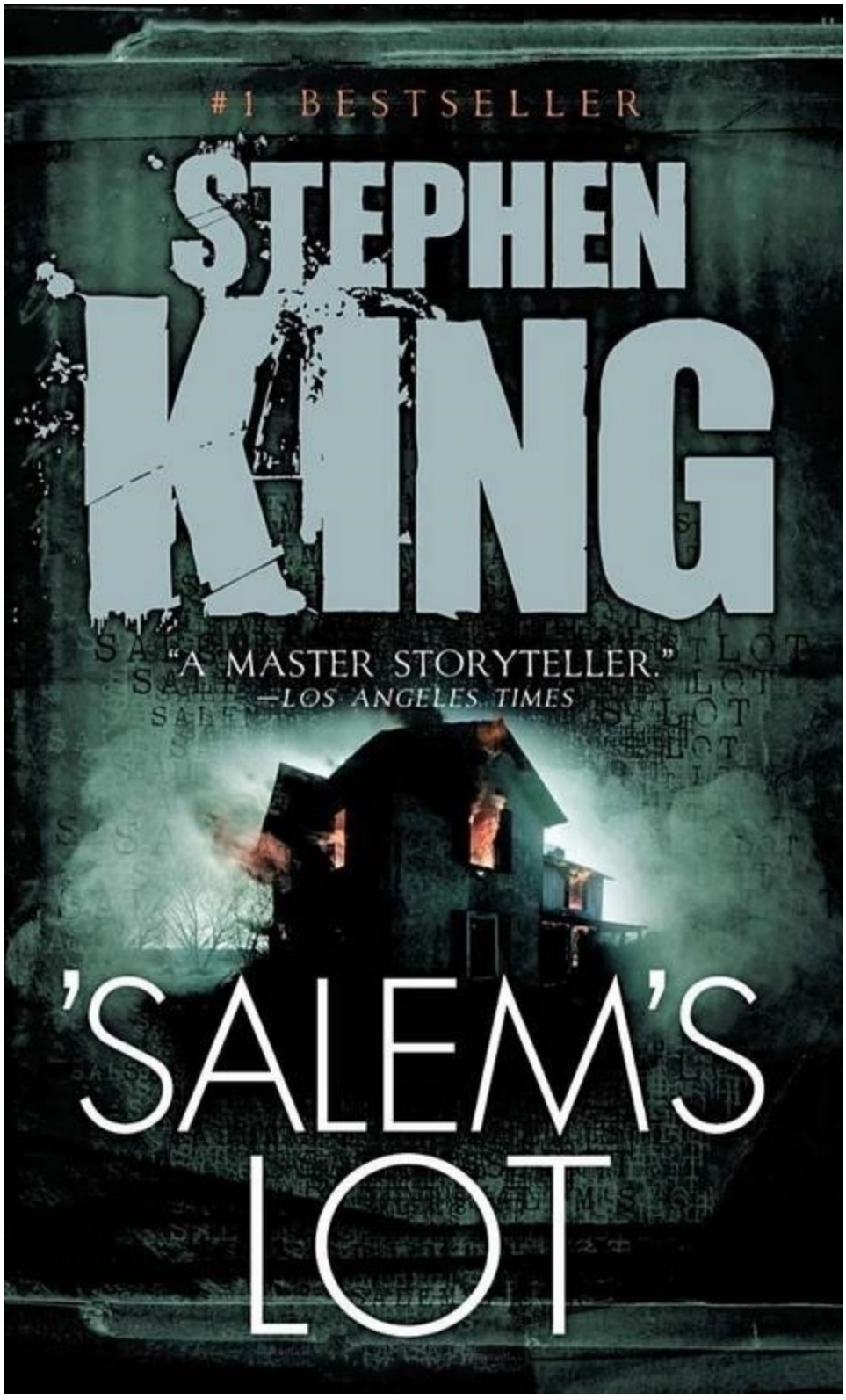
#1 BESTSELLER
STEPHEN
KING
"A MASTER STORYTELLER."
—LOS ANGELES TIMES
'SALEM'S
LOT

'SALEM'S LOT

STEPHEN KING

Published in 2011 by Anchor Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, NY.

Originally published in 1975 by Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, NY

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-0307743671

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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PROLOGUE

Old friend, what are you looking for?

After those many years abr

oad you come

With images you tended

Under foreign skies

Far away from your own land

-George Seferis

1

Almost everyone thought the man and the boy were father and son.

They crossed the country on a rambling southwest line in an old Citroën sedan, keeping mostly to secondary roads, traveling in fits and starts. They stopped in three places along the way before reaching their final destination: first in Rhode Island, where the tall man with the black hair worked in a textile mill; then in Youngstown, Ohio, where he worked for three months on a tractor assembly line; and finally in a small California town near the Mexican border, where he pumped gas and worked at repairing small foreign cars with an amount of success that was, to him, surprising and gratifying.

Wherever they stopped, he got a Maine newspaper called the Portland *Press-Herald* and watched it for items concerning a small southern Maine town named Jerusalem's Lot and the surrounding area. There were such items from time to time.

He wrote an outline of a novel in motel rooms before they hit Central Falls, Rhode Island, and mailed it to his agent. He had been a mildly successful novelist a million years before, in a time when the darkness had not come over his life. The agent took the outline to his last publisher, who expressed polite interest but no inclination to part with any advance money.

'Please' and 'thank you,' he told the boy as he tore the agent's letter up, were still free.

He said it without too much bitterness and set about the book anyway.

The boy did not speak much. His face retained a perpetual pinched look, and his eyes were dark-as if they always scanned some bleak inner horizon.

In the diners and gas stations where they stopped along the way, he was polite and nothing more. He didn't seem to want the tall man out of his sight, and the boy seemed nervous even when the man left him to use the

bathroom. He refused to talk about the town of Jerusalem's Lot, although the tall man tried to raise the topic from time to time, and he would not look at the Portland newspapers the man sometimes deliberately left around.

When the book was written, they were living in a beach cottage off the highway, and they both swam in the Pacific a great deal. It was warmer than

the Atlantic, and friendlier. It held no memories. The boy began to get very brown,

Although they were living well enough to eat three square meals a day and keep a solid roof over their heads, the man had begun to feel depressed and doubtful about the life they were living. He was tutoring the boy, and he did not seem to be losing anything in the way of education (the boy was bright and easy about books, as the tall man had been himself), but he didn't think that blotting 'salem's Lot out was doing the boy any good. Sometimes at night he screamed in his sleep and thrashed the blankets onto the floor.

A letter came from New York. The tall man's agent said that Random House was offering $12,000 in advance, and a book club sale was almost certain. Was it okay?

It was.

The man quit his job at the gas station, and he and the boy crossed the border.

2

Los Zapatos, which means 'the shoes' (a name that secretly pleased the man to no end), was a small village not far from the ocean. It was fairly free of tourists. There was no good road, no ocean view (you had to go five miles further west to get that), and no historical points of interest. Also, the local cantina was infested with cockroaches and the only whore was a fifty-year-old grandmother.

With the States behind them, an almost unearthly quiet dropped over their lives. Few planes went overhead, there were no turnpikes, and no one

owned a power lawn mower (or cared to have one) for a hundred miles.

They had a radio, but even that was noise without meaning; the news broadcasts were all in Spanish, which the boy began to pick up but which remained - and always would-gibberish to the man. All the music seemed to consist of opera. At night they sometimes got a pop music station from Monterey made frantic with the accents of Wolfman Jack but it faded in and out. The only motor within hearing distance was a quaint old Rototiller owned by a local farmer. When the wind was right, its irregular burping noise would come to their ears faintly, like an uneasy spirit. They drew their water from the well by hand.

Once or twice a month (not always together) they attended mass at the small church in town. Neither of them understood the ceremony, but they went all the same. The man found himself sometimes drowsing in the suffocating heat to the steady, familiar rhythms and the voices which gave them tongue. One Sunday the boy came out onto the rickety back porch where the man had begun work on a new novel and told him hesitantly that he had spoken to the priest about being taken into the church. The man nodded and asked him if he had enough Spanish to take instruction. The boy said he didn't think it would be a problem.

The man made a forty-mile trip once a week to get the Portland, Maine, paper, which was always at least a week old and was sometimes yellowed with dog urine. Two weeks after the boy had told him of his intentions, he found a featured story about 'salem's Lot and a Vermont town called Momson. The tall man's name was mentioned in the course of the story.

He left the paper around with no particular hope that the boy would pick it up. The article made him uneasy for a number of reasons. It was not over in 'salem's Lot yet, it seemed.

The boy came to him a day later with the paper in his hand, folded open to expose the headline: 'Ghost Town in Maine?'

'I'm scared,' he said.

'I am, too,' the tall man answered.

3

GHOST TOWN IN MAINE?

By John Lewis

Press-Herald Features Editor

JERUSALEM'S LOT-Jerusalem's Lot is a small town east of Cumberland and twenty miles north of Portland. It is not the first town in American history to just dry up and blow away, and will probably not be the last, but it is one of the strangest. Ghost towns are common in the American Southwest, where communities grew up almost overnight around rich gold and silver lodes and then disappeared almost as rapidly when the veins of ore played out, leaving empty stores and hotels and saloons to rot emptily in desert silence.

In New England the only counterpart to the mysterious emptying of Jerusalem's Lot, or 'salem's Lot as the natives often refer to it, seems to be a small town in Vermont called Momson. During the summer of 1923, Momson apparently just dried up and blew away, and all 312 residents went with it. The houses and few small business buildings in the town's center still stand, but since that summer fifty-two years ago, they have been uninhabited. In some cases the furnishings had been removed, but in most the houses were still furnished, as if in the middle of daily life some great wind had blown all the people away. In one house the table had been set for the evening meal, complete with a centerpiece of long-wilted flowers. In another the covers had been turned down neatly in an upstairs bedroom as if for sleep. In the local mercantile store, a rotted bolt of cotton cloth was found on the counter and a price of $1.22 rung up on the cash register.

Investigators found almost $50.00 in the cash drawer, untouched.

People in the area like to entertain tourists with the story and to hint that the town is haunted-that, they say, is why it has remained empty ever since.

A more likely reason is that Momson is located in a forgotten corner of the state, far from any main road. There is nothing there that could not be

duplicated in a hundred other towns except, of course, the *Mary Celeste*-

likemystery of its sudden emptiness.

Much the same could be said for Jerusalem's Lot.

In the census of 1970, 'salem's Lot claimed 1,319 inhabitants-a gain of exactly 67 souls in the ten years since the previous census. It is a sprawling, comfortable township, familiarly called the Lot by its previous inhabitants, where little of any note ever took place. The only thing the oldsters who regularly gathered in the park and around the stove in Crossen's Agricultural Market had to talk about was the Fire of '51, when a carelessly tossed match started one of the largest forest fires in the state's history.

If a man wanted to spin out his retirement in a small country town where everyone minded his own business and the big event of any given week was apt to be the Ladies' Auxiliary Bake-off, then the Lot would have been a good choice. Demographically, the census of 1970 showed a pattern familiar both to rural sociologists and to the long-time resident of any small Maine town: a lot of old folks, quite a few poor folks, and a lot of young folks who leave the area with their diplomas under their arms, never to return again.

But a little over a year ago, something began to happen in Jerusalem's Lot that was not usual. People began to drop out of sight. The larger proportion of these, naturally, haven't disappeared in the real sense of the word at all.

The Lot's former constable, Parkins Gillespie, is living with his sister in Kittery. Charles James, owner of a gas station across from the drugstore, is now running a repair shop in neighboring Cumberland. Pauline Dickens has moved to Los Angeles, and Rhoda Curless is working with the St Matthew's Mission in Portland. The list of 'undisappearances' could go on and on.

What is mystifying about these found people is their unanimous unwillingness-or inability-to talk about Jerusalem's Lot and what, if anything, might have happened there. Parkins Gillespie simply looked at

this reporter, lit a cigarette, and said, ‘I just decided to leave.’ Charles James claims he was forced to leave because his business dried up with the town.

Pauline Dickens, who worked as a waitress in the Excellent Caf6 for years, never answered this reporter’s letter of inquiry. And Miss Curless refuses to speak of ‘salem’s Lot at all.

Some of the missing can be accounted for by educated guesswork and a little research. Lawrence Crockett, a local real estate agent who has disappeared with his wife and daughter, has left a number of questionable business ventures and land deals behind him, including one piece of

Portland land speculation where the Portland Mall and Shopping Center is now under construction. The Royce McDougalls, also among the missing, had lost their infant son earlier in the year and there was little to hold them in town. They might be anywhere. Others fit into the same category.

According to State Police Chief Peter McFee, ‘We’ve got tracers out on a great many people from Jerusalem’s Lot-but that isn’t the only Maine town where people have dropped out of sight. Royce McDougall, for instance, left owing money to one bank and two finance companies… in my judgment, he was just a fly-by-nighter who decided to get out from under.

Someday this year or next, he’ll use one of those credit cards he’s got in his wallet and the repossession men will land on him with both feet. In America missing persons are as natural as cherry pie. We’re living in an automobile-oriented society. People pick up stakes and move on every two or three years. Sometimes they forget to leave a forwarding address.

Especially the deadbeats.’

Yet for all the hardheaded practicality of Captain McFee’s words, there are unanswered questions in Jerusalem’s Lot. Henry Petrie, and his wife and son are gone, and Mr Petrie, a Prudential Insurance Company executive, could hardly be called a deadbeat. The local mortician, the local librarian, and the local beautician are also in the dead-letter file. The list is of a disquieting length.

In the surrounding towns the whispering campaign that is the beginning of legend has already begun. ‘Salem’s Lot is reputed to be haunted.

Sometimes colored lights are reported hovering over the Central Maine Power lines that bisect the township, and if you suggest that the inhabitants of the Lot have been carried off by UFOS, no one will laugh. There has been some talk of a ‘dark coven’ of young people who were practicing the black mass in town and, perhaps, brought the wrath of God Himself on the namesake of the Holy Land’s holiest city. Others, of a less supernatural bent, remember the young men who ‘disappeared’ in the Houston, Texas, area some three years ago only to be discovered in grisly mass graves, An actual visit to ‘salem’s Lot makes such talk seem less wild. There is not one business left open. The last one to go under was Spencer’s Sundries and Pharmacy, which closed its doors in January. Crossen’s Agricultural Store, the hardware store, Barlow and Straker’s Furniture Shop, the Excellent Café, and even the Municipal Building are all boarded up. The new grammar school is empty, and so is the tri-town consolidated high

school, built in the Lot in 1967. The school furnishings and the books have been moved to make-do facilities in Cumberland pending a referendum vote in the other towns of the school district, but it seems that no children from ‘salem’s Lot will be in attendance when a new school year begins.

There are no children; only abandoned shops and stores, deserted houses, overgrown lawns, deserted streets, and back roads.

Some of the other people that the state police would like to locate or at least hear from include John Groggins, pastor of the Jerusalem’s Lot Methodist Church; Father Donald Callahan, Parish priest of St Andrew’s; Mabel Werts, a local widow who was prominent in ‘salem’s Lot church and social functions; Lester and Harriet Durham, a local couple who both worked at Gates Mill and Weaving; Eva Miller, who ran a local boardinghouse…

4

Two months after the newspaper article, the boy was taken into the church. He made his first confession-and confessed everything.

5

The village priest was an old man with white hair and a face seamed into a net of wrinkles. His eyes peered out of his sun-beaten face with surprising life and avidity. They were blue eyes, very Irish. When the tall man arrived at his house, he was sitting on the porch and drinking tea. A man in a city suit stood beside him. The man's hair was parted in the middle and greased in a manner that reminded the tall man of photograph portraits from the 1890s.

The man said stiffly, 'I am Jesús de la rey Muñoz. Father Gracon has asked me to interpret, as he has no English. Father Gracon has done my family a great service which I may not mention. My lips are likewise sealed in the matter he wishes to discuss. Is it agreeable to you?'

'Yes.' He shook Muñoz's hand and then Gracon's. Gracon replied in Spanish and smiled. He had only five teeth left in his jaw, but the smile was sunny and glad.

'He asks, Would you like a cup of tea? It is green tea. Very cooling.'

'That would be lovely.'

When the amenities had passed among them, the priest said, 'The boy is not your son.'

'No.'

'He made a strange confession. In fact I have never heard a stranger confession in all my days of the priesthood.'

'That does not surprise me.'

'He wept,' Father Gracon said, sipping his tea. 'It was a deep and terrible weeping. It came from the cellar of his soul. Must I ask the question this confession raises in my heart?'

'No,' the tall man said evenly. 'You don't. He is telling the truth.'

Gracon was nodding even before Muñoz translated, and his face had grown grave. He leaned forward with his hands clasped between his knees and spoke for a long time. Muñoz listened intently, his face carefully expressionless. When the priest finished, Muñoz said:

‘He says there are strange things in the world. Forty years ago a peasant from El Graniones brought him a lizard that screamed as though it were a woman. He has seen a man with stigmata, the marks of Our Lord’s passion,

and this man bled from his hands and feet on Good Friday. He says this is an awful thing, a dark thing. It is serious for you and the boy. Particularly for the boy. It is eating him up. He says… ’

Gracon spoke again, briefly.

‘He asks if you understand what you have done in this New Jerusalem.’

‘Jerusalem’s Lot,’ the tall man said. ‘Yes. I understand.’

Gracon spoke again.

‘He asks what you intend to do about it.’

The tall man shook his head Very slowly. ‘I don’t know.’

Gracon spoke again.

‘He says he will pray for you.’

6

A week later he awoke sweating from a nightmare and called out the boy’s name.

‘I’m going back,’ he said.

The boy paled beneath his tan.

‘Can you come with me?’ the man asked.

‘Do you love me?’

‘Yes. God, yes.’

The boy began to weep, and the tall man held him.

7

Still, there was no sleep for him. Faces lurked in the shadows, swirling up at him like faces obscured in snow, and when the wind blew an overhanging tree limb against the roof, he jumped.

Jerusalem’s Lot.

He closed his eyes and put his arm across them and it all began to come back. He could almost see the glass paperweight, the kind that will make a tiny blizzard when you shake it.

‘Salem’s Lot…

Part One: THE MARSTEN

HOUSE

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills holding darkness within; it had stood for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.

-Shirley Jackson

The Haunting of Hill House

Chapter One

BEN (I)

1

By the time he had passed Portland going north on the turnpike, Ben Mears had begun to feel a not unpleasurable tingle of excitement in his belly. It was September 5, 1975, and summer was enjoying her final grand fling. The trees were bursting with green, the sky was a high, soft blue, and just over the Falmouth town line he saw two boys walking a road parallel to the expressway with fishing rods settled on their shoulders like carbines.

He switched to the travel lane, stowed to the minimum turnpike speed, and began to look for anything that would jog his memory. There was nothing at first, and he tried to caution himself against almost sure disappointment. *You were seven then. That's twenty-five years of water under the bridge. Places change. Like people.*

In those days the four-lane 295 hadn't existed. If you wanted to go to Portland from the Lot, you went out Route 12 to Falmouth and then got on Number 1. Time had marched on.

Stop that shit.

But it was hard to stop. It was hard to stop when -

A big BSA cycle with jacked handlebars suddenly roared past him in the passing lane, a kid in a T-shirt driving, a girl in a red cloth jacket and huge mirror-lensed sunglasses riding pillion behind him. They cut in a little too quickly and he overreacted, jamming on his brakes and laying both hands on the horn. The BSA sped up, belching blue smoke from its exhaust, and the girl jabbed her middle finger back at him.

He resumed speed, wishing for a cigarette. His hands were trembling slightly. The BSA was almost out of sight now, moving fast. The kids. The goddamned kids. Memories tried to crowd in on him, memories of a more recent vintage. He pushed them away. He hadn't been on a motorcycle in two years. He planned never to ride on one again.

A flash of red caught his eye off to the left, and when, he glanced that way, he felt a burst of pleasure and recognition. A large red barn stood on a hill

far across a rising field of timothy and clover, a barn with a cupola painted white - even at this distance he could see the sungleam on the

weather vane atop that cupola. It had been there then, and was still here now. It looked exactly the same. Maybe it was going to be all right after all.

Then the trees blotted it out.

As the turnpike entered Cumberland, more and more things began to seem familiar. He passed over the Royal River, where they had fished for steelies and pickerel as boys. Past a brief, flickering view of Cumberland Village through the trees. In the distance the Cumberland water tower with its huge slogan painted across the side: ‘Keep Maine Green.’ Aunt Cindy had always said someone should print ‘Bring Money’ underneath that.

His original sense of excitement grew and he began to speed up, watching for the sign. It came twinkling up out of the distance in reflectorized green five miles later:

ROUTE 12 JERUSALEM’S LOT

CUMBERLAND CUMBERLAND CTR

A sudden blackness came over him, dousing his good spirits like sand on fire. He had been subject to these since (his mind tried to speak Miranda’s name and he would not let it) the bad time and was used to fending them off, but this one swept over him with a savage power that was dismaying.

What was he doing, coming back to a town where he had lived for four years as a boy, trying to recapture something that was irrevocably lost?

What magic could he expect to recapture by walking roads that he had once walked as a boy and were probably asphalted and straightened and logged off and littered with tourist beer cans? The magic was gone, both white and black. It had all gone down the chutes on that night when the motorcycle bad gone out of control and then there was the yellow moving van, growing and growing, his wife Miranda’s scream, cut off with sudden finality when -

The exit came up on his right, and for a moment he considered driving right past it, continuing on to Chamberlain or Lewiston, stopping for lunch, and then turning around and going back. But back where? Home? That was a laugh. If there was a home, it had been here. Even if it had only been four years, it was his.

He signaled, slowed the Citroën, and went up the ramp. Toward the top, where the turnpike ramp joined Route 12 (which became Jointner Avenue closer to town), he glanced up toward the horizon. What he saw there made him jam the brakes on with both feet. The Citroën shuddered to a stop and stalled.

The trees, mostly pine and spruce, rose in gentle slopes toward the east, seeming to almost crowd against the sky at the limit of vision. From here the town was not visible. Only the trees, and, in the distance, where those trees rose against the sky, the peaked, gabled roof of the Marsten House.

He gazed at it, fascinated. Warring emotions crossed his face with kaleidoscopic swiftness.

‘Still here,’ he murmured aloud. ‘By God.’

He looked down at his arms. They had broken out in goose flesh.

2

He deliberately skirted town, crossing into Cumberland and then coming back into ‘salem’s Lot from the west, taking the Burns Road. He was amazed by how little things had changed out here. There were a few new houses he didn’t remember, there was a tavern called Dell’s just over the town line, and a pair of fresh gravel quarries. A good deal of the hardwood had been pulped over. But the old tin sign pointing the way to the town dump was still there, and the road itself was still unpaved, full of chuckholes and washboards, and he could see Schoolyard Hill through the slash in the trees where the Central Maine Power pylons ran on a northwest to southeast line. The Griffen farm was still there, although the barn had been enlarged. He wondered if they still bottled and sold their own milk.

The logo had been a smiling cow under the name brand: ‘Sunshine Milk from the Griffen Farms!’ He smiled. He had splashed a lot of that milk on his corn flakes at Aunt Cindy’s house.

He turned left onto the Brooks Road, passed the wrought-iron gates and the low fieldstone wall surrounding Harmony Hill Cemetery, and then went down the steep grade and started up the far side-the side known as Marsten’s Hill.

At the top, the trees fell away on both sides of the road. On the right, you could look right down into the town proper-Ben’s first view of it. On the left, the Marsten House. He pulled over and got out of the car.

It was just the same. There was no difference, not at all. He might have last seen it yesterday.

The witch grass grew wild and tall in the front yard, obscuring the old, frost-heaved flagstones that led to the porch. Chirring crickets sang in it, and he could see grasshoppers jumping in erratic parabolas.

The house itself looked toward town. It was huge and rambling and sagging, its windows haphazardly boarded shut, giving it that sinister look of all old houses that have been empty for a long time. The paint had been weathered away, giving the house a uniform gray look. Windstorms had ripped many of the shingles off, and a heavy snowfall had punched in the west corner of the main roof, giving it a slumped, hunched look. A tattered no-trespassing sign was nailed to the right-hand newel post.

He felt a strong urge to walk up that overgrown path, past the crickets and hoppers that would jump around his shoes, climb the porch, peek

between the haphazard boards into the hallway or the front room. Perhaps try the front door. If it was unlocked, go in.

He swallowed and stared up at the house, almost hypnotized. It stared back at him with idiot indifference.

You walked down the hall, smelling wet plaster and rotting wallpaper, and mice would skitter in the walls. There would still be a lot of junk lying around, and you might pick something up, a paperweight maybe, and put it in your pocket. Then, at the end of the hall, instead of going through into the kitchen, you could turn left and go up the stairs, your feet gritting in the plaster dust which had sifted down from the ceiling over the years. There were fourteen steps, exactly fourteen. But the top one was smaller, out of proportion, as if it had been added to avoid the evil number. At the top of the stairs you stand on the landing, looking down the hall toward a closed door. And if you walk down the hall toward it, watching as if from outside yourself as the door gets closer and larger, you can reach out your hand and put it on the tarnished silver knob -

He turned away from the house, a straw-dry whistle of air slipping from his mouth. Not yet. Later, perhaps, but not yet. For now it was enough to know that all of that was still here. It had waited for him. He put his hands on the hood of his car and looked out over the town. He could find out down there who was handling the Marsten House, and perhaps lease it. The kitchen would make an adequate writing room and he could bunk down in the front parlor. But he wouldn't allow himself to go upstairs.

Not unless it had to be done.

He got in his car, started it, and drove down the hill to Jerusalem's Lot.

Chapter Two

SUSAN (I)

1

He was sitting on a bench in the park when he observed the girl watching him. She was a very pretty girl, and there was a silk scarf tied over her light blond hair. She was currently reading a book, but there was a sketch pad and what looked like a charcoal pencil beside her. It was Tuesday, September 16, the first day of school, and the park had magically emptied of the rowdier element. What was left was a scattering of mothers with

infants, a few old men sitting by the war memorial, and this girl sitting in the dappled shade of a gnarled old elm.

She looked up and saw him. An expression of startlement crossed her face. She looked down at her book; looked up at him again and started to rise; almost thought better of it; did rise; sat down again.

He got up and walked over, holding his own book, which was a paperback Western. ‘Hello,’ he said agreeably. ‘Do we know each other?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘That is… you’re Benjaman Mears, right?’

‘Right.’ He raised his eyebrows.

She laughed nervously, not looking in his eyes except in a quick flash, to try to read the barometer of his intentions. She was quite obviously a girl not accustomed to speaking to strange men in the park.

‘I thought I was seeing a ghost.’ She held up the book in her lap. He saw fleetingly that ‘Jerusalem’s Lot Public Library’ was stamped on the thickness of pages between covers. The book was *Air Dance*, his second novel. She showed him the photograph of himself on the back jacket, a photo that was four years old now. The face looked boyish and frighteningly serious - the eyes were black diamonds.

‘Of such inconsequential beginnings dynasties are begun,’ he said, and although it was a joking throwaway remark, it hung oddly in the air, like prophecy spoken in jest. Behind them, a number of toddlers were splashing happily in the wading pool and a mother was telling Roddy not to push his sister so *high*. The sister went soaring up on her swing regardless, dress flying, trying for the sky. It was a moment he remembered for years after, as though a special small slice had been cut from the cake of time. If nothing

fires between two people, such an instant simply falls back into the general wrack of memory.

Then she laughed and offered him the book. ‘Will you autograph it?’

‘A library book?’

‘I’ll buy it from them and replace it.’

He found a mechanical pencil in his sweater pocket, opened the book to the flyleaf, and asked, ‘What’s your name?’

‘Susan Norton.’

He wrote quickly, without thinking: *For Susan Norton, the prettiest girl in the park. Warm regards, Ben Mears*. He added the date below his signature in slashed notation.

‘Now you’ll have to steal it,’ he said, handing it back.

‘ *Air Dance* is out of print, alas.’

‘I’ll get a copy from one of those book finders in New York.’ She hesitated, and this time her glance at his eyes was a little longer. ‘It’s an awfully good book.’

‘Thanks. When I take it down and look at it, I wonder how it ever got published.’

‘Do you take it down often?’

‘Yeah, but I’m trying to quit.’

She grinned at him and they both laughed and that made things more natural. Later he would have a chance to think how easily this had happened, how smoothly. The thought was never a comfortable one. It conjured up an image of fate, not blind at all but equipped with sentient 20/20 vision and intent on grinding helpless mortals between the great millstones of the universe to make some unknown bread.

‘I read *Conway’s Daughter*, too. I loved that. I suppose you hear that all the time.’

‘Remarkably little,’ he said honestly. Miranda had also loved *Conway’s Daughter*, but most of his coffeehouse friends had been noncommittal and most of the critics had clobbered it. Well, that was critics for you. Plot was out, masturbation in.

‘Well, I did.’

‘Have you read the new one?’

‘ *Billy Said Keep Going?* Not yet. Miss Coogan at the drugstore says it’s pretty racy.’

‘Hell, it’s almost puritanical,’ Ben said. ‘The language is rough, but when you’re writing about uneducated country boys, you can’t… look, can I buy you an ice-cream soda or something? I was just getting a hanker on for one.’

She checked his eyes a third time. Then smiled, warmly.

‘Sure. I’d love one. They’re great in Spencer’s.’

That was the beginning of it.

2

‘Is that Miss Coogan?’

Ben asked it, low-voiced. He was looking at a tall, spare woman who was wearing a red nylon duster over her white uniform. Her blue-rinsed hair was done in a steplike succession of finger waves.

‘That’s her. She’s got a little cart she takes to the library every Thursday night. She fills out reserve cards by the ton and drives Miss Starcher crazy.’

They were seated on red leather stools at the soda fountain. He was drinking a chocolate soda; hers was strawberry. Spencer’s also served as the local bus depot and from where they sat they could look through an old-fashioned scrolled arch and into the waiting room, where a solitary young man in Air Force blues sat glumly with his feet planted around his suitcase.

‘Doesn’t look happy to be going wherever he’s going, does he?’ she said, following his glance.

‘Leave’s over, I imagine,’ Ben said. Now, he thought, she’ll ask if I’ve ever been in the service.

But instead: ‘I’ll be on that ten-thirty bus one of these days. Good-by,

‘salem’s Lot. Probably I’ll be looking just as glum as that boy.’

‘Where?’

‘New York, I guess. To see if I can’t finally become self-supporting.’

‘What’s wrong with right here?’

‘The Lot? I love it. But my folks, you know. They’d always be sort of looking over my shoulder. That’s a bummer. And the Lot doesn’t really have that much to offer the young career girl.’ She shrugged and dipped her head to suck at her straw. Her neck was tanned, beautifully muscled. She was wearing a colorful print shift that hinted at a good figure.

‘What kind of job are you looking for?’

She shrugged. ‘I’ve got a BA from Boston University… not worth the paper it’s printed on, really. Art major, English minor. The original dipso duo. Strictly eligible for the educated idiot category. I’m not even trained to decorate an office. Some of the girls I went to high school with are holding down plump secretarial jobs now. I never got beyond Personal Typing I, myself.’

‘So what does that leave?’

‘Oh… maybe a publishing house,’ she said vaguely. ‘Or some magazine… advertising, maybe. Places like that can always use someone

who can draw on command. I can do that. I have a portfolio.’

‘Do you have offers?’ he asked gently.

‘No… no. But…’

‘You don’t go to New York without offers,’ he said.

‘Believe me. You’ll wear out the heels on your shoes.’

She smiled uneasily. ‘I guess you should know.’

‘Have you sold stuff locally?’

‘Oh yes.’ She laughed abruptly. ‘My biggest sale to date was to the Cinex Corporation. They opened a new triple cinema in Portland and bought twelve paintings at a crack to hang in their lobby. Paid seven hundred dollars. I made a down payment on my little car.’

‘You ought to take a hotel room for a week or so in New York,’ he said,

‘and hit every magazine and publishing house you can find with your portfolio. Make your appointments six months in advance so the editors and personnel guys don’t have anything on their calendars. But for God’s sake, don’t just haul stakes for the big city.’

‘What about you?’ she asked, leaving off the straw and spooning ice cream. ‘What are you doing in the thriving community of Jerusalem’s Lot, Maine, population thirteen hundred?’

He shrugged. ‘Trying to write a novel.’

She was instantly alight with excitement. ‘In the Lot? What’s it about?

Why here? Are you -’

He looked at her gravely. ‘You’re dripping.’

‘I’m-? Oh, I am. Sorry.’ She mopped the base of her glass with a napkin.

‘Say, I didn’t mean to pry. I’m really not gushy as a rule.’

‘No apology needed,’ he said. ‘All writers like to talk about their books.

Sometimes when I'm lying in bed at night I make up a *Playboy* interview about me. Waste of time. They only do authors if their books are big on campus.'

The Air Force youngster stood up. A Greyhound was pulling up to the curb out front, air brakes chuffing.

'I lived in 'salem's Lot for four years as a kid. Out on the Burns Road.'

'The Burns Road? There's nothing out there now but the Marshes and a little graveyard. Harmony Hill, they call it.'

'I lived with my Aunt Cindy. Cynthia Stowens. My dad died, see, and my mom went through a… well, kind of a nervous breakdown. So she farmed me out to Aunt Cindy while she got her act back together. Aunt Cindy put

me on a bus back to Long Island and my mom just about a month after the big fire.' He looked at his face in the mirror behind the soda fountain. 'I cried on the bus going away from Mom, and I cried on the bus going away from Aunt Cindy and Jerusalem's Lot.'

'I was born the year of the fire,' Susan said. 'The biggest damn thing that ever happened to this town and I slept through it.'

Ben laughed. 'That makes you about seven years older than I thought in the park.'

'Really?' She looked pleased. 'Thank you… I think. Your aunt's house must have burned down.'

'Yes,' he said. 'That night is one of my clearest memories. Some men with Indian pumps on their backs came to the door and said we'd have to leave. It was very exciting. Aunt Cindy dithered around, picking things up and loading them into her Hudson. Christ, what a night.'

'Was she insured?'

'No, but the house was rented and we got just about everything valuable into the car, except for the TV. We tried to lift it and couldn't even budge it

off the floor. It was a Video King with a seven-inch screen and a magnifying glass over the picture tube. Hell on the eyes. We only got one channel anyway-lots of country music, farm reports, and Kitty the Klown.'

'And you came back here to write a book,' she marveled.

Ben didn't reply at once. Miss Coogan was opening cartons of cigarettes and filling the display rack by the cash register. The pharmacist, Mr Labree, was puttering around behind the high drug counter like a frosty ghost. The Air Force kid was standing by the door to the bus, waiting for the driver to come back from the bathroom.

'Yes,' Ben said. He turned and looked at her, full in the face, for the first time. She had a very pretty face, with candid blue eyes and a high, clear, tanned forehead. 'Is this town your childhood?' he asked.

'Yes.'

He nodded. 'Then you know. I was a kid in 'salem's Lot and it's haunted for me. When I came back, I almost drove right by because I was afraid it would be different.'

'Things don't change here,' she said. 'Not very much.'

'I used to play war with the Gardener kids down in the Marshes. Pirates out by Royal's Pond. Capture-the-flag and hide-and-go-seek in the park.

My mom and I knocked around some pretty hard places after I left Aunt

Cindy. She killed herself when I was fourteen, but most of the magic dust had rubbed off me long before that. What there was of it was here, and it's still here. The town hasn't changed that much. Looking out on Jointner Avenue is like looking through a thin pane of ice-like the one you can pick off the top of the town cistern in November if you knock it around the edges first-looking through that at your childhood. It's wavy and misty and in some places it trails off into nothing, but most of it is still all there.'

He stopped, amazed. He had made a speech.

‘You talk just like your books,’ she said, awed.

He laughed. ‘I never said anything like that before. Not out loud.’

‘What did you do after your mother… after she died?’

‘Knocked around,’ he said briefly. ‘Eat your ice cream.’

She did.

‘Some things have changed,’ she said after a while. ‘Mr Spencer died. Do you remember him?’

‘Sure. Every Thursday night Aunt Cindy came into town to do her shopping at Crossen’s store and she’d send me in here to have a root beer.

That was when it was on draft, real Rochester root beer. She’d give me a handkerchief with a nickel wrapped up in it.’

‘They were a dime when I came along. Do you remember what he always used to say?’

Ben hunched forward, twisted one hand into an arthritic claw, and turned one corner of his mouth down in a paralytic twist. ‘Your bladder,’ he whispered. ‘Those rut beers will destroy your bladder, bucko.’

Her laughter pealed upward toward the slowly rotating fan over their heads. Miss Coogan looked up suspiciously. ‘That’s *perfect!* Except he used to call me lassie.’

They looked at each other, delighted.

‘Say, would you like to go to a movie tonight?’ he asked.

‘I’d love to.’

‘What’s closest?’

She giggled. ‘The Cinex in Portland, actually. Where the lobby is decorated with the deathless paintings of Susan Norton.’

‘Where else? What kind of movies do you like?’

‘Something exciting with a car chase in it.’

‘Okay. Do you remember the Nordica? That was right here in town.’

‘Sure. It closed in 1968. 1 used to go on double dates there when I was in high school. We threw popcorn boxes at the screen when the movies were bad.’ She giggled. ‘They usually were.’

‘They used to have those old Republic serials,’ he said. ‘ *Rocket Man. The Return of Rocket Man. Crash Callahan and the Voodoo Death God.* ’

‘That was before my time.’

‘Whatever happened to it?’

‘That’s Larry Crockett’s real estate office now,’ she said. ‘The drive-in over in Cumberland killed it, I guess. That and TV.’

They were silent for a moment, thinking their own thoughts. The Greyhound clock showed 10:45 A.M.

They said in chorus: ‘Say, do you remember-’

They looked at each other, and this time Miss Coogan looked up at both of them when the laughter rang out. Even Mr Labree looked over.

They talked for another fifteen minutes, until Susan told him reluctantly that she had errands to run but yes, she could be ready at seven-thirty. When they went different ways, they both marveled over the easy, natural, coincidental impingement of their lives.

Ben strolled back down Jointner Avenue, pausing at the corner of Brock Street to look casually up at the Marsten House. He remembered that the

great forest fire of 1951 had burned almost to its very yard before the wind had changed.

He thought: Maybe it should have burned. Maybe that would have been better.

3

Nolly Gardener came out of the Municipal Building and sat down on the steps next to Parkins Gillespie just in time to see Ben and Susan walk into Spencer's together. Parkins was smoking a Pall Mail and cleaning his yellowed fingernails with a pocket knife.

'That's that writer fella, ain't it?' Nolly asked.

'Yep.'

'Was that Susie Norton with him?'

'Yep.'

'Well, that's interesting,' Nolly said, and hitched his garrison belt. His deputy star glittered importantly on his chest. He had sent away to a detective magazine to get it; the town did not provide its deputy constables with badges. Parkins had one, but he carried it in his wallet, something Nolly had never been able to understand. Of course everybody in the Lot knew he was the constable, but there was such a thing as tradition. There was such a thing as responsibility. When you were an officer of the law, you had to think about both. Nolly thought about them both often, although he could only afford to deputy part-time.

Parkins's knife slipped and slit the cuticle of his thumb. 'Shit,' he said mildly.

'You think he's a real writer, Park?'

'Sure he is. He's got three books right in this library.'

'True or made up?'

‘Made up.’ Parkins put his knife away and sighed.

‘Floyd Tibbets ain’t going to like some guy makin’ time with his woman.’

‘They ain’t married,’ Parkins said. ‘And she’s over eighteen.’

‘Floyd ain’t going to like it.’

‘Floyd can crap in his hat and wear it backward for all of me,’ Parkins said. He crushed his smoke on the step, took a Sucrets box out of his pocket, put the dead butt inside, and put the box back in his pocket.

‘Where’s that writer fella livin’?’

‘Down to Eva’s,’ Parkins said. He examined his wounded cuticle closely.

‘He was up lookin’ at the Marsten House the other day. Funny expression on his face.’

‘Funny? What do you mean?’

‘Funny, that’s all.’ Parkins took his cigarettes out. The sun felt warm and good on his face. ‘Then he went to see Larry Crockett. Wanted to lease the place.’

‘The *Marsten* place?’

‘Yep.’

‘What is he, crazy?’

‘Could be.’ Parkins brushed a fly from the left knee of his pants and watched it buzz away into the bright morning. ‘Ole Larry Crockett’s been a busy one lately. I hear he’s gone and sold the Village Washtub. Sold it awhile back, as a matter of fact.’

‘What, that old laundrymat?’

‘Yep.’

‘What would anyone want to put in there!’

‘Dunno.’

‘Well.’ Nolly stood up and gave his belt another hitch. ‘Think I’ll take a turn around town.’

‘You do that,’ Parkins said, and lit another cigarette.

‘Want to come?’

‘No, I believe I’ll sit right here for a while.’

‘Okay. See you.’

Nolly went down the steps, wondering (not for the first time) when Parkins would decide to retire so that he, Nolly, could have the job full-time. How in God’s name could you ferret out crime sitting on the Municipal Building steps?

Parkins watched him go with a mild feeling of relief. Nolly was a good boy, but he was awfully eager. He took out his pocket knife, opened it, and began paring his nails again.

4

Jerusalem’s Lot was incorporated in 1765 (two hundred years later it had celebrated its bicentennial with fireworks and a pageant in the park; little Debbie Forester’s Indian princess costume was set on fire by a thrown sparkler and Parkins Gillespie had to throw six fellows in the local cooler for public intoxication), a full fifty-five years before Maine became a state as the result of the Missouri Compromise.

The town took its peculiar name from a fairly prosaic occurrence. One of the area’s earliest residents was a dour, gangling farmer named Charles Belknap Tanner. He kept pigs, and one of the large sows was named Jerusalem. Jerusalem broke out of her pen one day at feeding time, escaped into the nearby woods, and went wild and mean. Tanner warned small children off his property for years afterward by leaning over his gate and

croaking at them in ominous, gore-crow tones: ‘Keep ‘ee out o’ Jerusalem’s wood lot, if ‘ee want to keep ‘ee guts in ‘ee belly!’ The warning took hold, and so did the name. It proves little, except that perhaps in America even a pig can aspire to immortality.

The main street, known originally as the Portland Post Road, had been named after Elias Jointner in 1896. Jointner, a member of the House of Representatives for six years (up until his death, which was caused by syphilis, at the age of fifty-eight), was the closest thing to a personage that the Lot could boast-with the exception of Jerusalem the pig and Pearl Ann Butts, who ran off to New York City in 1907 to become a Ziegfeld girl.

Brock Street crossed Jointner Avenue dead center and at right angles, and the township itself was nearly circular (although a little flat on the east, where the boundary was the meandering Royal River). On a map, the two main roads gave the town an appearance very much like a telescopic sight.

The northwest quadrant of the sight was north Jerusalem, the most heavily wooded section of town. It was the high ground, although it would not have appeared very high to anyone except perhaps a Midwesterner. The tired old hills, which were honeycombed with old togging roads, sloped down gently toward the town itself, and the Marsten House stood on the last of these.

Much of the northeast quadrant was open land-hay, timothy, and alfalfa.

The Royal River ran here, an old river that had cut its banks almost to the base level. It flowed under the small wooden Brock Street Bridge and

wandered north in flat, shining arcs until it entered the land near the northern limits of the town, where solid granite lay close under the thin soil.

Here it had cut fifty-foot stone cliffs over the course of a million years. The kids called it Drunk’s Leap, because a few years back Tommy Rathbun, Virge Rathbun’s tosspot brother, staggered over the edge while looking for a place to take a leak. The Royal fed the mill-polluted Androscoggin but had never been polluted itself; the only industry the Lot had ever boasted was a sawmill, long since closed. In the summer months, fishermen casting

from the Brock Street Bridge were a common sight. A day when you couldn't take your limit out of the Royal was a rare day.

The southeast quadrant was the prettiest. The land rose again, but there was no ugly blight of fire or any of the topsoil ruin that is a fire's legacy.

The land on both sides of the Griffen Road was owned by Charles Griffen, who was the biggest dairy farmer south of Mechanic Falls, and from Schoolyard Hill you could see Griffen's huge barn with its aluminum roof glittering in the sun like a monstrous heliograph. There were other farms in the area, and a good many houses that had been bought by the white-collar workers who commuted to either Portland or Lewiston. Sometimes, in autumn, you could stand on top of Schoolyard Hill and smell the fragrant odor of the field burnings and see the toylike 'salem's Lot Volunteer Fire Department truck, waiting to step in if anything got out of hand. The lesson of 1951 had remained with these people.

It was in the southwest area that the trailers had begun to move in, and everything that goes with them, like an exurban asteroid belt: junked-out cars up on blocks, tire swings hanging on frayed rope, glittering beer cans lying beside the roads, ragged wash hung on lines between makeshift poles, the ripe smell of sewage from hastily laid septic tanks. The houses in the Bend were kissing cousins to woodsheds, but a gleaming TV aerial sprouted from nearly every one, and most of the TVs inside were color, bought on credit from Grant's or Sears. The yards of the shacks and trailers were usually full of kids, toys, pickup trucks, snowmobiles, and motorbikes.

In some cases the trailers were well kept, but in most cases it seemed to be too much trouble. Dandelions and witch grass grew ankle-deep. Out near the town line, where Brock Street became Brock Road, there was Dell's, where a rock 'n' roll band played on Fridays and a c/w combo played on Saturdays. It had burned down once in 1971 and was rebuilt. For most of

the down-home cowboys and their girlfriends, it was the place to go and have a beer or a fight.

Most of the telephone lines were two-, four-, or six-party connections, and so folks always had someone to talk about. In all small towns, scandal is

always simmering on the back burner, like your Aunt Cindy's baked beans. The Bend produced most of the scandal, but every now and then someone with a little more status added something to the communal pot.

Town government was by town meeting, and while there had been talk ever since 1965 of changing to the town council form with biannual public budget hearings, the idea gained no way. The town was not growing fast enough to make the old way actively painful, although its stodgy, one-for-one democracy made some of the newcomers roll their eyes in exasperation. There were three selectmen, the town constable, an overseer of the poor, a town clerk (to register your car you have to go far out on the Taggart Stream Road and brave two mean dogs who ran loose in the yard), and the school commissioner. The volunteer Fire Department got a token appropriation of three hundred dollars each year, but it was mostly a social club for old fellows on pensions. They saw a fair amount of excitement during grass fire season and sat around the Reliable tall-taling each other the rest of the year. There was no Public Works Department because there were no public water lines, gas mains, sewage, or light-and-power. The CMP electricity pylons marched across town on a diagonal from northwest to southeast, cutting a huge gash through the timberland 150 feet wide. One of these stood close to the Marsten House, looming over it like an alien sentinel.

What 'salem's Lot knew of wars and burnings and crises in government it got mostly from Walter Cronkite on TV. Oh, the Potter boy got killed in Vietnam and Claude Bowie's son came back with a mechanical foot-stepped on a land mine-but he got a job with the post office helping Kenny Danies and so *that* was all right. The kids were wearing their hair longer and not combing it neatly like their fathers, but nobody really noticed anymore. When they threw the dress code out at the Consolidated High School, Aggie Corliss wrote a letter to the Cumberland *Ledger*, but Aggie had been writing to the *Ledger* every week for years, mostly about the evils of liquor and the wonder of accepting Jesus Christ into your heart as your personal savior.

Some of the kids took dope. Horace Kilby's boy Frank went up before Judge Hooker in August and got fined fifty dollars (the judge agreed to let

him pay the fine with profits from his paper route), but alcohol was a bigger problem. Lots of kids hung out at Dell's since the liquor age went down to eighteen. They went rip-assing home as if they wanted to resurface the road with rubber, and every now and then someone would get killed. Like when Billy Smith ran into a tree on the Deep Cut Road at ninety and killed both himself and his girl friend, LaVerne Dube.

But except for these things, the Lot's knowledge of the country's torment was academic. Time went on a different schedule there. Nothing too nasty could happen in such a nice little town. Not there.

5

Ann Norton was ironing when her daughter burst in with a bag of groceries, thrust a book with a rather thin-faced young man on the back jacket in her face, and began to babble.

'Slow down,' she said. 'Turn down the TV and tell me.' Susan choked off Peter Marshall, who was giving away thousands of dollars on 'The Hollywood Squares', and told her mother about meeting Ben Mears. Mrs Norton made herself nod with calm and sympathetic understanding as the story spilled out, despite the yellow warning lights that always flashed when Susan mentioned a new boy-men now, she supposed, although it was hard to think Susie could be old enough for men. But the lights were a little brighter today.

'Sounds exciting,' she said, and put another one of her husband's shirts on the ironing board.

'He was really nice,' Susan said. 'Very natural.'

'Hoo, my feet,' Mrs Norton said. She set the iron on its fanny, making it hiss balefully, and eased into the Boston rocker by the picture window. She reached a, Parliament out of the pack on the coffee table and lit it. 'Are you sure he's all right, Susie?'

Susan smiled a little defensively. 'Sure, I'm sure. He looks like… oh, I don't know-a college instructor or something.'

‘They say the Mad Bomber looked like a gardener,’ Mrs Norton said reflectively.

‘Moose shit,’ Susan said cheerfully. It was an epithet that never failed to irritate her mother.

‘Let me see the book.’ She held a hand out for it, Susan gave it to her, suddenly remembering the homosexual rape scene in the prison section.

‘ *Air Dance*,’ Ann Norton said meditatively, and began to thumb pages at random. Susan waited, resigned. Her mother would bird-dog it. She always did.

The windows were up, and a lazy forenoon breeze ruffled the yellow curtains in the kitchen-which Mom insisted on calling the pantry, as if they lived in the lap of class. It was a nice house, solid brick, a little hard to heat in the winter but cool as a grotto in the summer. They were on a gentle rise of land on outer Brock Street, and from the picture window where Mrs

Norton sat you could see all the way into town. The view was a pleasant one, and in the winter it could be spectacular with long, twinkling vistas of unbroken snow and distance-dwindled buildings casting yellow oblongs of light on the snow fields.

‘Seems I read a review of this in the Portland paper. It wasn’t very good.’

‘I like it,’ Susan said steadily. ‘And I like him.’

‘Perhaps Floyd would like him, too,’ Mrs Norton said idly. ‘You ought to introduce them.’

Susan felt a real stab of anger and was dismayed by it. She thought that she and her mother had weathered the last of the adolescent storms and even the aftersqualls, but here it all was. They took up the ancient arguments of her identity versus her mother’s experience and beliefs like an old piece of knitting.

‘We’ve talked about Floyd, Mom, You know there’s nothing firm there.’

‘The paper said there were some pretty lurid prison scenes, too. Boys getting together with boys.’

‘Oh, Mother, for Christ’s sake.’ She helped herself to one of her mother’s cigarettes.

‘No need to curse,’ Mrs Norton said, unperturbed. She handed the book back and tapped the long ash on her cigarette into a ceramic ash tray in the shape of a fish. It had been given to her by one of her Ladies’ Auxiliary friends, and it had always irritated Susan in a formless sort of way. There was something obscene about tapping your ashes into a perch’s mouth.

‘I’ll put the groceries away,’ Susan said, getting up.

Mrs Norton said quietly, ‘I only meant that if you and Floyd Tibbits are going to be married-’

The irritation boiled over into the old, goaded anger. ‘What in the name of *God* ever gave you that idea? Have I ever told you that?’

‘I assumed-’

‘You assumed wrong,’ she said hotly and not entirely truthfully. But she had been cooling toward Floyd by slow degrees over a period of weeks.

‘I assumed that when you date the same boy for a year and a half,’ her mother continued softly and implacably, ‘that it must mean things have gone beyond the handholding stage.’

‘Floyd and I are more than friends,’ Susan agreed evenly. Let her make something of that.

An unspoken conversation hung suspended between them.

Have you been sleeping with Floyd?

None of your business.

What does this Ben Mears mean to you?

None of your business.

A re you going to fall for him and do something foolish?

None of your business.

I love you, Susie. Your dad and I both love you.

And to that no answer. And no answer. And no answer. And that was why New York-or someplace-was imperative. In the end you always crashed against the unspoken barricades of their love, like the walls of a padded cell. The truth of their love rendered further meaningful discussion impossible and made what had gone before empty of meaning.

‘Well,’ Mrs Norton said softly. She stubbed her cigarette out on the perch’s lip and dropped it into his belly.

‘I’m going upstairs,’ Susan said.

‘Sure. Can I read the book when you’re finished?’

‘If you want to.’

‘I’d like to meet him,’ she said.

Susan spread her hands and shrugged.

‘Will you be late tonight?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What shall I tell Floyd Tibbits if he calls?’

The anger flashed over her again. ‘Tell him what you want.’ She paused.

‘You will anyway.’

‘Susan!’

She went upstairs without looking back.

Mrs Norton remained where she was, staring out the window and at the town without seeing it. Overhead she could hear Susan's footsteps and then the clatter of her easel being pulled out.

She got up and began to iron again. When she thought Susan might be fully immersed in her work (although she didn't allow that idea to do more than flitter through a corner of her conscious mind), she went to the telephone in the pantry and called up Mabel Werts. In the course of the conversation she happened to mention that Susie had told her there was a famous author in their midst and Mabel sniffed and said well you must mean that man who wrote *Conway's Daughter* and Mrs Norton said yes and

Mabel said that wasn't writing but just a sexbook, pure and simple. Mrs Norton asked if he was staying at a motel or -

As a matter of fact, he was staying downtown at Eva's Rooms, the town's only boardinghouse. Mrs Norton felt a surge of relief. Eva Miller was a decent widow who would put up with no hanky-panky. Her rules on women in the rooms were brief and to the point. If she's your mother or your sister, all right. If she's not, you can sit in the kitchen. No negotiation on the rule was entertained.

Mrs Norton hung up fifteen minutes later, after artfully camouflaging her main objective with small talk.

Susan, she thought, going back to the ironing board. Oh, Susan, I only want what's best for you. Can't you see that?

6

They were driving back from Portland along 295, and it was not late at all- only a little after eleven. The speed limit on the expressway after it got out of Portland's suburbs was fifty-five, and he drove well. The Citroën's headlights cut the dark smoothly.

They had both enjoyed the movie, but cautiously, the way people do when they are feeling for each other's boundaries. Now her mother's question occurred to her and she said, 'Where are you staying? Are you renting a place?'

'I've got a third-floor cubbyhole at Eva's Rooms, on Railroad Street.'

'But that's awful! It must be a hundred degrees up there!'

'I like the heat,' he said. 'I work well in it. Strip to the waist, turn up the radio, and drink a gallon of beer. I've been putting out ten pages a day, fresh copy. There's some interesting old codgers there, too. And when you finally go out on the porch and catch the breeze… heaven.'

'Still,' she said doubtfully.

'I thought about renting the Marsten House,' he said casually. 'Even went so far as to inquire about it. But it's been sold.'

'The *Marsten* House?' She smiled. 'You're thinking of the wrong place.'

'Nope. Sits up on that first hill to the northwest of town. Brooks Road.'

'Sold? Who in the name of heaven-?'

'I wondered the same thing. I've been accused of having a screw loose from time to time, but even I only thought of renting it. The real estate man wouldn't tell me. Seems to be a deep, dark secret.'

'Maybe some out-of-state people want to turn it into a summer place,'

she said. 'Whoever it is, they're crazy. Renovating a place is one thing-I'd love to try it-but that place is beyond renovation. The place was a wreck even when I was a kid. Ben, why would you ever want to stay there?'

'Were you ever actually inside?'

'No, but I looked in the window on a dare. Were you?'

‘Yes. Once.’

‘Creepy place, isn’t it?’

They fell silent, both thinking of the Marsten House. This particular reminiscence did not have the pastel nostalgia of the others. The scandal and violence connected with the house had occurred before their births, but

small towns have long memories and pass their horrors down ceremonially from generation to generation.

The story of Hubert Marsten and his wife, Birdie, was the closest thing the town had to a skeleton in its closet. Hubie had been the president of a large New England trucking company in the 1920s-a trucking company which, some said, conducted its most profitable business after midnight, running Canadian whisky into Massachusetts.

He and his wife had retired wealthy to ‘salem’s Lot in 1929, and had lost a good part of that wealth (no one, not even Mabel Werts, knew exactly how much) in the stock market crash of 1929.

In the ten years between the fall of the market and the rise of Hitler, Marsten and his wife lived in their house like hermits. The only time they were seen was on Wednesday afternoons when they came to town to do their shopping. Larry McLeod, who was the mailman during those years, reported that Marsten got four daily papers, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The New Yorker*, and a pulp magazine called *Amazing Stories*. He also got a check once a month from the trucking company, which was based in Fall River, Massachusetts. Larry said he could tell it was a check by bending the envelope and peeking into the address window.

Larry was the one who found them in the summer of 1939. The papers and magazines-five days’ worth-had piled up in the mailbox until it was impossible to cram in more. Larry took them all up the walk with the intention of putting them in between the screen door and the main door.

It was August and high summer, the beginning of dog days, and the grass in the Marsten front yard was calf-high, green and rank. Honeysuckle ran wild

over the trellis on the west side of the house, and fat bees buzzed indolently around the wax-white, redolent blossoms. In those days the house was still a fine-looking place in spite of the high grass, and it was generally agreed that Hubie had built the nicest house in ‘salem’s Lot before going soft in the attic.

Halfway up the walk, according to the story that was eventually told with breathless horror to each new Ladies’ Auxiliary member, Larry had smelled something bad, like spoiled meat. He knocked on the front door and got no answer. He looked through the door but could see nothing in the thick gloom. He went around to the back instead of walking in, which was lucky for him. The smell was worse in back. Larry tried the back door, found it unlocked, and stepped into the kitchen. Birdie Marsten was sprawled in a

corner, legs splayed out, feet bare. Half her head had been blown away by a close-range shot from a thirty-ought-six.

. (‘Flies,’ Audrey Hersey always said at this point, speaking with calm authority. ‘Larry said the kitchen was full of em. Buzzing around, lighting on the… you know, and taking off again. Flies.’) Larry McLeod turned around and went straight back to town. He fetched Norris Varney, who was constable at the time, and three or four of the hangers-on from Crossen’s Store-Milt’s father was still running the place in those days. Audrey’s eldest brother, Jackson, had been among them. They drove back up in Norris’s Chevrolet and Larry’s mail truck.

No one from town had ever been in the house, and it was a nine days’

wonder. After the excitement died down, the Portland *Telegram* had done a feature on it. Hubert Marsten’s house was a piled, jumbled, bewildering rat’s nest of junk, scavenged items, and narrow, winding passageways which led through yellowing stacks of newspapers and magazines and piles of moldering white-elephant books. The complete sets of Dickens, Scott, and Mariatt had been scavenged for the Jerusalem’s Lot Public Library by Loretta Starcher’s predecessor and still remained in the stacks.

Jackson Hersey picked up a *Saturday Evening Post*, began to flip through it, and did a double-take. A dollar bill had been taped neatly to each page.

Norris Varney discovered how lucky Larry had been when he went around to the back door. The murder weapon had been lashed to a chair with its barrel pointing directly at the front door, aimed chest-high. The gun was cocked, and a string attached to the trigger ran down the hall to the doorknob.

('Gun was loaded, too,' Audrey would say at this point. 'One tug and Larry McLeod would have gone straight up to the pearly gates.') There were other, less lethal booby traps. A forty-pound bundle of newspapers had been rigged over the dining room door. One of the stair risers leading to the second floor had been hinged and could have cost someone a broken ankle. It quickly became apparent that Hubie Marsten had been something more than Soft; he had been a full-fledged Loony.

They found him in the bedroom at the end of the upstairs hall, dangling from a rafter.

(Susan and her girl friends had tortured themselves deliciously with the stories they had gleaned from their elders; Amy Rawcliffe had a log playhouse in her back yard and they would lock themselves in and sit in the

dark, scaring each other about the Marsten House, which gained its proper noun status for all time even before Hitler invaded Poland, and repeating their elders' stories with as many grisly embellishments as their minds could conceive. Even now, eighteen years later, she found that just thinking of the Marsten House had acted on her like a wizard's spell, conjuring up the painfully clear images of little girls crouched inside Amy's playhouse, holding hands, and Amy saying with impressive eeriness: 'His face was all swole up and his tongue turned black and popped out and there was flies crawling on it. My momma tole Mrs Werts.')

'… place.'

'What? I'm sorry.' She came back to the present with an almost physical wrench. Ben was pulling off the turnpike and onto the 'salem's Lot exit ramp.

'I said, it was a spooky old place.'

Tell me about when you went in.'

He laughed humorlessly and flicked up his high beams. The two-lane blacktop ran straight ahead through an alley of pine and spruce, deserted. 'It started as kid's stuff. Maybe that's all it ever was. Remember, this was in 1951, and little kids had to think up something to take the place of sniffing airplane glue out of paper bags, which hadn't been invented yet. I used to play pretty much with the Bend kids, and most of them have probably moved away by now… do they still call south 'salem's Lot the Bend?'

'Yes.'

'I messed around with Davie Barclay, Charles James only all the kids used to call him Sonny Harold Rauberson, Floyd Tibbits-'

'Floyd?' she asked, startled.

'Yes, do you know him?'

'I've dated him,' she said, and afraid her voice sounded strange, hurried on: 'Sonny James is still around, too. He runs the gas station on Jointner Avenue. Harold Rauberson is dead. Leukemia.'

'They were all older than I, by a year or two. They had a club. Exclusive, you know. Only Bloody Pirates with at least three references need apply.'

He had meant it to be light, but there was a jag of old bitterness buried in the words. 'But I was persistent. The one thing in the world I wanted was to be a Bloody Pirate… that summer, at least.

'They finally weakened and told me I could come in if I passed the initiation, which Davie thought up on the spot. We were all going up to the

Marsten House, and I was supposed to go in and bring something out. As booty.' He chuckled but his mouth had gone dry.

'What happened?'

‘I got in through a window. The house was *still* full of junk, even after twelve years. They must have taken the newspapers during the war, but they just left the rest of it. There was a table in the front hall with one of those snow globes on it-do you know what I mean? There’s a little house inside, and when you shake it, there’s snow. I put it in my pocket, but I didn’t leave. I really wanted to prove myself. So I went upstairs to where he hung himself.’

‘Oh my God,’ she said.

‘Reach in the glove box and get me a cigarette, would you? I’m trying to quit, but I need one for this.’

She got him one and he punched the dashboard lighter.

‘The house smelled. You wouldn’t believe how it smelled. Mildew and upholstery rot and a kind of rancid smell like butter that had gone over. And living things-rats or woodchucks or whatever else that had been nesting in the walls or hibernating in the cellar. A yellow, wet smell.

‘I crept up the stairs, a little kid nine years old, scared shitless. The house was creaking and settling around me and I could hear things scuttling away from me on the other side of the plaster. I kept thinking I heard footsteps behind me. I was afraid to turn around because I might see Hubie Marsten shambling after me with a hangman’s noose in one hand and his face all black.’

He was gripping the steering wheel very hard. The levity had gone out of his voice. The *intensity* of his remembering frightened her a little. His face, in the glow of the instrument panel, was set in the long lines of a man who was traveling a hated country he could not completely leave.

‘At the top of the stairs I got all my courage and ran down the hall to that room. My idea was to run in, grab something from there, too, and then get the hell out of there. The door at the end of the hall was closed. I could see it getting closer and closer and I could see that the hinges had settled and the bottom edge was resting on the door jamb. I could see the doorknob, silvery and a little tarnished in the place where palms had gripped it. When

I pulled on it, the bottom edge of the door gave a scream against the wood like a woman in pain. If I had been straight, I think I would have turned around and gotten the hell out right then. But I was pumped full of

adrenaline, and I grabbed it in both hands and pulled for all I was worth. It flew open. And there was Hubie, hanging from the beam with his body silhouetted against the light from the window.'

'Oh, Ben, don't-' she said nervously.

'No, I'm telling you the truth,' he insisted. 'The truth of what a nine-year-old boy saw and what the man remembers twenty-four years later, anyway. Hubie was hanging there, and his face wasn't black at all. It was green. The eyes were puffed shut. His hands were livid… ghastly. And then he opened his eyes.'

Ben took a huge drag on his cigarette and pitched it out his window into the dark.

'I let out a scream that probably could have been heard for two miles.

And then I ran. I fell halfway downstairs, got up, and ran out the front door and straight down the road. The kids were waiting for me about half a mile down. That's when I noticed I still had the glass snow globe in my hand.

And I've still got it.'

'You don't really think you saw Hubert Marsten, do you, Ben?' Far up ahead she could see the yellow blinking light that signaled the center of town and was glad for it.

After a long pause, he said, 'I don't know.' He said it with difficulty and reluctance, as if he would have rather said no and closed the subject thereby. 'Probably I was so keyed up that I hallucinated the whole thing. On the other hand, there may be some truth in that idea that houses absorb the emotions that are spent in them, that they hold a kind of… dry charge.

Perhaps the right personality, that of An imaginative boy, for instance, could act as a catalyst on that dry charge, and cause it to produce an active manifestation of… of something. I'm not talking about ghosts, precisely.

I'm talking about a kind of psychic television in three dimensions. Perhaps even something alive. A monster, if you like.'

She took one of his cigarettes and lit it.

'Anyway, I slept with the light on in my bedroom for weeks after, and I've dreamed about opening that door off and on for the rest of my life.

Whenever I'm in stress, the dream comes.'

'That's terrible.'

'No, it's not,' he said. 'Not very, anyway. We all have our bad dreams.'

He gestured with a thumb at the silent, sleeping houses they were passing on Jointner Avenue. 'Sometimes I wonder that the very boards of those

houses don't cry out with the awful things that happen in dreams.' He paused. 'Come on down to Eva's and sit on the porch for a while, if you like. I can't invite you in-rules of the house-but I've got a couple of Cokes in the icebox and some Bacardi in my room, if you'd like a nightcap.'

'I'd like one very much.'

He turned onto Railroad Street, popped off the headlights, and turned into the small dirt parking lot which served the rooming house. The back porch was painted white with red trim, and the three wicker chairs lined up on it looked toward the Royal River. The river itself was a dazzling dream. There was a late summer moon caught in the trees on the river's far bank, three-quarters full, and it had painted a silver path across the water. With the town silent, she could hear the faint foaming sound as water spilled down the sluiceways of the dam.

'Sit down. I'll be back.'

He went in, closing the screen door softly behind him, and she sat down in one of the rockers.

She liked him in spite of his strangeness. She was not a believer in love at first sight, although she did believe that instant lust (going under the more innocent name of infatuation) occurred frequently. And yet he wasn't a man that would ordinarily encourage midnight entries in a locked diary; he was too thin for his height, a little pale. His face was introspective and bookish, and his eyes rarely gave away the train of his thoughts. All this topped with a heavy pelt of black hair that looked as if it had been raked with the fingers rather than brushed.

And that story -

Neither *Conway's Daughter* nor *Air Dance* hinted at such a morbid turn of mind. The former was about a minister's daughter who runs away, joins the counterculture, and takes a long, rambling journey across the country by thumb. The latter was the story of Frank Buzzey, an escaped convict who begins a new life as a car mechanic in another state, and his eventual recapture. Both of them were bright, energetic books, and Hubie Marsten's dangling shadow, mirrored in the eyes of a nine-year-old boy, did not seem to lie over either of them.

As if by the very suggestion, she found her eyes dragged away from the river and up to the left of the porch, where the last hill before town blotted out the stars.

'Here,' he said. 'I hope these'll be all right.

'Look at the Marsten House,' she said.

He did. There was a light on up there.

7

The drinks were gone and midnight passed; the moon was nearly out of sight. They had made some light conversation, and then she said into a pause:

‘I like you, Ben. Very much.’

‘I like you, too. And I’m surprised… no, I don ‘t mean it that way. Do you remember that stupid crack I made in the park? This all seems too fortuitous.’

‘I want to see you again, if you want to see me.’

‘I do.’

‘But go slow, Remember, I’m just a small-town girl.’

He smiled. ‘It seems so Hollywood. But Hollywood good. Am I supposed to kiss you now?’

‘Yes,’ she said seriously, ‘I think that comes next.’

He was sitting in the rocker next to her, and without stopping its slow movement forth and back, he leaned over and pressed his mouth on hers, with no attempt to draw her tongue or to touch her. His lips were firm with the pressure of his square teeth, and there was a faint taste-odor of rum and tobacco.

She began to rock also, and the movement made the kiss into something new. It waxed and waned, light and then firm. She thought: He’s tasting me.

The thought wakened a secret, clean excitement in her, and she broke the kiss before it could take her further.

‘Wow,’ he said.

‘Would you like to come to dinner at my house tomorrow night?’ she asked. ‘My folks would love to meet you, I bet.’ In the pleasure and serenity of this moment, she could throw that sop to her mother.

‘Home cooking?’

‘The homiest.’

‘I’d love it. I’ve been living on TV dinners since I moved in.’

‘Six o’clock? We eat early in Sticksville.’

‘Sure. Fine. And speaking of home, I better get you there. Come on.’

They didn’t speak on the ride back until she could see the night light twinkling on top of the hill, the one her mother always left on when she was out.

‘I wonder who’s up there tonight?’ she asked, looking toward the Marsten House.

‘The new owner, probably,’ he said noncommittally.

‘It didn’t look like electricity, that light,’ she mused. ‘Too yellow, too faint. Kerosene lamp, maybe.’

‘They probably haven’t had a chance to have the power turned on yet.’

‘Maybe. But almost anyone with a little foresight would call up the power company before they moved in.’ He didn’t reply. They had come to her driveway.

‘Ben,’ she said suddenly, ‘is your new book about the Marsten House?’

He laughed and kissed the tip of her nose. ‘It’s late.’

She smiled at him. ‘I don’t mean to snoop.’

‘It’s all right. But maybe another time… in daylight.’

‘Okay.’

‘You better get in, girly. Six tomorrow?’

She looked at her watch. ‘Six today.’

‘Night, Susan.’

‘Night.’

She got out and ran lightly up the path to the side door, then turned and waved as he drove away. Before she went in, she added sour cream to the milkman’s order. With baked potatoes, that would add a little class to supper.

She paused a minute longer before going in, looking up at the Marsten House.

8

In his small, boxlike room he undressed with the light off and crawled into bed naked. She was a nice girl, the first nice one since Miranda had died. He hoped he wasn’t trying to turn her into a new Miranda; that would be painful for him and horribly unfair to her.

He lay down and let himself drift. Shortly before sleep took him, he hooked himself up on one elbow, looked past the square shadow of his typewriter and the thin sheaf of manuscript beside it, and out the window.

He had asked Eva Miller specifically for this room after looking at several, because it faced the Marsten House directly.

The lights up there were still on.

That night he had the old dream for the first time since he had come to Jerusalem’s Lot, and it had not come with such vividness since those terrible maroon days following Miranda’s death in the motorcycle accident.

The run up the hallway, the horrible scream of the door as he pulled it open, the dangling figure suddenly opening its hideous puffed eyes, himself turning to the door in the slow, sludgy panic of dreams -

And finding it locked.

Chapter Three

THE LOT (I)