

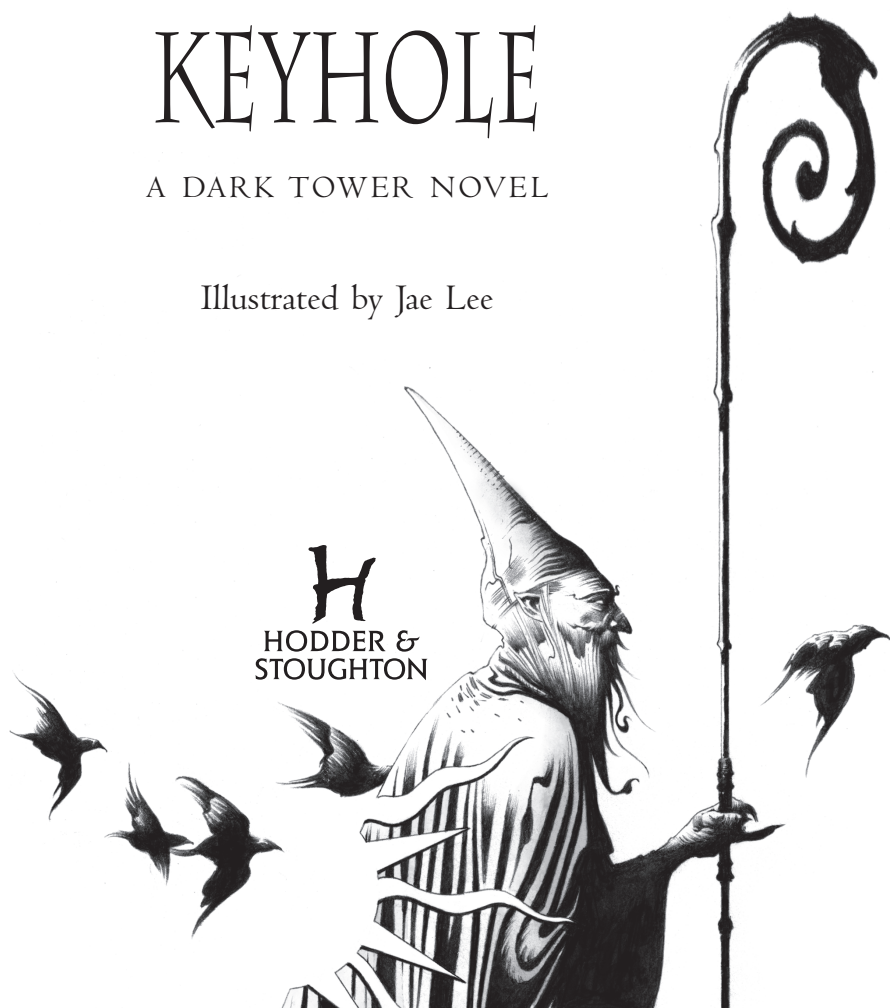
STEPHEN KING

THE WIND THROUGH THE KEYHOLE

A DARK TOWER NOVEL

Illustrated by Jae Lee

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FOREWORD

Many of the people holding this book have followed the adventures of Roland and his band – his ka-tet – for years, some of them from the very beginning. Others – and I hope there are many, newcomers and Constant Readers alike – may ask, *Can I read and enjoy this story if I haven't read the other Dark Tower books?* My answer is yes, if you keep a few things in mind.

First, Mid-World lies next to our world, and there are many overlaps. In some places there are doorways between the two worlds, and sometimes there are thin places, porous places, where the two worlds actually mingle. Three of Roland's ka-tet – Eddie, Susannah, and Jake – have been drawn separately from troubled lives in New York into Roland's Mid-World quest. Their fourth traveling companion, a billy-bumbler named Oy, is a golden-eyed creature native to Mid-World. Mid-World is very old, and falling to ruin, filled with monsters and untrustworthy magic.

Second, Roland Deschain of Gilead is a gunslinger – one of a small band that tries to keep order in an increasingly lawless world. If you think of the gunslingers of Gilead as a strange combination of knights errant and territorial marshals in the

Old West, you'll be close to the mark. Most of them, although not all, are descended from the line of the old White King, known as Arthur Eld (I told you there were overlaps).

Third, Roland has lived his life under a terrible curse. He killed his mother, who was having an affair – mostly against her will, and certainly against her better judgment – with a fellow you will meet in these pages. Although it was by mistake, he holds himself accountable, and the unhappy Gabrielle Deschain's death has haunted him since his young manhood. These events are fully narrated in the Dark Tower cycle, but for our purposes here, I think it's all you have to know.

For longtime readers, this book should be shelved between *Wizard and Glass* and *Wolves of the Calla* . . . which makes it, I suppose, *Dark Tower* 4.5.

As for me, I was delighted to discover my old friends had a little more to say. It was a great gift to find them again, years after I thought their stories were told.

Stephen King
September 14, 2011

THE WIND THROUGH THE KEYHOLE

A DARK TOWER NOVEL



STARKBLAST



1

During the days after they left the Green Palace that wasn't Oz after all – but which was now the tomb of the unpleasant fellow Roland's ka-tet had known as the Tick-Tock Man – the boy Jake began to range farther and farther ahead of Roland, Eddie, and Susannah.

'Don't you worry about him?' Susannah asked Roland. 'Out there on his own?'

'He's got Oy with him,' Eddie said, referring to the billy-bumbler who had adopted Jake as his special friend. 'Mr Oy gets along with nice folks all right, but he's got a mouthful of sharp teeth for those who aren't so nice. As that guy Gasher found out to his sorrow.'

'Jake also has his father's gun,' Roland said. 'And he knows how to use it. That he knows very well. And he won't leave the Path of the Beam.' He pointed overhead with his reduced hand. The low-hanging sky was mostly still, but a single corridor of clouds moved steadily southeast. Toward the land of Thunderclap, if the note left behind for them by the man who styled himself RF had told the truth.

Toward the Dark Tower.

'But why—' Susannah began, and then her wheelchair hit a bump. She turned to Eddie. 'Watch where you're pushin me, sugar.'

'Sorry,' Eddie said. 'Public Works hasn't been doing any maintenance along this stretch of the turnpike lately. Must be dealing with budget cuts.'

It wasn't a turnpike, but it *was* a road . . . or had been: two ghostly ruts with an occasional tumbledown shack to mark the way. Earlier that morning they had even passed an abandoned store with a barely readable sign: TOOK'S OUTLAND MERCANTILE. They investigated inside for supplies — Jake and Oy had still been with them then — and had found nothing but dust, ancient cobwebs, and the skeleton of what had been either a large raccoon, a small dog, or a billy-bumbler. Oy had taken a cursory sniff and then pissed on the bones before leaving the store to sit on the hump in the middle of the old road with his squiggle of a tail curled around him. He faced back the way they had come, sniffing the air.

Roland had seen the bumbler do this several times lately, and although he had said nothing, he pondered it. Someone trailing them, maybe? He didn't actually believe this, but the bumbler's posture — nose lifted, ears pricked, tail curled — called up some old memory or association that he couldn't quite catch.

'Why does Jake want to be on his own?' Susannah asked.

'Do you find it worrisome, Susannah of New York?' Roland asked.

'Yes, Roland of Gilead, I find it *worrisome*.' She smiled amiably enough, but in her eyes, the old mean light sparkled. That was the Detta Walker part of her, Roland reckoned. It would never be completely gone, and he wasn't sorry. Without the strange

woman she had once been still buried in her heart like a chip of ice, she would have been only a handsome black woman with no legs below the knees. With Detta onboard, she was a person to be reckoned with. A dangerous one. A gunslinger.

‘He has plenty of stuff to think about,’ Eddie said quietly. ‘He’s been through a lot. Not every kid comes back from the dead. And it’s like Roland says – if someone tries to face him down, it’s the someone who’s apt to be sorry.’ Eddie stopped pushing the wheelchair, armed sweat from his brow, and looked at Roland. ‘*Are* there someones in this particular suburb of nowhere, Roland? Or have they all moved on?’

‘Oh, there are a few, I wot.’

He did more than wot; they had been peeked at several times as they continued their course along the Path of the Beam. Once by a frightened woman with her arms around two children and a babe hanging in a sling from her neck. Once by an old farmer, a half-mutie with a jerking tentacle that hung from one corner of his mouth. Eddie and Susannah had seen none of these people, or sensed the others that Roland felt sure had, from the safety of the woods and high grasses, marked their progress. Eddie and Susannah had a lot to learn.

But they had learned at least some of what they would need, it seemed, because Eddie now asked, ‘Are they the ones Oy keeps scenting up behind us?’

‘I don’t know.’ Roland thought of adding that he was sure something else was on Oy’s strange little bumbler mind, and decided not to. The gunslinger had spent long years with no ka-tet, and keeping his own counsel had become a habit. One he would have to break, if the tet was to remain strong. But not now, not this morning.

‘Let’s move on,’ he said. ‘I’m sure we’ll find Jake waiting for us up ahead.’

2

Two hours later, just shy of noon, they breasted a rise and halted, looking down at a wide, slow-moving river, gray as pewter beneath the overcast sky. On the northwestern bank – their side – was a barnlike building painted a green so bright it seemed to yell into the muted day. Its mouth jutted out over the water on pilings painted a similar green. Docked to two of these pilings by thick hawsers was a large raft, easily ninety feet by ninety, painted in alternating stripes of red and yellow. A tall wooden pole that looked like a mast jutted from the center, but there was no sign of a sail. Several wicker chairs sat in front of the pole, facing the shore on their side of the river. Jake was seated in one of these. Next to him was an old man in a vast straw hat, baggy green pants, and longboots. On his top half he wore a thin white garment – the kind of shirt Roland thought of as a slinkum. Jake and the old man appeared to be eating well-stuffed popkins. Roland’s mouth sprang water at the sight of them.

Oy was beyond them, at the edge of the circus-painted raft, looking raptly down at his own reflection. Or perhaps at the reflection of the steel cable that ran overhead, spanning the river.

‘Is it the Whye?’ Susannah asked Roland.

‘Yar.’

Eddie grinned. ‘You say Whye; I say Whye Not?’ He raised one hand and waved it over his head. ‘Jake! Hey, Jake! Oy!’

Jake waved back, and although the river and the raft moored

at its edge were still a quarter of a mile away, their eyes were uniformly sharp, and they saw the white of the boy's teeth as he grinned.

Susannah cupped her hands around her mouth. 'Oy! Oy! To me, sugar! Come see your mama!'

Uttering shrill yips that were the closest he could get to barks, Oy flew across the raft, disappeared into the barnlike structure, then emerged on their side. He came charging up the path with his ears lowered against his skull and his gold-ringed eyes bright.

'Slow down, sug, you'll give yourself a heart attack!' Susannah shouted, laughing.

Oy seemed to take this as an order to speed up. He arrived at Susannah's wheelchair in less than two minutes, jumped up into her lap, then jumped down again and looked at them cheerfully. 'Olan! Ed! Suze!'

'Hile, Sir Throcken,' Roland said, using the ancient word for bumbler he'd first heard in a book read to him by his mother: *The Throcken and the Dragon*.

Oy lifted his leg, watered a patch of grass, then faced back the way they had come, scenting at the air, eyes on the horizon.

'Why does he keep doing that, Roland?' Eddie asked.

'I don't know.' But he *almost* knew. Was it some old story, not *The Throcken and the Dragon* but one like it? Roland thought so. For a moment he thought of green eyes, watchful in the dark, and a little shiver went through him – not of fear, exactly (although that might have been a part of it), but of remembrance. Then it was gone.

There'll be water if God wills it, he thought, and only realized he had spoken aloud when Eddie said, 'Huh?'

'Never mind,' Roland said. 'Let's have a little palaver with

Jake's new friend, shall we? Perhaps he has an extra popkin or two.'

Eddie, tired of the chewy staple they called gunslinger burritos, brightened immediately. 'Hell, yeah,' he said, and looked at an imaginary watch on his tanned wrist. 'Goodness me, I see it's just gobble o'clock.'

'Shut up and push, honeybee,' Susannah said.

Eddie shut up and pushed.

3

The old man was sitting when they entered the boathouse, standing when they emerged on the river side. He saw the guns Roland and Eddie were wearing – the big irons with the sandalwood grips – and his eyes widened. He dropped to one knee. The day was still, and Roland actually heard his bones creak.

'Hile, gunslinger,' he said, and put an arthritis-swollen fist to the center of his forehead. 'I salute thee.'

'Rise up, friend,' Roland said, hoping the old man *was* a friend – Jake seemed to think so, and Roland had come to trust his instincts. Not to mention the billy-bumbler's. 'Rise up, do.'

The old man was having trouble managing it, so Eddie stepped aboard and gave him an arm.

'Thankee, son, thankee. Be you a gunslinger as well, or are you a 'prentice?'

Eddie looked at Roland. Roland gave him nothing, so Eddie looked back at the old man, shrugged, and grinned. 'Little of both, I guess. I'm Eddie Dean, of New York. This is my wife, Susannah. And this is Roland Deschain. Of Gilead.'

The riverman's eyes widened. 'Gilead that was? Do you say so?'

'Gilead that was,' Roland agreed, and felt an unaccustomed sorrow rise up from his heart. Time was a face on the water, and like the great river before them, it did nothing but flow.

'Step aboard, then. And welcome. This young man and I are already fast friends, so we are.' Oy stepped onto the big raft and the old man bent to stroke the bumbler's raised head. 'And we are, too, aren't we, fella? Does thee remember my name?'

'Bix!' Oy said promptly, then turned to the northwest again, raising his snout. His gold-ringed eyes stared raptly at the moving column of clouds that marked the Path of the Beam.

4

'Will'ee eat?' Bix asked them. 'What I have is poor and rough, but such as there is, I'd be happy to share.'

'With thanks,' Susannah said. She looked at the overhead cable that ran across the river on a diagonal. 'This is a ferry, isn't it?'

'Yeah,' Jake said. 'Bix told me there are people on the other side. Not close, but not far, either. He thinks they're rice farmers, but they don't come this way much.'

Bix stepped off the big raft and went into the boathouse. Eddie waited until he heard the old guy rummaging around, then bent to Jake and said in a low voice, 'Is he okay?'

'He's fine,' Jake said. 'It's the way we're going, and he's happy to have someone to take across. He says it's been years.'

'I'll bet it has been,' Eddie agreed.

Bix reappeared with a wicker basket, which Roland took from him – otherwise the old man might have tumbled into the water. Soon they were all sitting in the wicker chairs, munching popkins filled with some sort of pink fish. It was seasoned and delicious.

‘Eat all you like,’ Bix said. ‘The river’s filled with shannies, and most are true-threaded. The muties I throw back. Once upon a time we were ordered to throw the bad ’uns up a-bank so they wouldn’t breed more, and for a while I did, but now . . .’ He shrugged. ‘Live and let live is what I say. As someone who’s lived long himself, I feel like I *can* say it.’

‘How old are you?’ Jake asked.

‘I turned a hundred and twenty quite some time ago, but since then I’ve lost count, so I have. Time’s short on this side of the door, kennit.’

On this side of the door. That memory of some old story tugged at Roland again, and then was gone.

‘Do you follow that?’ The old man pointed to the moving band of clouds in the sky.

‘We do.’

‘To the Callas, or beyond?’

‘Beyond.’

‘To the great darkness?’ Bix looked both troubled and fascinated by the idea.

‘We go our course,’ Roland said. ‘What fee would you take to cross us, sai ferryman?’

Bix laughed. The sound was cracked and cheerful. ‘Money’s no good with nothing to spend it on, you have no livestock, and it’s clear as day that I have more to eat than you do. And you could always draw on me and force me to take you across.’

‘Never,’ Susannah said, looking shocked.

‘I know that,’ Bix said, waving a hand at her. ‘Harriers might – and then burn my ferry for good measure once they got t’other side – but true men of the gun, never. And women too, I suppose. You don’t seem armed, missus, but with women, one can never tell.’

Susannah smiled thinly at this and said nothing.

Bix turned to Roland. ‘Ye come from Lud, I wot. I’d hear of Lud, and how things go there. For it was a marvelous city, so it was. Crumbling and growing strange when I knew it, but still marvelous.’

The four of them exchanged a look that was all an-tet, that peculiar telepathy they shared. It was a look that was also dark with shume, the old Mid-World term that can mean shame, but also means sorrow.

‘What?’ Bix asked. ‘What have I said? If I’ve asked for something you’d not give, I cry your pardon.’

‘Not at all,’ Roland said, ‘but Lud . . .’

‘Lud is dust in the wind,’ Susannah said.

‘Well,’ Eddie said, ‘not dust, exactly.’

‘Ashes,’ Jake said. ‘The kind that glow in the dark.’

Bix pondered this, then nodded slowly. ‘I’d hear anyway, or as much as you can tell in an hour’s time. That’s how long the crossing takes.’

5

Bix bristled when they offered to help him with his preparations. It was his job, he said, and he could still do it – just

not as quickly as once upon a time, when there had been farms and a few little trading posts on both sides of the river.

In any case, there wasn't much to do. He fetched a stool and a large ironwood ringbolt from the boathouse, mounted the stool to attach the ringbolt to the top of the post, then hooked the ring-bolt to the cable. He took the stool back inside and returned with a large metal crank shaped like a block Z. This he laid with some ceremony by a wooden housing on the far end of the raft.

'Don't none of you kick that overboard, or I'll never get home,' he said.

Roland squatted on his hunkers to study it. He beckoned to Eddie and Jake, who joined him. He pointed to the words embossed on the long stroke of the Z. 'Does it say what I think it does?'

'Yep,' Eddie said. 'North Central Positronics. Our old pals.'

'When did you get that, Bix?' Susannah asked.

'Ninety year ago, or more, if I were to guess. There's an underground place over there.' He pointed vaguely in the direction of the Green Palace. 'It goes for miles, and it's full of things that belonged to the Old People, perfectly preserved. Strange music still plays from overhead, music such as you've never heard. It scrambles your thinking, like. And you don't dare stay there long, or you break out in sores and puke and start to lose your teeth. I went once. Never again. I thought for a while I was going to die.'

'Did you lose your hair as well as your chompers?' Eddie asked.

Bix looked surprised, then nodded. 'Yar, some, but it grew back. That crank, it's *still*, you know.'

Eddie pondered this a moment. Of course it was still, it was an inanimate object. Then he realized the old man was saying *steel*.

'Are'ee ready?' Bix asked them. His eyes were nearly as bright as Oy's. 'Shall I cast off?'

Eddie snapped off a crisp salute. 'Aye-aye, cap'n. We're away to the Treasure Isles, arr, so we be.'

'Come and help me with these ropes, Roland of Gilead, will ya do.'

Roland did, and gladly.

6

The raft moved slowly along the diagonal cable, pulled by the river's slow current. Fish jumped all around them as Roland's ka-tet took turns telling the old man about the city of Lud, and what had befallen them there. For a while Oy watched the fish with interest, his paws planted on the upstream edge of the raft. Then he once more sat and faced back the way they had come, snout raised.

Bix grunted when they told him how they'd left the doomed city. 'Blaine the Mono, y'say. I remember. Crack train. There was another 'un, too, although I can't remember the name—'

'Patricia,' Susannah said.

'Aye, that was it. Beautiful glass sides, she had. And you say the city's all gone?'

'All gone,' Jake agreed.

Bix lowered his head. 'Sad.'

'It is,' Susannah said, taking his hand and giving it a brief,

light squeeze. 'Mid-World's a sad place, although it can be very beautiful.'

They had reached the middle of the river now, and a light breeze, surprisingly warm, ruffled their hair. They had all laid aside their heavy outer clothes and sat at ease in the wicker passenger chairs, which rolled this way and that, presumably for the views this provided. A large fish – probably one of the kind that had fed their bellies at gobble o'clock – jumped onto the raft and lay there, flopping at Oy's feet. Although he was usually death on any small creature that crossed his path, the bumbler appeared not even to notice it. Roland kicked it back into the water with one of his scuffed boots.

'Yer throcken knows it's coming,' Bix remarked. He looked at Roland. 'You'll want to take heed, aye?'

For a moment Roland could say nothing. A clear memory rose from the back of his mind to the front, one of a dozen hand-colored woodcut illustrations in an old and well-loved book. Six bumlbers sitting on a fallen tree in the forest beneath a crescent moon, all with their snouts raised. That volume, *Magic Tales of the Eld*, he had loved above all others when he had been but a sma' one, listening to his mother as she read him to sleep in his high tower bedroom, while an autumn gale sang its lonely song outside, calling down winter. 'The Wind through the Keyhole' was the name of the story that went with the picture, and it had been both terrible and wonderful.

'All my gods on the hill,' Roland said, and thumped the heel of his reduced right hand to his brow. 'I should have known right away. If only from how warm it's gotten the last few days.'

'You mean you didn't?' Bix asked. 'And you from In-World?' He made a tsking sound.

‘Roland?’ Susannah asked. ‘What is it?’

Roland ignored her. He looked from Bix to Oy and back to Bix. ‘The starkblast’s coming.’

Bix nodded. ‘Aye. Throcken say so, and about starkblast the throcken are never wrong. Other than speaking a little, it’s their bright.’

‘Bright what?’ Eddie asked.

‘He means their talent,’ Roland said. ‘Bix, do you know of a place on the other side where we can hide up and wait for it to pass?’

‘Happens I do.’ The old man pointed to the wooded hills sloping gently down to the far side of the Whye, where another dock and another boathouse – this one unpainted and far less grand – waited for them. ‘Ye’ll find your way forward on the other side, a little lane that used to be a road. It follows the Path of the Beam.’

‘Sure it does,’ Jake said. ‘All things serve the Beam.’

‘As you say, young man, as you say. Which do’ee ken, wheels or miles?’

‘Both,’ Eddie said, ‘but for most of us, miles are better.’

‘All right, then. Follow the old Calla road five miles . . . maybe six . . . and ye’ll come to a deserted village. Most of the buildings are wood and no use to’ee, but the town meeting hall is good stone. Ye’ll be fine there. I’ve been inside, and there’s a lovely big fireplace. Ye’ll want to check the chimney, accourse, as ye’ll want a good draw up its throat for the day or two ye have to sit out. As for wood, ye can use what’s left of the houses.’

‘What is this starkblast?’ Susannah asked. ‘Is it a storm?’

‘Yes,’ Roland said. ‘I haven’t seen one in many, many years.’

It's a lucky thing we had Oy with us. Even then I wouldn't have known, if not for Bix.' He squeezed the old man's shoulder. 'Thankee-sai. We all say thankee.'

7

The boathouse on the southeastern side of the river was on the verge of collapse, like so many things in Mid-World; bats roosted heads-down from the rafters and fat spiders scuttled up the walls. They were all glad to be out of it and back under the open sky. Bix tied up and joined them. They each embraced him, being careful not to hug tight and hurt his old bones.

When they'd all taken their turn, the old man wiped his eyes, then bent and stroked Oy's head. 'Keep em well, do, Sir Throcken.'

'Oy!' the bumbler replied. Then: 'Bix!'

The old man straightened, and again they heard his bones crackle. He put his hands to the small of his back and winced.

'Will you be able to get back across okay?' Eddie asked.

'Oh, aye,' Bix said. 'If it was spring, I might not – the Whye en't so placid when the snow melts and the rains come – but now? Piece o' piss. The storm's still some way off. I crank for a bit against the current, then click the bolt tight so I can rest and not slip back'ards, then I crank some more. It might take four hours instead of one, but I'll get there. I always have, anyway. I only wish I had some more food to give'ee.'

'We'll be fine,' Roland said.

'Good, then. Good.' The old man seemed reluctant to leave.

He looked from face to face – seriously – then grinned, exposing toothless gums. ‘We’re well-met along the path, are we not?’

‘So we are,’ Roland agreed.

‘And if you come back this way, stop and visit awhile with old Bix. Tell him of your adventures.’

‘We will,’ Susannah said, although she knew they would never be this way again. It was a thing they all knew.

‘And mind the starkblast. It’s nothing to fool with. But ye might have a day, yet, or even two. He’s not turning circles yet, are ye, Oy?’

‘Oy!’ the bumbler agreed.

Bix fetched a sigh. ‘Now you go your way,’ he said, ‘and I go mine. We’ll both be laid up under cover soon enough.’

Roland and his tet started up the path.

‘One other thing!’ Bix called after them, and they turned back. ‘If you see that cussed Andy, tell him I don’t want no songs, and I don’t want my gods-damned *horrascope* read!’

‘Who’s Andy?’ Jake called back.

‘Oh, never mind, you probably won’t see him, anyway.’

That was the old man’s last word on it, and none of them remembered it, although they did meet Andy, in the farming community of Calla Bryn Sturgis. But that was later, after the storm had passed.