggy little putting green that looks ever so much nicer in the Georgia Pines brochures, and beyond that is a path that winds into the little copse of woods east of the nursing home. There are a couple of old sheds along this path, neither of them used for anything these days. At the second, which stands close to the high stone wall between the Georgia Pines grounds and Georgia Highway 47, I went in and stayed for a little while.

I ate a good dinner that night, watched a little TV, and went to bed early. On many nights I'll wake up and creep back down to the TV room, where I watch old movies on the American Movie Channel. Not last night, though; last night I slept like a stone, and with none of the dreams that have so haunted me since I started my adventures in literature. All that writing must have worn me out; I'm not as young as I used to be, you know.

When I woke and saw that the patch of sun which usually lies on the floor at six in the morning had made it all the way up to the foot of my bed, I hit the deck in a hurry, so alarmed I hardly noticed the arthritic flare of pain in my hips and knees and ankles. I dressed as fast as I could, then hurried down the hall to the window that overlooks the employees' parking lot, hoping the slot where Dolan parks his old Chevrolet would still be empty. Sometimes he's as much as half an hour late—

No such luck. The car was there, gleaming rustily in the morning sun. Because Mr. Brad Dolan has something to arrive on time for these days, doesn't he? Yes. Old Paulie Edgecombe goes somewhere in the early mornings, old Paulie Edgecombe is up to something, and Mr. Brad Dolan intends to find out what it is. *What do you do down there, Paulie? Tell me.* He would likely be watching for me already. It would be smart to stay right where I was . . . except I couldn't.

"Paul?"

I turned around so fast I almost fell down. It was my friend Elaine Connelly. Her eyes widened and she put out her hands, as if to catch me. Lucky for her I caught my balance; Elaine's arthritis is terrible, and I probably would have broken her in two like a dry stick if I'd fallen into her arms. Romance doesn't die when you pass into the strange country that lies beyond eighty, but you can forget the *Gone with the Wind* crap.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"That's all right," I said, and gave her a feeble smile. "It's a better wake-up than a faceful of cold water. I should hire you to do it every morning."

"You were looking for his car, weren't you? Dolan's car."

There was no sense kidding her about it, so I nodded. "I wish I could be sure he's over in the west wing. I'd like to slip out for a little while, but I don't want him to see me."

She smiled—a ghost of the teasing imp's smile she must have had as a girl. "Nosy bastard, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"He's not in the west wing, either. I've already been down to breakfast, sleepyhead, and I can tell you where he is, because I peeked. He's in the kitchen."

I looked at her, dismayed. I had known Dolan was curious, but not how curious.

"Can you put your morning walk off?" Elaine asked.

I thought about it. "*I could*, I suppose, but . . ."

"You shouldn't."

"No. I shouldn't."

Now, I thought, *she'll ask me where I go, what I have to do down in those woods that's so damned important.*

But she didn't. Instead she gave me that imp's smile again. It looked strange and absolutely wonderful on her too-gaunt, pain-haunted face. "Do you know Mr. Howland?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, although I didn't see him much; he was in the west wing, which at Georgia Pines was almost like a neighboring country. "Why?"

"Do you know what's special about him?"

I shook my head.

"Mr. Howland," Elaine said, smiling more widely than ever, "is one of only five residents left at Georgia Pines who have permission to smoke. That's because he was a resident before the rules changed."

A grandfather clause, I thought. And what place was more fitted for one than an old-age home?

She reached into the pocket of her blue-and-white-striped dress and pulled two items partway out: a cigarette and a book of matches. “Thief of green, thief of red,” she sang in a lilting, funny voice. “Little Ellie’s going to wet the bed.”

“Elaine, what—”

“Walk an old girl downstairs,” she said, putting the cigarette and matches back into her pocket and taking my arm in one of her gnarled hands. We began to walk back down the hall. As we did, I decided to give up and put myself in her hands. She was old and brittle, but not stupid.

As we went down, walking with the glassy care of the relics we have now become, Elaine said: “Wait at the foot. I’m going over to the west wing, to the hall toilet there. You know the one I mean, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. “The one just outside the spa. But why?”

“I haven’t had a cigarette in over fifteen years,” she said, “but I feel like one this morning. I don’t know how many puffs it’ll take to set off the smoke detector in there, but I intend to find out.”

I looked at her with dawning admiration, thinking how much she reminded me of my wife—Jan might have done exactly the same thing. Elaine looked back at me, smiling her saucy imp’s smile. I cupped my hand around the back of her lovely long neck, drew her face to mine, and kissed her mouth lightly. “I love you, Ellie,” I said.

“Oooh, such big talk,” she said, but I could tell she was pleased.

“What about Chuck Howland?” I asked. “Is he going to get in trouble?”

“No, because he’s in the TV room, watching *Good Morning America* with about two dozen other folks. And I’m going to make myself scarce as soon as the smoke detector turns on the west-wing fire alarm.”

“Don’t you fall down and hurt yourself, woman. I’d never forgive myself if —”

“Oh, stop your fussing,” she said, and this time *she* kissed *me*. Love among the ruins. It probably sounds funny to some of you and grotesque to the rest of you, but I’ll tell you something, my friend: weird love’s better than no love at all.

I watched her walk away, moving slowly and stiffly (but she will only use a cane on wet days, and only then if the pain is terrible; it’s one of her vanities), and waited. Five minutes went by, then ten, and just as I was deciding she had