

# HAUNTED HEART

THE LIFE AND TIMES  
OF STEPHEN KING

*LISA ROGAK*



# HAUNTED HEART

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**ALSO BY LISA ROGAK**

**A BOY NAMED SHEL: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SHEL SILVERSTEIN**

**THE MAN BEHIND THE DA VINCI CODE: AN UNAUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF DAN BROWN**

**HAUNTED  
HEART**  
THE LIFE AND  
TIMES OF  
**STEPHEN KING**

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**FOR SCOTT MENDEL,  
FOR DEALING WITH ME AND  
MY FOIBLES FOR FIVE YEARS NOW**

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**INTRODUCTION**

**1. APT PUPIL**

**2. HEAD DOWN**

**3. THE GUNSLINGER**

**4. DESPERATION**

**5. RIDING THE BULLET**

**6. THE RUNNING MAN**

**7. DIFFERENT SEASONS**

**8. MAXIMUM OVERDRIVE**

**9. THE LONG WALK**

**10. IT GROWS ON YOU**

**11. THE GOLDEN YEARS**

**12. MISERY**

**13. SOMETIMES THEY COME BACK**

**14. THE END OF THE WHOLE MESS**

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

**TIME LINE**

**NOTES**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**INDEX**

# HAUNTED HEART

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## I'M AFRAID OF EVERYTHING

—STEPHEN KING

It's probably no surprise that his fears rule every second of Stephen King's existence. He's surrounded by them, and anyone who's read even one of his novels knows that the most innocent item can be a harbinger of terror.

At various times through the years, King has rattled off a veritable laundry list of his fears: the dark, snakes, rats, spiders, squishy things, psychotherapy, deformity, closed-in spaces, death, being unable to write, flying—fill in the blank, the list is long. He's described himself as having a permanent address in “the People's Republic of Paranoia.”

His treatises on his fear of the number thirteen—triskaidekaphobia—are particularly revealing. “The number 13 never fails to trace that old icy finger up and down my spine,” he wrote. “When I'm writing, I'll never stop work if the page number is 13 or a multiple of 13; I'll just keep on typing till I get to a safe number.

“I always take the last two steps on my back stairs as one, making thirteen into twelve. There were after all, thirteen steps on the English gallows up until 1900 or so. When I'm reading, I won't stop on page 94, 193, 382, since the sums of these numbers add up to thirteen.”

You get the picture. King—he prefers to be called Steve—draws upon his fears quite liberally in his writing, yet at the same time, part of the reason that he writes is to attempt to drown them out, to suffocate them and put them out of their misery once and for all so he'll never be tormented by them again.

Yeah, right. He doesn't believe it either.

The only way he can block them out is when he's writing. Once he gets rolling and is carried along by a story about a particular fear, it's gone, at least temporarily. He writes as fast and furiously as he can because if there's one thing Stephen King knows after spending decades writing, it's this: the moment the pen stops moving or the computer switches off, the fears will rush right back, ready for another round.

Despite his fear of therapists, he once went to see one. When he began cataloging his fears, the therapist interrupted him, telling him to visualize his fear as a ball he could close up in his fist. It was all he could do not to run for the door. “Lady, you don't know how much fear I've got,” he replied. “I can maybe get it down to the size of a soccer ball, but fear is my living and I can only get it so small.”

In an exchange with Dennis Miller on his former TV talk show, Steve was thrilled to discover that he had found a kindred spirit in the Land of Fear. The men were discussing their shared dread of flying when King offered his theory about how the collective fear of people on a plane helps prevent a crash.

“Right,” said Miller with a knowing nod. “The degree of rigidity in our body keeps the wings up.”

Not quite, as Steve went on to explain. “It's a psychic thing, and anybody with half a brain knows that it shouldn't work. You have three or four people who are terrified right out of their minds. We hold it up. The flight you have to be afraid of is the flight where there's nobody on who's afraid of flying. Those are the flights that crash. Trust me on this.”

A few nervous laughs came from the audience. Both men blinked past the glare of the lights and then looked at each other. They think we're *kidding*?

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Without fear where would Stephen King be? It's almost as if he's hooked on his anxiety, just one more thing for him to mainline, like the booze and drugs he was hooked on for decades. In fact, he made no secret of his lifelong struggle with substances.

"All those addictive substances are part of the bad side of what we do," he said. "I think it's part of that obsessive deal that makes you a writer in the first place, that makes you want to write it all down. Writing is an addiction for me. Even when the writing is not going well, if I don't do it, the fact that I'm not doing it nags at me."

One of the amazing aspects of Stephen King's life is that his copious drug and alcohol abuse didn't interfere with either the quantity or the quality of his prodigious output. However, while he would later acknowledge his surprise that his work didn't suffer—especially when the haze was thickest—he's also spoken with regret that he couldn't remember writing certain books, such as *Cujo*. That clearly bothered him, for he always fondly looked back on each of his novels and stories, revisiting them as if they were old friends, rerunning the memories of the nuances and the ideas of a world and people that he just happened to have pulled out of his head.

Writing horror and telling stories had become so ingrained in him over the years that cranking out thousands of words every day of the year was second nature to him, despite a daily input of booze and drugs that would easily have killed a college kid on a weekend binge. Indeed, some of the tall tales and denial extended to what he told interviewers. For years, he told them that he wrote every day, taking a break from writing only on the Fourth of July, his birthday, and Christmas. That was patently untrue. He later said that he couldn't *not* write every day of the year, but he thought telling fans that he allowed himself a whole three days away from writing made him seem more personable. He hadn't yet realized that admitting his addictions to his fans would make him appear even more human.

While he's long been an unapologetic admirer of everything mainstream—he's referred to himself as the Big Mac of authors—he isn't always comfortable on the pedestal. Steve's iconic position in popular fiction was cemented early on, only a few years after his first novel, *Carrie*, was published. And yet, he isn't above—or below—using his fame when it suits him.

King claims to hate being famous—his wife Tabby detests it even more, calling life with a celebrity spouse like being in "a goddamn fishbowl"—but even after three decades in the public spotlight, he still talks to journalists from media large and small, gives public talks, attends Red Sox games, and conducts book signings. After all, with more than thirty years in the business, his ability to sell books has little to do with whether he gives a bunch of interviews. Though he claims to be shy, he's still as open and self-deprecating as he was when he first started out.

Then, of course, there's the flip side: "When you get into this business, they don't tell you you'll get cat bones in the mail, or letters from crazy people, or that the people on the tour bus will be gathered at your fence snapping pictures."

Because he lives a life that is so out and about, pick a random New Englander and chances are he'll have a story about a Stephen King sighting.

A New Hampshire man who regularly visited Fenway Park knew that Steve had season tickets to the Red Sox games. For several years, he kept an eye out for Steve, but he never spotted him. One day at the stadium, he saw King walking toward him and he froze. He couldn't think of anything to say. Finally, all he could come out with was "Boo!" as they came eye to eye. Steve said "Boo!" back at

headed for his seat.

“He’s just a competitive guy who wants to be the best at what he does,” says Warren Silver, a friend from Bangor.

This, after sixty-three books published in thirty-five years, including collaborations, short-story collections—and having *The Green Mile* count as six separate books. Since the publication of *Carr* in 1974, none of his books has been out of print, an accomplishment that can be matched by few bestselling authors. Proof still that his fears loom large.

Does he write for a particular person? While he admits that he writes to vanquish his fear, and writing for an audience of one—himself—he has occasionally provided a glimpse of the real man behind the curtain, a man whom Steve has no real recollection of: his father, who walked out of the family home one evening for a pack of cigarettes and kept on going, leaving his wife and two sons—David, age four, and Steve, two—to fend for themselves throughout a childhood of wrenching poverty and great uncertainty.

“I really think I write for myself, but there does seem to be a target that this stuff pours out toward,” he said. “I am always interested in this idea that a lot of fiction writers write for their fathers because their fathers are gone.”

Steve coped with a difficult childhood by turning first to books and then to writing his own stories. And as he put it, it’s a world that he has never really left.

“You have to be a little nuts to be a writer because you have to imagine worlds that aren’t there,” he said. “You’re hearing voices, you’re making believe, you’re doing all of the things that we’re told as children not to do. Or else we’re told to distinguish between reality and those things. Adults will say, ‘You have an invisible friend, that’s nice, you’ll outgrow that.’ Writers don’t outgrow it.”

So who is Stephen King, really? The standard assumption of casual fans and detractors is that he must be a creepy man who loves to blow things up in his backyard. Loyal fans usually go a bit deeper, knowing him to be a loyal family man and a benefactor to countless charities, many around his Bangor, Maine, home.

His friends, however, present a different, more complex picture.

“He’s a brilliant, funny, generous, compassionate man whose character is made up of layer upon layer,” says longtime friend and coauthor Peter Straub. “What you see is not only not what you get, it isn’t even what you see. Steve is a mansion containing many rooms, and all of this makes him a wonderful company.”

According to Bev Vincent, a friend whom Steve helped out with Vincent’s book *The Road to the Dark Tower*, a reference guide to King’s seven-volume magnum opus, his self-image is somewhat surprising: “Steve still sees himself as a small-town guy who has done a few interesting things but doesn’t think that his personal life would interest anyone.”

And he doesn’t understand why anyone would want to read an entire book about him—let alone write one. On the other hand, he has no problem if people want to discuss his work, either face-to-face or in a book.

But we all know he’s wrong. Stephen King has led an endlessly fascinating life, and because we love, admire, and are scared out of our minds by his books, stories, and movies, of course we want to know more about the man who’s spawned it all. Who wouldn’t?

This is a biography, a story of his life. Of course his works play into it, they are unavoidable, but they are not the featured attraction here. Stephen King is.

Through the years, Steve's fans have been legendary for taking him to task whenever he's gotten the facts wrong in his stories. For instance, in *The Stand*, Harold Lauder's favorite candy bar was PayDay bar. At one point in the story, Harold left behind a chocolate fingerprint in a diary at a time when the candy contained no chocolate. In the first few months after the book was published, Steve received mailbags full of letters from readers to inform him of his mistake, which was remedied in later editions of the book. And then of course, the candy company began to make PayDays with chocolate. Though some might claim Steve was prescient, you can't blame the man; after all, this is a guy who isn't exactly fond of doing research when he's deep into the writing of a novel. "I do the research [after I write]," he said. "Because when I'm writing a book, my attitude is, don't confuse me with facts. You know, let me go ahead and get on with the work."

On the other hand, his lack of concern with the facts of both his fictional and real lives has proved to be more than a bit frustrating to me and other writers. In researching this biography, I've attempted to check and double-check the facts of his life, but whether it's the natural deterioration of memory that comes with age or two solid decades of abusing alcohol, cocaine, and other drugs in various combinations, the guy can't be faulted for fudging a few dates here and there.

For example, in *On Writing*, he wrote that his mother died in February 1974, two months before *Carrie* was first published. However, I have not only a copy of his mother's obituary but her death certificate, both of which show that she most definitely died on December 18, 1973, in Mexico, Maine, at the home of Steve's brother, Dave.

Once I knew I was going to be writing about King's life, I got busy. I dug up old interviews in obscure publications that only published one issue back in 1975, read numerous books, and watched almost all of the movies based on his stories and novels—good and bad, and, boy, the bad ones can be a hoot. I also plunged into the many books that have been written about him and his work since the early eighties. As with the films, there are some good ones and some that are not so good.

The thing that struck me was not the blood and guts and special effects; the gory scenes in his books and movies weren't as bad as I'd imagined they would be. And it wasn't his ability to draw and develop characters; I already knew that was one of his particular talents.

What really got me was how funny the man is. I mean, really funny. Yes, his use of pop-culture references and brand names can be amusing when placed side by side with a guy who has a cleaver sticking out of his neck, or as with a corpse in an office setting with an Eberhard pencil stuck in each eye, but his sense of humor just knocked me over. I fell off the couch when the ice cream truck in *Maximum Overdrive* started playing "King of the Road," and again in *Graveyard Shift* when rats are trying to stay on top of broken planks coursing down a fast-moving stream in the middle of a mill floor and the music playing is "Surfin' Safari" by the Beach Boys. King did not write the screenplay for the latter, but you just know his long arm of influence made it into the film.

Steve has gone on the record countless times to say that the one question he hates most is "Where do you get your ideas?" To me as a biographer, all you have to do is ask, "Is it authorized?" to make my face screw up like King's after an awestruck fan has asked him the idea question.

No, this biography is *not* authorized. The running joke among biographers is that if it is authorized, the book makes a good cure for insomnia. King does know about this book and told his friends that they could talk with me if they desired. I visited Bangor over several gray, bleak November days in the fall of 2007 to check out all of the key Stephen King haunts. In other words, all the highlights of the local Stephen King tours. It was sheer serendipity that one morning I found myself sitting in his office in the former National Guard barracks out near the airport, with his longtime assistant Marsilio DeFillipo grilling me about my aim for this book.

For most of that half-hour interrogation, the man himself hovered just outside the doorway listening in on our conversation but never once stepping inside.

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In the end, perhaps the most surprising thing about Stephen King is that he is a die-hard romantic which is evident in all of his stories. And to the surprise of his millions of fans, he would be the first to admit it, though to hear him explain it, maybe it's not really much of a revelation.

"Yes, I am a romantic," he said back in 1988. "I believe all those sappy, romantic things, that children are good, good wins out over evil, it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. I really believe all that shit. I can't help it. I see a lot of it at work."

However, the most romantic hearts are often the most haunted. I chose *Haunted Heart* as the title of this biography because it's clear that Stephen King's childhood indelibly shaped him for both good and not so good.

In an interview with the BBC, when Steve talked about his father and growing up without him, he began with a bit of an edge, a defiance as if to say, "Why are we talking about this? I'm so over it and have been for decades." Once he got going, however, things got painfully intimate, revealing the hurtful, petulant boy that still exists close to the surface beneath Stephen King's skin. During his childhood, when the other kids had fathers and he didn't, he explained. Male relatives were around, to be sure, but they weren't the real thing. It would *never* be the real thing.

"At least the father in *The Shining* was there, even though he was bad," he said. "For me, there was a vacuum that was neither good or bad, just an empty place." At that point, his face crumpled a little, he distractedly ran a hand through his hair, and he looked away from the camera, which remained focused on him for a second or two before abruptly cutting away.

In short, Stephen King has never gotten over feeling like an abandoned child and he never stopped being a child permanently haunted by his father's absence. That's something that will never change and has affected his entire life, from his childhood and his marriage to his books. *Especially* his books.

Keep this in mind as you read both this book and Steve's novels, and you'll find that it will go a long way toward a deeper understanding of the man and the worlds he's created.

By all accounts, Stephen King should never have been born.

His mother, Nellie Ruth Pillsbury, who went by her middle name, married a captain in the merchant marines named Donald Edwin King on July 23, 1939, in Scarborough, Maine. But given Donald's frequent and lengthy absences due to the encroaching war, their marriage was on shaky ground from the start.

Doctors had informed Ruth that she would never bear children, and so the Kings did what many presumably infertile couples did back then and applied to adopt a child.

David Victor was adopted shortly after his birth in Portland, Maine, on September 14, 1945, a month after the end of the war.

Despite her doctor's diagnosis of infertility, in the midwinter of 1947, Ruth discovered she was pregnant. Stephen Edwin King was born on September 21, 1947, two years to the day after David's adoption was finalized. He shares the birthday with H. G. Wells, author of such sci-fi classics as *The War of the Worlds*, who was born eighty-one years earlier.

Nellie Ruth Pillsbury was born on February 3, 1913, in Scarborough, Maine, to Guy Herbert and Nellie Weston Fogg Pillsbury. She was the fourth of eight children.

Ruth's ancestral roots ran deep in her seaside hometown of Scarborough, Maine. Her great-great-grandfather Jonathan Pillsbury moved to town before 1790 just after the American Revolution ended. He married a local woman, and raised a family. Ruth's ancestors owned property, farmed, and built ships and houses in Scarborough for many generations. The family lived on Prouts Neck, a peninsula a fifteen-minute drive from Portland, whose population was a mix of summer people and locals whose roots went back at least several generations. As a young girl, Ruth was surrounded by her siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Artist Winslow Homer, who died in 1910, had his studio and retirement home near Guy Pillsbury's home.

In the nineteenth century, Scarborough was an active seaport. In addition to farming, townspeople participated in fishing and shipbuilding. A dike was built in 1877 to control overflowing tidal marshes, but it changed the seascape around Scarborough from a port to a salt marsh.

The town recovered and gained popularity as a summer destination in the early 1900s when regular trolley service brought tourists from Boston and New York. Vacation establishments known as shore dinner houses sprang up along with tourist homes and hotels and motels. A majority of the population worked at jobs in the tourist industry for the summer, including a hotel known as the Pillsbury House, run by some of Ruth's relatives from 1915 to 1932. In the early 1900s, Ruthie's father, Guy, supplemented his main income as a carpenter by shuttling tourists from the station to their hotels in a horse-drawn carriage.

Nellie, Ruth's mother, had worked as a schoolteacher before her marriage, and the entire Pillsbury family placed a high importance on education and music for their children. Ruth's siblings would go on to attend Bowdoin, Northeastern, and Emerson.

In 1931, the Depression was deeply entrenched in coastal Maine. Natives were already used making do with what they had, but the Depression brought even less hard cash to down-east households as fewer tourists could afford to travel to the state for vacation. Guy Pillsbury had a large household: his oldest daughter, Mary, at twenty-three, was still living at home, as were his other children, Mollie, Lois, Mary, Guy Jr., Carolyn, Ethelyn, and Ruth. It was time for some of them to move on. Ruth was only too happy to set off to see the world.

After her idyllic childhood, Ruth studied piano at the New England Conservatory in Boston for a short time. Little is known about her life during the Depression, but clearly she didn't have an easy time of it when it came to her personal life.

A couple of years after she left Scarborough in 1931, Ruth got married, but the marriage quickly soured and she filed for divorce. In the 1930s, divorce was rare in the United States, and many men would automatically have viewed a divorced woman as damaged goods. A few years later, she met Donald Edwin King, who was born on March 11, 1914, to William R. and Helen A. Bowden King, in Peru, Indiana, and Ruth's history as a divorced woman didn't seem to bother him.

Ruth and Donald were married on July 23, 1939, in Scarborough, Maine, with her family present. Shortly after the wedding, the couple moved to Chicago to live with Donald's family at 4815 Belmont Plaine Avenue. The honeymoon quickly wore off as Ruth found herself homesick for her native Maine. She was frequently alone while Donald continued to travel around the world as a merchant marine.

Over the next six years, the couple moved frequently. After spending a couple of years in Chicago, they moved to 17 Terrace Place in Croton-on-Hudson, just north of New York City. But again, Donald took off, leaving Ruth to fend for herself for a few years while her husband visited sporadically.

She put a brave face on things and decided to pursue a musical career. Every Sunday morning, she ferried herself to Manhattan's Rockefeller Center to play the organ on a radio show called *The Church Today* on the NBC network, a weekly broadcast of a traditional church service. If Donald objected to his wife's career, it didn't stop her. After all, Ruth was a headstrong woman. Besides, he wasn't around enough to be bothered by it.

When it was clear that World War Two would soon end, the Kings returned to Maine and Donald retired from his footloose life. The couple fell into an uneasy truce in their modest home in Scarborough, Maine, an hour's drive from Ruth's relatives in Durham. Ruth had never learned to drive a car and depended on her husband to get around. He didn't care for her family, so visits were infrequent. The couple's unhappiness grew.

Donald took a job as a door-to-door salesman around Portland, pushing Electrolux vacuum cleaners to housewives who were establishing families and contented households as they settled into the beginnings of the postwar baby boom. Knowing that he'd spend each night in the same house, with the same woman, did nothing to soothe the restlessness Donald had indulged during the years he roamed all over the world, during stints at sea that lasted for months at a time. "As my mother once told me, he was the only man on the sales force who regularly demonstrated vacuum cleaners to pretty young widows at two o'clock in the morning," said Steve years later. "He was quite a ladies' man, according to my mother. In any case, he was a man with an itchy foot, a travelin' man, as the song says. I think trouble came easy to him."

Neither an adopted nor a biological child could keep Donald with his family. He was stuck in a place he didn't like with a family he didn't particularly want. And the housewives who invited him into their homes for more than his vacuum cleaners couldn't hold him either. He missed the adventure of the open road and sea, and waking up in the morning—or in the middle of the night—and never

knowing which enemies he'd face.

So one night, when Steve had just turned two, Donald casually told his wife that he was going to the store for a pack of cigarettes. He walked out the door and kept on going. They never saw him again. The drama of his departure would be comically cliché, if not for the permanent damage it did to every member of the King family.

Ruth was a resourceful Mainer, frugal and practical by nature.

After her husband walked out, Ruth packed up her two kids, swallowed her pride, and depended on her relatives, as well as Don's family in Chicago, to put them up for a short time each while she looked for a job to keep them afloat. Steady jobs for a once-divorced, once-abandoned female pianist with two small children were not in great abundance, even in the great economic boom of the postwar years, so she took what she could get, which most often was menial labor as a housekeeper or bakery clerk.

The small King family would stay in a room in an aunt's or cousin's house or apartment until Ruth felt they were about to wear out their welcome, then they'd move on to the next sympathetic relative with a room to spare. Their perambulations took them far beyond Maine. During the first four years after Donald left and while Stephen was two to six years of age, they lived in Chicago; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Malden, Massachusetts; and West De Pere, Wisconsin.

Sometimes, to Ruth's great consternation, she had to split up the family. At one point Steve stayed with Ruth's younger sister Ethelyn and her husband, Oren Flaws, in West Durham, Maine, while Dave stayed with Mollie, another sister, in Malden, Massachusetts.

Ruth King rarely let her boys see her dejection at their poverty and constant moves. Instead, she dealt with their circumstances with a sense of humor and by telling her young sons stories. Both her optimism and storytelling would have a lasting influence on Steve.

The boys often shared a bedroom, more often a bed, and had to deal with threadbare hand-me-down clothes and broken toys from cousins who were often resentful at the attention Steve and Dave received. In the midst of such tumult, and with a few relatives who were clearly not thrilled about having a couple of youngsters underfoot, the two young boys quickly learned to look after each other and finding a comfortable refuge in books. They often read to each other. When Ruth got home from work she'd grill them to make sure that they'd been reading the whole time she was gone.

In later years, Steve told a story from when he was four years old and playing outside with a friend who lived near a railroad line. He was supposed to wait to be picked up or to call Ruth when he wanted to come home, but he showed up back home an hour later, clearly in shock, his face white as a sheet.

While they were playing, Steve's friend had wandered over to the tracks and been hit by a freight train. "My mother told me they picked up the pieces in a wicker basket," he said years later. "My mom never knew if I had been near him, and I have no memory of the incident at all, only of having been told about it some years after the fact."

The family's constant changes of address continued. When Steve was in kindergarten, Ruth packed up the family to live with Donald's family in Chicago for a time. This was something new, a reconnection to Steve's father. Through all their moves, Steve and Dave had learned to keep quiet whenever they were around grown-ups, but it became especially important when they were staying with Granny Spansky, Donald's mother. Steve was even better behaved around her for two reasons.

First, if he kept his mouth shut and just listened, maybe he'd hear her talk about why his father had left. After all, she was Donald's mother, she *had* to know what happened to him. But if she did know the whereabouts of her son, she wasn't talking.



Second, she was nothing like his mother's relatives back in Maine, who were reserved, quiet, and steered away from uncomfortable and difficult subjects. Granny Spansky reminded Steve of the evil witches in the stories he and Dave read to each other. "She was a big, heavyset woman who alternately fascinated and repelled me," he said. "I can still see her cackling like an old witch through toothless gums. She'd fry an entire loaf of bread in bacon drippings on an antique range and then gobble down, chortling, 'My, that's *crisp!*' "

After they left Granny Spansky's house, they moved to West De Pere, Wisconsin, to live with Ruth's sister Cal for a while, then they moved on to Fort Wayne, Indiana, where they lived with Don's sister Betty for a few months before finding an apartment of their own nearby. But Steve already knew it wouldn't last. Either they'd be evicted—once they were kicked out of an apartment after the babysitter fell asleep and a neighbor saw Steve crawling on the roof of the building—or they'd wear out their welcome and the sisters would be calling each other long-distance to see who would take Ruth and the boys *this* time. Before long, it was time to move again.

When Stephen was six years old, Ruth and her sons moved to her sister Lois's house in Stratford, Connecticut. Finally, it looked as if Ruth's fortunes were starting to turn. After working for a few months, she had saved enough money to rent an apartment of their own nearby.

Once Steve got to school, he was always the new kid in the class, often more than once in one school year. But he quickly learned how to cope. If one of his classmates began to pick on him, it didn't last that long; Steve combined his intelligence and wit to gently disarm his fellow students—always in a nice way, he'd been on the receiving end of nasty and knew it only made the target hate the tormentor more—along with his teachers, and so he rarely had any trouble.

But from the beginning, Steve was a sickly kid. Whether from the stress of the family's constant moves or living in poverty, he spent most of the first-grade year home from school, confined to his bed. First he came down with measles, followed by strep throat, which then spread to his ears. He ended up with a nasty ear infection that wouldn't go away no matter how many antibiotics he took.

To combat boredom while at home, he devoured every book he could get his hands on, including a wide assortment of comic books of the day, but he also began to create his own stories. One day he copied the words out of the cartoon balloons into a notepad, adding some description about setting or a character's appearance whenever he felt it was necessary. He gave it to his mother, who read it and showered praise on him, until he admitted that he didn't really write it after all, it was mostly copied.

A flash of disappointment crossed her face. She told him those comics were mostly one-note: "He's always knocking someone's teeth out. I bet you could do better. Write one of your own."

Steve immediately got to work, scribbling out a story entitled "Mr. Rabbit Trick," about a white bunny who drove around town with his three animal pals looking for little kids in trouble to help. When he handed it to Ruth, the first question she asked was if he had written it himself. He answered yes. She told him it was good enough to be in a book, and he was so jazzed by her approval that he sat down and wrote four more stories about the rabbit and his buddies. She read them, smiled and laughed in all the right places, then gave Steve a quarter for each story.

It was the first money he made as a writer.

When he was engrossed in writing, he forgot he was sick. Though his stories made him feel better, they did nothing to clear up the infection. Ruth brought him to an ear doctor who recommended that his ears be lanced by sticking a sterilized needle into the eardrum to drain the moisture so the infection could heal. The doctor told the young boy to lie still on the exam table and be quiet. But he also assured Steve it wouldn't hurt. "The pain was beyond anything I have ever felt," he wrote years

later. He howled and screamed as the tears ran down his face. But more important, he tried to absorb that the doctor had lied to him.

He returned to the doctor's office a week later, and again the doctor said it wouldn't hurt. "The second time I almost believed it," he said. But he was again betrayed. The third week when the lie was repeated, Steve kicked and thrashed on the table, anticipating the searing pain while realizing that he could do nothing to prevent what was about to happen. What made matters worse was that the doctor never got his name right, calling him Robert instead of Steve.

"In my panicky child's way, I'm thinking, 'Of course it will hurt! You're even lying about what my name is!'"

After his ears cleared up, his tonsils flared up next. After they were removed, he recovered, and he never again had to face a doctor with a needle pointed at his ear. But Steve had missed so much school that he had to repeat the first grade. To further embarrass him, that same year his brother, David, was doing so well that he was allowed to skip the fourth grade.

After Steve's father left, the only reference anyone in the family made to Donald was with a kind of shorthand: he became known as Daddy Done, short for Daddy Done Left.

"It was like he was an unperson," said Steve. Whenever Ruth had to leave Dave and Steve with various relatives, the boys would occasionally overhear a cousin or an aunt whispering among themselves that she'd had a nervous breakdown, and the only way she could get better was to go off and rest someplace for a while. The truth was that Ruth was actually working two and three jobs to pay off the debts Donald had accumulated during their marriage.

While she never wanted her kids to find out, Ruth did engage them in a bit of conspiracy before they entered elementary school. In the 1950s, for a husband to leave a wife, or to get a divorce, was the ultimate shame, especially in a small town, where neighbors would gossip about the real reasons and typically blame the woman. Only a widow could hold her head up high.

And so Ruth pulled her two young sons aside and told them what to say whenever anyone asked where their father was: "Tell them he's in the navy."

"We were ashamed not to have a father," said King. "I think my mother was deeply ashamed to have been left with these two young boys when her other sisters kept their husbands."

At one point Ruth had a job working the midnight shift at a bakery. Her sons would come home from school and have to tiptoe around so she could sleep. Desserts, a rarity before, now came in the form of broken cookies from the bakery.

Ruth lacked the time or the energy to chastise her children—she expected David to help her to raise his younger brother. But when Steve began to show interest in science fiction stories and horror comics, she told him she disapproved, though she never gave either of her children an outright no. Instead she preferred to let them make their own decisions and perhaps learn a lesson.

Steve's mother did forbid him to listen to radio broadcasts of Ray Bradbury's science fiction stories, but Steve eavesdropped anyway upstairs from his bedroom through a heating vent after he was supposed to be in bed as his mother listened to the radio downstairs. Afterward, he was so scared that he couldn't sleep in his own bed so he slept under his brother's.

As his appetite for books grew, a few started to make a huge impression on him. When he read *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* by Dr. Seuss, Steve realized that strange things could happen to perfectly normal people often for no reason at all.

He loved the comic-book series *Castle of Frankenstein* and bought the new installments every time one appeared on the newsstand.

Steve and his brother discovered E.C. Comics, which stood for Entertaining Comics, in the midfifties. The boys loved the ghosts, zombies, and ghouls that were featured in the bimonthly *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, and *The Crypt of Terror*. The publisher of E.C. was Bill Gaines, who would create a new kind of comic book in 1956 with *Mad* magazine. The narrators of E.C. comics would often start with an aside directed at “Dear Reader.” This would later be echoed in Steve’s work with the use of the salutation “Constant Reader” in his stories and novels.

“One of my favorites was when a baseball team was disemboweling the bad guys and lining the base paths with their intestines,” Steve said. “They used his head for the ball, and this one eye was bulging out as the bat hits it.”

Though Ruth was tolerant of her son’s choice of reading material, she hated E.C. comics. She finally put her foot down when he began to wake up in the middle of the night screaming from his nightmares. She confiscated all of Steve’s copies and refused to give them back, so he bought more and hid them under his bed. When she caught him, she’d ask why he was wasting his time with such junk. “Someday, I’m going to write this junk,” he replied.

In addition to reading comic books and writing stories, Steve also loved the movies. When he was living in Connecticut, he watched the *Million Dollar Movie* on WOR, broadcast out of New York, as much as he could. This nightly program featured a black-and-white movie, usually from the 1940s that was often repeated every night for a week. Steve was glued to the screen and began to study the structure, language, and special effects in each movie, and he began to apply the lessons he learned to his own writing. “I began to see things as I wrote, in a frame like a movie screen,” he said.

He also saw *The Snake Pit*, a 1948 movie starring Olivia de Havilland, about a woman who is in an insane asylum but doesn’t know how she ended up there and as a result is driven insane. Steve’s wife Tabby, later said that the movie made a lasting impression on him: “I think it may have infected him with a belief that you can go insane quite easily.”

Steve agreed: “As a kid, I worried about my sanity a lot.”

He also went to the movie theater as much as he could. He particularly loved the B-grade horror flicks such as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* and *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* and cheesy sci-fi movies like *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

Though some people enjoy watching horror movies for the schlock value, even back then Steve never denied that he was scared out of his wits by these movies, while continuing to go back for more. “I liked to be scared, I liked the total surrender of emotional control,” he said. “I’d been raised in a family where emotional control was a really important thing. You weren’t supposed to show you were afraid, you weren’t supposed to show that you were in pain or frightened or sad.

“There was a high premium on keeping yourself to yourself—on maintaining a pleasant exterior—saying ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you,’ and using your handkerchief even if you’re on the *Titanic* and it’s going down, because that’s the way you were supposed to behave.”

While being scared out of his wits, he was also studying the technical effects in the films. “I got a little more discriminating in my ability to detect special effects, if not necessarily my sense of taste,” he observed. “Even when the flying saucer appeared to be a Kool cigarette filter tip with a sparkler stuck in it, it looked real to me because I was at a young and very credulous age.”

But he wasn’t too discriminating in his movie tastes: he also loved World War Two movies such as *Halls of Montezuma*, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and *Gung Ho!*

In fact, the first movie that terrified him wasn’t even a horror film, but one from Walt Disney. After he saw *Bambi* in 1955, the forest-fire scene gave him nightmares for weeks.

It wasn't just the movies that scared him; the normal things in everyday life did as well.

Perhaps Steve's greatest fear was what would happen to him and his brother if Ruth fell ill and couldn't take care of them. Or worse. It was clear that the relatives didn't want children. Steve thought he and Dave would end up in foster care or a place like the insane asylum in *The Snake Pit*.

Steve was learning that the world was a scary place—both the real one and the make-believe one—and as a result, his fears were beginning to multiply exponentially. He was afraid of spiders, falling into the toilet, older kids, what-if-his-mother-suddenly-walked-away-too, everything. He was afraid that he'd die before he was twenty years old. He was also scared of clowns. "When I was a kid, I saw other kids cry about clowns too," he said. "To me there's something scary, something sinister about such a figure of happiness and fun being evil."

Ruth did her part to contribute to her son's fears as well. "One of the reasons I've been successful is that I was brought up by a woman who worried all the time," he said. "She'd tell me to put on my rubbers or I'd get pneumonia and die."

But back in the 1950s, some bona fide fears appeared as well, including a nationwide polio epidemic for which no vaccine existed. Most people refrained from swimming in public pools because of the fear of contracting the disease. And then there were the Russians. The general anxiety about the Communists was pervasive throughout the culture. And the fears of having an atomic bomb fall on your town were amplified with every school air-raid drill, which sent kids scurrying under their desks for protection.

One Saturday afternoon in October 1957, Steve was at a Saturday matinee when suddenly the movie screen went dark. The audience started to make noise, believing that the film strip had broken or the projectionist had switched to the wrong reel, but suddenly the lights came on overhead and the manager walked down the aisle and stood in front of the screen. "He mounted the stage and in a trembling voice, he told us that the Russians had just launched a space satellite into orbit around Earth called *Sputnik*," said King. The United States was supposed to be number one when it came to everything—military strength and technology among them—and so when it was clear the Russians had taken the lead, the nation felt as if it had been punched in the gut.

In addition to warning Steve and Dave about the dangers of catching cold, Ruth King was fond of giving her children advice by offering up pithy sayings such as "You'll never be hung for your beauty" and "You need that like a hen needs a flag." After a particularly grueling day at work, she'd caution her children to "hope for the best and expect the worst."

Though Steve brushed some of the sayings off, two in particular he took to heart, while providing them with a little bit of a spin: "If you think the worst, it can't come true" and "If you can't see something nice, keep your mouth shut."

Fortunately, Ruth never said he couldn't *write* things that weren't nice.

Throughout his childhood, Steve continued to write and Ruth continued to pay him a quarter for each story. He wrote his first horror story at the age of seven. Spending almost every weekend and every weeknight sitting slack-jawed in front of a movie screen had begun to affect his subject matter.

"I had internalized the idea from the movies that just when everything looked blackest, the scientists would come up with some off-the-wall solution that would take care of things," he said. So he wrote a story about a dinosaur that was creating a lot of damage and havoc when one of the scientists came to the rescue. "He said, 'Wait, I have a theory—the old dinosaur used to be allergic to leather.' So they went out and threw leather boots and shoes and leather vests at it, and it went away."

However, all of the movies and comics and horror stories Steve devoured also had a downside: they often caused nightmares. "My imagination was too big for my head at that point, and so I spent a lot of

of miserable hours,” he said. “With the kind of imagination I had, you couldn’t switch off the images once you’d triggered them, so I’d see my mother laid out in a white-silk-lined mahogany coffin with brass handles, her dead face blank and waxen. I’d hear the organ dirges in the background, and then I’d see myself being dragged off to some Dickensian workhouse by a terrible old lady in black.”

At the age of eight, he had a dream where he saw the body of a hanged man on a scaffold atop a hill. “When the wind caused the corpse to turn in the air, I saw that it was my own face, rotted and picked over by the birds, but still obviously mine. And then the corpse opened its eyes and looked at me.”

He woke up and started screaming and couldn’t stop. “Not only was I unable to go back to sleep for hours after that, but I was really afraid to turn out the light for weeks. I can still see it as clearly now as when it happened.”

In 1958, Ruth moved the family from Connecticut to West Durham, Maine, a small town about thirty miles north of Scarborough, so she could care for her ailing, elderly parents, who were both in their eighties.

It was her sisters’ idea. The arrangement was that her siblings would offer Ruth food and a place, a small, old, rickety farmhouse with an outhouse out back. Steve, Dave, and Ruth would share the house and receive spare food and canned goods in exchange for caring for Mama and Daddy Guy, as they were known, who were beginning to have trouble taking care of themselves. Ruth’s sister and brother-in-law Ethelyn and Oren Flaws also lived nearby.

Ruth accepted the offer, and the three settled in West Durham in a neighborhood near Runaround Pond that Steve later described as consisting of “four families and a graveyard.”

Once the family had settled in, Steve discovered he was surrounded by relatives and the family history, exaggerations and gossip characteristic of small towns—including a few good ghost stories. By listening to the tall tales and rumors, he learned that people liked to invent truths where there were none. It was a valuable lesson for a budding writer.

Ruth came from a long line of Methodists, so her children dutifully attended services and Bible school several times a week at the tiny, two-hundred-year-old Methodist church next door to the house.

Fewer than twenty families attended the church, so the parish had no funds to retain a full-time preacher. The church drew on members of the congregation to lead services and preach sermons, a rotating selection that occasionally included Steve, though several times a year when they were feeling flush, parishioners would invite a traveling preacher to conduct services.

Hanging on one of the walls of the parish hall was a poster with the words METHODISTS SAY NO THANK YOU. At Sunday school, children would dutifully learn their Bible verses and recite them from memory. For their efforts, they were rewarded with unadorned miniature crucifixes that the children could paint as they desired, deciding for themselves whether to add the bloody thorns on the hands and feet.

“I listened to a lot of fire and brimstone as a child,” Steve said. “Part of me will always be the Methodist kid who was told that you were not saved by work alone, and that hellfire was very long. One story he heard that described the afterlife was about a pigeon that flies to a mountain made of iron to rub its beak on the metal only once every ten thousand years, and the time it took the mountain to erode is the equivalent of the first second of hell. “When you’re six or seven years old, that kind of stuff bends your mind a little,” he said, readily admitting the images from church have long influenced his stories and novels.

Stephen attended fifth and sixth grades in the Center Grammar School, a one-room schoolhouse

few doors down from his own. Because he had repeated the first grade, he was not only the biggest kid in the class but also the oldest. Despite his childhood illnesses, he'd shot up to a height of six foot two by the age of twelve.

West Durham was so small that it lacked a library, but once a week the state sent the Bookmobile to the town, a mobile library in a big green van. To Steve, it was a vast improvement over the library in Stratford, Connecticut, where he had only been allowed to check out books from the children's section, most often Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys novels. With the Bookmobile, patrons could take out three books a week, and the kids could borrow books from the adult section. While browsing the adult shelves, Steve discovered several police-procedural novels by Ed McBain. A few pages into the first one he took home, a scene described the cops interrogating a woman standing in the doorway of her slum apartment dressed in nothing more than a slip. The police turn away and tell her to go get dressed, but instead she pushes her breast toward them, saying, "In your eye, cop!"

"Immediately something clicked in my head," said Steve. "I thought, that's real, that could really happen, and that was the end of the Hardy Boys and all juvenile fiction for me."

From McBain, he progressed to Edgar Allan Poe and John D. MacDonald, running through the classics of horror, crime, and speculative fiction. Soon he was always the first in line when the Bookmobile rolled back into town.

As he had done back in Connecticut, Steve spent many Saturday afternoons sitting in the dark at the movies, and the Ritz Theater in Lewiston was one of his regular haunts. Since he was so tall for his age, the ticket clerk tried to charge him the adult price. He got in the habit of tucking his birth certificate into his pocket so he could verify his age.

As time passed, Steve began to retreat more into his books and movies. Even though the family was together with little chance of splitting up again, life at home was harder than in Connecticut, especially for Ruth.

For nearly a decade, the Kings had lived on very little cash, subsisting on barter and whatever the relatives could spare—a bag of groceries here and some hand-me-down clothes there. In summers, the farm's well would inevitably dry up and they'd have to tote water from Ethelyn's house a half mile away. Their own house had no bath or shower, so in the winters the boys would take a bath at the aunt's house, then walk home through the snow, their bodies still steaming.

Steve would later compare their life to a sharecropping arrangement, where his mother worked long hours for little reward. "Those were very unhappy years for my mother," he said. "She had no money and she was always on duty. My grandmother had total senile dementia and was incontinent." Ruth used an old wringer washing machine to do the laundry, and when she hung the diapers on the clothesline in winter, her hands started to bleed because the combination of the lye and the cold water dried out her skin. She had still not learned to drive a car and so was always dependent on other people around her who did.

An unspectacular intimacy with death no longer so familiar to most Americans also characterized Stephen's formative years. This became especially true once the Kings moved back to Durham. In rural Maine of the 1950s and '60s, families still dealt with their dead at home, instead of relying on a funeral home. Besides, most residents didn't have the money to pay for an undertaker. Steve had seen a number of dead bodies—mostly elderly relatives laid out at his friends' homes—along with the body of a man who had drowned in a pond in Durham.

In the late 1950s, the saga of Charles Starkweather captured the attention of the American public. With his fourteen-year-old girlfriend, Caril Fugate, the nineteen-year-old Starkweather went on a rampage, killing eleven people in Nebraska and Wyoming—including Fugate's mother, stepfather,

and sister—over two months in the winter of 1957–58. Starkweather was caught, tried, and executed in 1959, and Fugate was sentenced to life in prison and paroled in 1976.

Young Steve was fascinated and revolted by the serial killer and started to keep a scrapbook of newspaper clippings about Starkweather's exploits. He'd sit for hours, staring at the photos of the condemned killer, trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong. As usual, Ruth thought it wasn't something her eleven-year-old son should be following so closely.

"Good God, you're warped," she told him when she found his scrapbook. But as he explained to his mother, he studied Starkweather so that if he ran into someone with the same deadened eyes on the street, he'd be able to recognize the killer and stay far away. But he realized even at that early age something else was at play.

"There's always the urge to see somebody dead that isn't you," he said. "That urge doesn't change because civilization or society does, it's hardwired into the human psyche, a perfectly valid human need to say, 'I'm okay,' and the way I can judge that is that these people are not."

"To me, Charles Starkweather was totally empty. I was examining the human equivalent of a black hole, and that's what really attracted me to Starkweather. Not that I wanted to be like him, but I wanted to recognize him if I met him on the street and get out of his way. You could see it in his eyes to a degree. There was something gone in there. But I also understood that it was in me, and it was in a lot of people."

But something else was behind his fascination with Starkweather. "There was a little voice inside my head that said, 'You're gonna be writing about people like this your whole life, so here's the starting line, GO!' "

On the surface, Steve's childhood looked similar to other boys' lives in the 1950s: he hung out with his friends, tinkered with cars, and listened to rock and roll. The first record he owned was an Elvis Presley 78 with "Hound Dog" on the A side and "Don't Be Cruel" on the flip side. He wore out both sides of the record playing it over and over. "It was like finding something that was very, very powerful, like a drug," he said. "It made you bigger than you were. It made you tough even if you weren't."

But once he became a teenager, he stood out for being just a little bit eccentric. For instance, he'd head out to spend the afternoon at a friend's house and show up in his bedroom slippers, probably because so much was going on in his head that he forgot to change into shoes.

He often felt like an outcast, though he had learned at an early age to keep his mouth shut about it. "I kept that part of myself to myself," he said. "I never wanted to let anybody get at it. I figured they'd steal it if they knew what I thought about certain things. It wasn't the same thing as being embarrassed about it, so much as wanting to keep it and sort of work it out for myself."

He found that the only way to do that was to write about it.

In 1959, David got hold of an old mimeograph machine, and the two boys decided to publish a local newsletter. Selling it for a nickel, they wrote and distributed *Dave's Rag* to their neighbors in West Durham. Dave wrote news stories about people in the neighborhood while Steve wrote reviews of his favorite TV shows and movies as well as a few short stories. The response was favorable, with most neighbors buying a few copies, but after a few months, Dave's interest waned.

Steve wasn't too disappointed, for that meant there would be more time for writing his own stories and reading. In West Durham, Steve began what would become a lifelong habit of taking long afternoon walks while his nose was stuck in a book. Both Ruth and Dave shared his love of reading—

wasn't unusual to see the family sitting around the dinner table, each reading a paperback—but Steve devoured more books than his brother and mother combined. He got lost in the stories, but he was also starting to note how each author told the story and how he built suspense and made Steve care—or not care—about the characters. He learned something with each book he read, and he simply couldn't get enough.

He also started to write as much as he read. Every free moment when he wasn't in school or helping his mother with some of the chores, he was writing or reading.

When Ruth bought him a behemoth, secondhand Underwood typewriter for \$35, he knew he had everything he needed to start on his path as a writer, and he began to submit his stories to the pulp thriller and mystery magazines he'd been reading for years. He wrote after school and on weekends and during summer vacations he rarely left his attic bedroom. "I'd be upstairs during the summer, pounding away in my underpants, streaming with sweat," he said. He typed so much that the letter carriage broke off, and he had to write in the missing letters by hand on each manuscript page.

The more he wrote, the better he felt. He had a way to deal with the images and thoughts that he knew his family and society wouldn't understand. His stories were full of blood and gore and inhumane impulses—just like the stories he loved to read—but writing them, getting them out, was better than keeping them inside.

"As a child, Stephen King saw and felt too much for his age," said George Beahm, author of several books on King and his work. "Consider how sensitive children generally are: they don't have a way to edit, to filter, to take a critical stance on experience around them. I would say that the reason why these images come out so powerfully in his fiction is because as a child he had no way to filter. Everything just came in, and it affected him deeply."

His childhood friend Chris Chesley believes that Steve's sense of isolation had as large an effect on his writing as the movies he saw, the books he read, and the murderous impulses he often felt. "His mother worked and his brother was older and off with his friends, so Steve spent a lot of time by himself," said Chesley. "In that respect, he was different from many of us who knew him because he was more isolated than we were."

Even though he had just started to submit stories to the pulp magazines of the day, Steve was calmly convinced of his talent and future success even at the age of fourteen. Chesley would sit with Steve in his friend's bedroom, reading, writing, and smoking. They'd take turns at the typewriter, one reading a book while the other cranked out a couple of pages. One day, Chesley remembered, Steve finished his stint at the typewriter and glanced over at him with a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

"You know what I'm gonna do the first time I hit it big, Chris? I'm gonna get myself a great big Cadillac!" Steve would laugh, light another cigarette, and return to the typewriter, even though it was Chris's turn.

Steve encountered a relative in Durham who reminded him of the way Granny Spansky had kept him spellbound for hours, though while his grandmother had captivated him because she reminded him of a fairy-tale witch, Uncle Clayton's stories were what mesmerized young Steve. "Some of the best yarns in those days were spun by my uncle Clayton, a great old character who had never lost his childlike sense of wonder," he said. "Uncle Clayt would cock his hunting cap back on his mane of white hair, roll a Bugler cigarette with one liver-spotted hand, light up with a Diamond match he scratches on the side of his boot, and launch into great stories, not only about ghosts but about local legends and scandals, family goings-on, the exploits of Paul Bunyan, everything under the sun. I listen spellbound to that slow down-east drawl of his and I'd be in another world."

Uncle Clayton, who wasn't really a relative, but a family friend, had a few other talents that kept



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