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11.22.63

Written by Stephen King

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An extract from

STEPHEN KING

11.22.63

A NOVEL

HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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Lee Harvey Oswald lived on Mercedes Street in Fort Worth, Texas, with his wife, Marina, and their daughter, June, for a few months in the late summer, early fall of 1962. Jake Epping, the protagonist of Stephen King's new novel 11.22.63 *moves in across the street to monitor Oswald's movements, intending to prevent him from assassinating JFK. Jake has fallen in love with Sadie Dunhill, a high school librarian in Jodie, a small town not far from Dallas.*

Living on Mercedes Street was not an uplifting experience.

Days weren't so bad. They resounded with the shouts of children recently released from school, all dressed in too-big hand-me-downs; housewives kvetching at mailboxes or backyard clotheslines; teenagers driving rusty beaters with glasspack mufflers and radios blaring K-Life. The hours between 2:00 and 6:00 a.m. weren't so bad, either. Then a kind of stunned silence fell over the street as colicky babies finally slept in their cribs (or dresser drawers) and their daddies snored toward another day of hourly wages in the shops, factories, or outlying farms.

Between four and six in the afternoon, however, the street was a jangle of mommas screaming at kids to get the hell in and do their chores and poppas arriving home to scream at their wives, probably because they had no one else to scream at. Many of the wives gave back as good as they got. The drunkadaddies started to roll in around eight, and things really got noisy around eleven, when either the bars closed or the money ran out. Then I heard slamming

doors, breaking glass, and screams of pain as some loaded drunkadaddy tuned up on the wife, the kiddies, or both. Often red lights would strobe in through my drawn curtains as the cops arrived. A couple of times there were gunshots, maybe fired at the sky, maybe not. And one early morning, when I went out to get the paper, I saw a woman with dried blood crusting the lower half of her face. She was sitting on the curb in front of a house four down from mine, drinking a can of Lone Star. I almost went down to check on her, even though I knew how unwise it would be to get involved with the life of this low-bottom working neighborhood. Then she saw me looking at her and hoisted her middle finger. I went back inside.

There was no Welcome Wagon, and no women named Muffy or Buffy trotting off to Junior League meetings. What there was on Mercedes Street was plenty of time to think. Time to miss my friends in Jodie. Time to miss the work that had kept my mind off what I had come here to do. Time to realize the teaching had done a lot more than pass the time; it had satisfied my mind the way work does when you care about it, when you feel like you might actually be making a difference.

There was even time to feel bad about my formerly spiffy convertible. Besides the non-functional radio and the wheezy valves, it now blatted and backfired through a rusty tailpipe and there was a crack in the windshield caused by a rock that had bounced off the back of a lumbering asphalt truck. I'd stopped washing it, and now sad to say; it fit in perfectly with the other busted-up transpo on Mercedes Street.

Mostly there was time to think about Sadie.

You're breaking that young woman's heart, Ellie Dockerty had said, and mine wasn't doing so well, either. The idea of

spilling everything to Sadie came to me one night as I lay awake listening to a drunken argument next door: *you did, I didn't, you did, I didn't, fuck you*. I rejected the idea, but it came back the following night, rejuvenated. I could see myself sitting with her at her kitchen table, drinking coffee in the strong afternoon sunlight that slanted through the window over the sink. Speaking calmly. Telling her my real name was Jacob Epping, I wouldn't actually be born for another fourteen years, I had come from the year 2011 via a fissure in time that my late friend Al Templeton called the rabbit-hole.

How would I convince her of such a thing? By telling her that a certain American defector who had changed his mind about Russia was shortly going to move in across the street from where I now lived, along with his Russian wife and their baby girl? By telling her that the Dallas Texans – not yet the Cowboys, not yet America's Team – were going to beat the Houston Oilers 20-17 this fall, in double overtime? Ridiculous. But what else did I know about the immediate future? Not much, because I'd had no time to study up. I knew a fair amount about Oswald, but that was all.

She'd think I was crazy. I could sing her lyrics from another dozen pop songs that hadn't been recorded yet, and she'd still think I was crazy. She'd accuse me of making them up myself; wasn't I a writer, after all? And suppose she *did* believe it? Did I want to drag her into the shark's mouth with me? Wasn't it bad enough that she'd be coming back to Jodie in August, and that if John Clayton was an echo of Frank Dunning, he might come looking for her?

'*All right, get out then!*' a woman screamed from the street, and a car accelerated away in the direction of Winscott Road. A wedge of light probed briefly through

a crack in my drawn curtains and flashed across the ceiling.

'*COCKSUCKER!*' she yelled after it, to which a male voice, a little more distant, yelled back: 'You can suck mine, lady, maybe it'll calm you down.'

That was life on Mercedes Street in the summer of '62.

Leave her out of it. That was the voice of reason. *It's just too dangerous. Maybe at some point she can be a part of your life again – a life in Jodie, even – but not now.*

Only there was never going to be a life for me in Jodie. Given what Ellen now knew about my past, teaching at the high school was a fool's dream. And what else was I going to do? Pour concrete?

One morning I put on the coffeepot and went for the paper on the stoop. When I opened the front door, I saw that both of the Sunliner's rear tires were flat. Some bored out-too-late kid had slashed them with a knife. That was also life on Mercedes Street in the summer of '62.

On Thursday, the fourteenth of June, I dressed in jeans, a blue workshirt, and an old leather vest I'd picked up at a secondhand store on Camp Bowie Road. Then I spent the morning pacing through my house. I had no television, but I listened to the radio. According to the news, President Kennedy was planning a state trip to Mexico later in the month. The weather report called for fair skies and warm temperatures. The DJ yammered awhile, then played 'Palisades Park'. The screams and roller-coaster sound effects on the record clawed at my head.

At last I could stand it no longer. I was going to be early, but I didn't care. I got into the Sunliner, which now sported two retread blackwalls to go with the whitewalls on the front, and drove the forty-odd miles to Love Field in

northwest Dallas. There was no short-term or long-term parking, just parking. It cost seventy-five cents a day. I clapped my old summer straw on my head and trudged approximately half a mile to the terminal building. A couple of Dallas cops stood at the curb drinking coffee, but there were no security guards inside and no metal detectors to walk through. Passengers simply showed their tickets to a guy standing by the door, then walked across the hot tarmac to planes belonging to one of five carriers: American, Delta, TWA, Frontier, and Texas Airways.

I checked the chalkboard mounted on the wall behind the Delta counter. It said that Flight 194 was on time. When I asked the clerk to make sure, she smiled and told me it had just left Atlanta.

'But you're awfully early.'

'I can't help it' I said. I'll probably be early to my own funeral.'

She laughed and wished me a nice day. I bought a *Time* and walked across to the restaurant, where I ordered the Cloud 9 Chef's Salad. it was huge and I was too nervous to be hungry, it's not every day that a man gets to see the person who's going to change world history, but it gave me something to pick at while I waited for the plane carrying the Oswald family to arrive.

I was in a booth with a good view of the main terminal. It wasn't very crowded, and a young woman in a dark blue traveling suit caught my eye. Her hair was twisted into a neat bun. She had a suitcase in each hand. A Negro porter approached her. She shook her head, smiling, then banged her arm on the side of the Traveler's Aid booth as she passed it. She dropped one of her suitcases, rubbed her elbow, then picked up the case again and forged onward.

Sadie leaving to start her six-week residency in Reno.

Was I surprised? Not at all. it was that convergence thing again. I'd grown used to it. Was I almost overwhelmed by an impulse to run out of the restaurant and catch up to her before it was too late? Of course I was.

For a moment it seemed more than possible, it seemed necessary. I would tell her fate (rather than some weird time-travel harmonic) had brought us together at the airport. Stuff like that worked in the movies, didn't it? I'd ask her to wait while I bought my own ticket to Reno, and tell her that once we were there, I'd explain everything. And after the obligatory six weeks, we could buy a drink for the judge who had granted her divorce before he married us.

I actually started to get up. As I did, I happened to look at the cover of the *Time* I'd bought at the newsstand. Jacqueline Kennedy was on the cover. She was smiling, radiant, wearing a sleeveless dress with a V-neck. THE PRESIDENT'S LADY DRESSES FOR SUMMER, the caption read. As I looked at the photo, the color drained away to black and white and the expression changed from a happy smile to a vacant stare. Now she was standing next to Lyndon Johnson on *Air Force One*, and no longer wearing the pretty (and slightly sexy) summer dress. A blood-spattered wool suit had taken its place. I remembered reading, not in Al's notes, somewhere else, that not long after Mrs. Kennedy's husband had been pronounced dead, Lady Bird Johnson had moved to embrace her in the hospital corridor and had seen a glob of the dead president's brains on that suit.

A head-shot president. And all the dead who would come after, standing behind him in a ghostly file that stretched away into infinity.

I sat back down again and watched Sadie carry her suitcases toward the Frontier Airlines counter. The bags were obviously heavy but she carried them con brio, her

back straight, her low heels clicking briskly. The clerk checked them and put them on a baggage trolley. He and Sadie conferred; she passed him the ticket she had bought through a travel agency two months ago, and the clerk scribbled something on it. She took it back and turned for the gate. I lowered my head to make sure she wouldn't see me. When I looked up again, she was gone.

Forty long, long minutes later, a man, a woman, and two small children, a boy and a girl, passed the restaurant. The boy was holding his father's hand and chattering away. The father was looking down at him, nodding and smiling. The father was Robert Oswald.

The loudspeaker blared, 'Delta's flight 194 is now arriving from Newark and Atlanta Municipal Airport. Passengers can be met at Gate 4. Delta Flight 194, now arriving.'

Robert's wife, Vada, according to Al's notes, swept the little girl into her arms and hurried along faster. There was no sign of Marguerite.

I picked at my salad, chewing without tasting. My heart was beating hard.

I could hear the approaching roar of engines and saw the white nose of a DC-8 as it pulled up to the gate. Greeters piled up around the door. A waitress tapped me on the shoulder and I almost screamed.

'Sorry, sir,' she said in a Texas accent that was thick enough to cut. 'Jes wanted to ask if I could get y'all anything else.'

'No,' I said. 'I'm fine.'

'Well, that's good.'

The first passengers began cutting across the terminal. They were all men wearing suits and prosperous haircuts. Of course. The first passengers to deplane were always from first class.

'Sure I can't get you a piece of peach pah? It's fresh today.'

'No thanks.'

'You sure, hon?'

Now the coach class passengers came in a flood, all of them festooned with carry-on bags. I heard a woman squeal. Was that Vada, greeting her brother-in-law?

'I'm sure,' I said, and picked up my magazine.

She took the hint. I sat stirring the remains of my salad into an orange soup of French dressing and watched. Here came a man and woman with a baby, but the kid was almost a toddler, too old to be June. The passengers passed the restaurant, chattering with the friends and relatives who had come to pick them up. I saw a young man in an Army uniform pat his girlfriend's bottom. She laughed, slapped his hand, then stood on tiptoe to kiss him.

For five minutes or so the terminal was almost full. Then the crowd began to thin out. There was no sign of the Oswalds. A wild certainty came to me: they weren't on the plane. I hadn't just traveled back in time, I had bounced into some sort of parallel universe. Maybe the Yellow Card Man had been meant to stop something like that from happening, but the Yellow Card Man was dead, and I was off the hook. No Oswald? Fine, no mission. Kennedy was going to die in some other version of America, but not in this one. I could catch up with Sadie and live happily ever after.

The thought had no more than crossed my mind when I saw my target for the first time. Robert and Lee were side by side, talking animatedly. Lee was swinging what was either an oversized attaché case or a small satchel. Robert had a pink suitcase with rounded corners that looked like something out of Barbie's closet. Vada and Marina came along behind. Vada had taken one of two patchwork cloth

bags; Marina had the other slung over her shoulder. She was also carrying June, now four months old, in her arms and laboring to keep up. Robert and Vada's two kids flanked her, looking at her with open curiosity.

Vada called to the men and they stopped almost in front of the restaurant. Robert grinned and took Marina's carry-bag. Lee's expression was . . . amused? Knowing? Maybe both. The tiniest suggestion of a smile dimpled the corners of his mouth. His nondescript hair was neatly combed. He was, in fact, the perfect A. J. Squared Away in his pressed white shirt, khakis, and shined shoes. He didn't look like a man who had just completed a journey halfway around the world; there wasn't a wrinkle on him and not a trace of beard-shadow on his cheeks. He was just twenty-two years old, and looked younger, like one of the teenagers in my last American Lit class.

So did Marina, who wouldn't be old enough to buy a legal drink for another month. She was exhausted, bewildered, and staring at everything. She was also beautiful, with clouds of dark hair and upturned, somehow rueful blue eyes.

June's arms and legs were swaddled in cloth diapers. Even her neck was wrapped in something, and although she wasn't crying, her face was red and sweaty. Lee took the baby. Marina smiled her gratitude, and when her lips parted, I saw that one of her teeth was missing. The others were discolored, one of them almost black. The contrast with her creamy skin and gorgeous eyes was jarring.

Oswald leaned close to her and said something that wiped the smile off her face. She looked up at him warily. He said something else, poking her shoulder with one finger as he did so. I remembered Al's story, and wondered if Oswald was saying the same thing to his wife now: *pokhoda cyka* – walk, bitch.

But no. It was the swaddling that had upset him. He tore it away – first from the arms, then the legs – and flung the diapers at Marina, who caught them clumsily. Then she looked around to see if they were being watched.

Vada came back and touched Lee's arm. He paid no attention to her, just unwrapped the makeshift cotton scarf from around baby June's neck and flung *that* at Marina. It fell to the terminal floor. She bent and picked it up without speaking.

Robert joined them and gave his brother a friendly punch on the shoulder. The terminal had almost entirely cleared out now – the last of the deplaning passengers had passed the Oswald family – and I heard what he said clearly. 'Give her a break, she just got here. She doesn't even know where here is yet.'

'Look at this kid,' Lee said, and raised June for inspection. At that, she finally began to cry. 'She's got her wrapped up like a damn Egyptian mummy. Because that's the way they do it back home. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. *Staryj baba!* Old woman.' He turned back to Marina with the bawling baby in his arms. She looked at him fearfully. '*Staryj baba*.'

She tried to smile, the way people do when they know the joke is on them, but not why. I thought fleetingly of Lennie, in *Of Mice and Men*. Then a grin, cocky and a little sideways, lit Oswald's face. It made him almost handsome. He kissed his wife gently, first on one cheek, then the other.

'USA!' he said, and kissed her again. 'USA, Rina! Land of the free and home of the turds!'

Her smile became radiant. He began to speak to her in Russian, handing back the baby as he did so. He put his arm around her waist as she soothed June. She was still

smiling as they left my field of vision, and shifted the baby to her shoulder so she could take his hand.

I went home, if I could call Mercedes Street home, and tried to take a nap. I couldn't get under, so I lay there with my hands behind my head, listening to the uneasy street noises and speaking with Al Templeton. This was a thing I found myself doing quite often, now that I was on my own. For a dead man, he always had a lot to say.

'I was stupid to come Fort Worth,' I told him. 'If I try to hook up that bug to the tape recorder, someone's apt to see me. Oswald himself might see me, and that would change everything. He's already paranoid, you said so in your notes. He knew the KGB and MVD were watching him in Minsk, and he's going to be afraid that the FBI and the CIA are watching him here. And the FBI actually will be, at least some of the time.'

'Yes, you'll have to be careful,' Al agreed. 'It won't be easy, but I trust you, buddy. It's why I called you in the first place.'

'I don't even want to get near him. Just seeing him in the airport gave me a class-A case of the willies.'

'I know you don't, but you'll have to. As someone who spent damn near his whole life cooking meals, I can tell you that no omelet was ever made without breaking eggs. And it would be a mistake to overestimate this guy. He's no super-criminal. Also, he's going to be distracted, mostly by his batshit mother. How good is he going to be at anything for awhile except shouting at his wife and knocking her around when he gets too pissed off for shouting to be enough?'

'I think he cares for her, Al. At least a little, and maybe a lot. in spite of the shouting.'

'Yeah, and it's guys like him who are most likely to fuck up their women. Look at Frank Dunning. You just take care of your business, buddy.'

'And what am I going to get if I do manage to hook up that bug? Tape recordings of arguments? Arguments in Russian? That'll be a big help.'

'You don't need to decode the man's family life. It's George de Mohrenschildt you need to find out about. You have to make sure de Mohrenschildt isn't involved in the attempt on General Walker. Once you accomplish that, the window of uncertainty closes. And look on the bright side. If Oswald catches you spying on him, his future actions might change in a good way. He might not try for Kennedy after all.

'Do you really believe that?'

'No. Actually I don't.'

'Neither do I. The past is obdurate. it doesn't want to be changed.'

He said, 'Buddy, now you're cooking . . .'

'With gas,' I heard myself muttering. 'Now I'm cooking with gas.'

I opened my eyes. I had fallen asleep after all. Late light was coming in through the drawn curtains. Somewhere not far away, on Davenport Street in Fort Worth, the Oswald brothers and their wives would be sitting down to dinner – Lee's first meal back on his old stomping grounds.

Outside my own little bit of Fort Worth, I could hear a skip-rope chant. it sounded very familiar. I got up, went through my dim living room (furnished with two thrift-shop easy chairs but nothing else), and twitched back one of the drapes an inch or so. Those drapes had been my very first installation. I wanted to see; I didn't want to be seen.

2703 was still deserted, with the FOR RENT sign

double-tacked to the railing of the rickety porch, but the lawn wasn't deserted. There, two girls were twirling a jump rope while a third stutter-stepped in and out. Of course they weren't the girls I'd seen on Kossuth Street in Derry – these three, dressed in patched and faded jeans instead of crisp new shorts, looked runty and underfed – but the chant was the same, only now with Texas accents.

'Charlie Chaplin went to *France*! Just to watch the ladies *dance*! Salute to the *Cap'un*! Salute to the *Queen*! My old man drives a sub-ma-rine!'

The skip-rope girl caught her foot and went tumbling into the crabgrass that served as 2703's front lawn. The other girls piled on top of her and all three of them rolled in the dirt. Then they got to their feet and went pelting away.

I watched them go, thinking *I saw them but they didn't see me. That's something. That's a start. But Al, where's my finish*?

De Mohrenschildt was the key to the whole deal, the only thing keeping me from killing Oswald as soon as he moved in across the street. George de Mohrenschildt, a petroleum geologist who speculated in oil leases. A man who lived the playboy lifestyle, mostly thanks to his wife's money. Like Marina, he was a Russian exile, but unlike her, from a noble family, he was, in fact, Baron de Mohrenschildt. The man who was going to become Lee Oswald's only friend during the few months of life Oswald had left. The man who was going to suggest to Oswald that the world would be much better off without a certain racist right-wing ex-General. if de Mohrenschildt turned out to be part of Oswald's attempt to kill Edwin Walker, my situation would be vastly complicated; all the nutty conspiracy theories would then be in play. Al, however, believed all the Russian geologist had done (or *would* do, as I've said, living

in the past is confusing) was egg on a man who was already obsessed with fame and mentally unstable.

Al had written in his notes: *If Oswald was on his own on the night of April 10th, 1963, chances that there was another gunman involved in the Kennedy assassination seven months later drop to almost zero.*

Below this, in capital letters, he had added his final verdict: GOOD ENOUGH TO TAKE THE SON OF A BITCH OUT.