

THE SERIAL THRILLER CONTINUES...

THE GREEN MILE 2

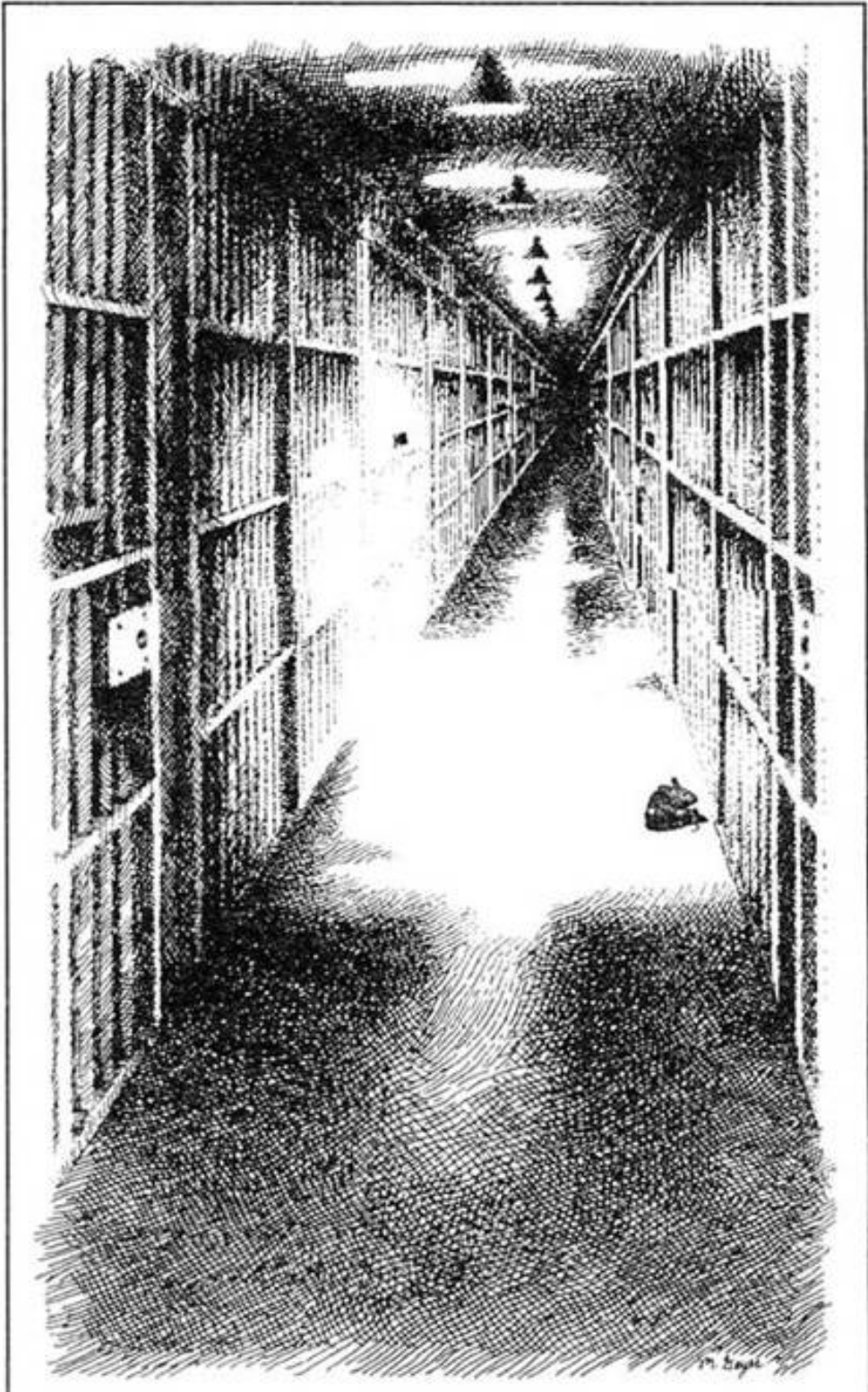
STEPHEN KING



THE MOUSE ON THE MILE



The Mouse On the Mile



Contents

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

1

The nursing home where I am crossing my last bunch of t's and dotting my last mess of i's is called Georgia Pines. It's about sixty miles from Atlanta and about two hundred light-years from life as most people — people under the age of eighty, let's say — live it. You who are reading this want to be careful that there isn't a place like it waiting in your future. It's not a cruel place, not for the most part; there's cable TV, the food's good (although there's damned little a man can chew), but in its way, it's as much of a killing bottle as E Block at Cold Mountain ever was.

There's even a fellow here who reminds me a little of Percy Wetmore, who got his job on the Green Mile because he was related to the governor of the state. I doubt if this fellow is related to anyone important, even though he acts that way. Brad Dolan, his name is. He's always combing his hair, like Percy was, and he's always got something to read stuffed into his back pocket. With Percy it was magazines like *Argosy* and *Men's Adventure*; with Brad it's these little paperbacks called *Gross Jokes* and *Sick Jokes*. He's always asking people why the Frenchman crossed the road or how many Polacks it takes to screw in a lightbulb or how many pallbearers there are at a Harlem funeral. Like Percy, Brad is a dimwit who thinks nothing is funny unless it's mean.

Something Brad said the other day struck me as actually smart, but I don't give him a lot of credit for it; even a stopped clock is right twice a day, the proverb has it. "You're just lucky you don't have that Alzheimer's disease, Paulie," was what he said. I hate him calling me that, Paulie, but he goes on doing it, anyway; I've given up asking him to quit. There are other sayings — not quite proverbs — that apply to Brad Dolan: "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink" is one; "You can dress him up but you can't take him out" is another. In his thickheadedness he is also like Percy.

When he made his comment about Alzheimer's, he was mopping the floor of the solarium, where I had been going over the pages I have already written. There's a great lot of them, and I think there's apt to be a great lot

more before I am through. 'That Alzheimer's, do you know what it really is?'

'No,' I said, — but I'm sure you'll tell me, Brad.'

'It's AIDS for old people,' he said, and then burst out laughing, hucka-hucka-hucka-*huck!*, just like he does over those idiotic jokes of his.

I didn't laugh, though, because what he said struck a nerve somewhere. Not that I have Alzheimer's; although there's plenty of it on view here at beautiful Georgia Pines, I myself just suffer the standard oldguy memory problems. Those problems seem to have more to do with *when* than *what*. Looking over what I have written so far, it occurs to me that I *remember* everything that happened back in '32; it's the order of events that sometimes gets confused in my head. Yet, if I'm careful, I think I can keep even that sorted out. More or less.

John Coffey came to E Block and the Green Mile in October of that year, condemned for the murder of the nine-year-old Detterick twins. That's my major landmark, and if I keep it in view, I should do just fine. William "Wild Bill" Wharton came after Coffey; Delacroix came before. So did the mouse, the one Brutus Howell — Brutal, to his friends — called Steamboat Willy and Delacroix ended up calling Mr. Jingles.

Whatever you called him, the mouse came first, even before Del — it was still summer when he showed up, and we had two other prisoners on the Green Mile: The Chief, Arlen Bitterbuck; and The Pres, Arthur Flanders.

That mouse. That goddam mouse. Delacroix loved it, but Percy Wetmore sure didn't.

Percy hated it from the first.

2

The mouse came back just about three days after Percy had chased it down the Green Mile that first time. Dean Stanton and Bill Dodge were talking politics . . . which meant in those days, they were talking Roosevelt and Hoover — Herbert, not J. Edgar. They were eating Ritz crackers from a box Dean had purchased from old Toot-Toot an hour or so before. Percy was standing in the office doorway, practicing quick draws with the baton he loved so much, as he listened. He'd pull it out of that ridiculous handtooled holster he'd gotten somewhere, then twirl it (or try to; most times he would have dropped it if not for the rawhide loop he kept on his wrist), then re-holster it. I was off that night, but got the full report from Dean the following evening.

The mouse came up the Green Mile just as it had before, hopping along, then stopping and seeming to check the empty cells. After a bit of that it would hop on, undiscouraged, as if it had known all along it would be a long search, and it was up to that.

The President was awake this time, standing at his cell door. That guy was a piece of work, managing to look natty even in his prison blues. We knew just by the way he looked that he wasn't made for Old Sparky, and we were right — less than a week after Percy's second run at that mouse, The Pres's sentence was commuted to life and he joined the general population.

'Say!' he called. "There's a mouse in here! What kind of a joint are you guys running, anyway?' He was kind of laughing, but Dean said he also sounded kind of outraged, as if even a murder rap hadn't been quite enough to knock the Kiwanis out of his soul. He had been the regional head of an outfit called Mid-South Realty Associates, and had thought himself smart enough to be able to get away with pushing his half-senile father out a third-story window and collect on a double-indemnity whole-life policy. On that he had been wrong, but maybe not by much.

'Shut up, you lugoon,' Percy said, but that was pretty much automatic. He had his eye on the mouse. He had re-holstered his baton and taken out one of his magazines, but now he tossed the magazine on the duty desk and

pulled the baton out of its holster again. He began tapping it casually against the knuckles of his left hand.

'Son of a bitch,' Bill Dodge said. 'I've never seen a mouse in here before.'

'Aw, he's sort of cute,' Dean said. 'And not afraid at all.'

'How do you know?'

'He was in the other night. Percy saw him, too. Brutal calls him Steamboat Willy.'

Percy kind of sneered at that, but for the time being said nothing. He was tapping the baton faster now on the back of his hand.

'Watch this,' Dean said. 'He came all the way up to the desk before. I want to see if he'll do it again.'

It did, skirting wide of The Pres on its way, as if it didn't like the way our resident parricide smelled. It checked two of the empty cells, even ran up onto one of the bare, unmattressed cots for a sniff, then came back to the Green Mile. And Percy standing there the whole time, tapping and tapping, not talking for a change, wanting to make it sorry for coming back. Wanting to teach it a lesson.

'Good thing you guys don't have to put him in Sparky,' Bill said, interested in spite of himself. 'You'd have a hell of a time getting the clamps and the cap on.'

Percy said nothing still, but he very slowly gripped the baton between his fingers, the way a man would hold a good cigar.

The mouse stopped where it had before, no more than three feet from the duty desk, looking up at Dean like a prisoner before the bar. It glanced up at Bill for a moment, then switched its attention back to Dean. Percy it hardly seemed to notice at all.

'He's a brave little barstid, I got to give him that,' Bill said. He raised his voice a little. 'Hey! Hey! Steamboat Willy!'

The mouse flinched a little and fluttered its ears, but it didn't run, or even show any signs of wanting to.

'Now watch this,' Dean said, remembering how Brutal had fed it some of his corned-beef sandwich. 'I don't know if he'll do it again, but —'

He broke off a piece of Ritz cracker and dropped it in front of the mouse. It just looked with its sharp black eyes at the orangey fragment for a second or two, its filament-fine whiskers twitching as it sniffed. Then it reached out, took the cracker in its paws, sat up, and began to eat.

'Well. I'll be shucked and boiled!' Bill exclaimed. 'Eats as neat as a parson on parish house Saturday night!'

'Looks more like a nigger eating watermelon to me,' Percy remarked, but neither guard paid him any mind. Neither did The Chief or The Pres, for that matter. The mouse finished the cracker but continued to sit, seemingly balanced on the talented coil of its tail, looking up at the giants in blue.

'Lemme try,' Bill said. He broke off another piece of cracker, leaned over the front of the desk, and dropped it carefully. The mouse sniffed but did not touch.

'Huh,' Bill said. 'Must be full.'

'Nah,' Dean said, 'he knows you're a floater, that's all.'

'Floater, am I? I like that! I'm here almost as much as Harry Terwilliger! Maybe more!'

'Simmer down, old-timer, simmer down,' Dean said, grinning. 'But watch and see if I'm not right.' He bombed another piece of cracker over the side. Sure enough, the mouse picked that one up and began to eat again, still ignoring Bill Dodge's contribution completely. But before it had done more than take a preliminary nibble or two, Percy threw his baton at it, launching it like a spear.

The mouse was a small target, and give the devil his due — it was a wickedly good shot, and might have taken "Willy's" head clean off, if its reflexes hadn't been as sharp as shards of broken glass. It ducked — yes, just as a human being would have — and dropped the chunk of cracker. The heavy hickory baton passed over its head and spine close enough so its fur ruffled (that's what Dean said, anyway, and so I pass it on, although I'm not sure I really believe it), then hit the green linoleum and bounced against the bars of an empty cell. The mouse didn't wait to see if it was a mistake; apparently remembering a pressing engagement elsewhere, it turned and was off down the corridor toward the restraint room in a flash.

Percy roared with frustration — he knew how close he had come — and chased after it again. Bill Dodge grabbed at his arm, probably out of simple instinct, but Percy pulled away from him. Still, Dean said, it was probably that grab which saved Steamboat Willy's life, and it was still a near thing. Percy wanted not just to kill the mouse but to *squash* it, so he ran in big, comical leaps, like a deer, stamping down with his heavy black workshoes. The mouse barely avoided Percy's last two jumps, first zigging and then