



HOUSE
on the
FORGOTTEN
COAST

A NOVEL

Ruth Coe Chambers

HOUSE

on the

FORGOTTEN

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COAST



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*To my husband, Jack,
without whom this book would never have left my computer*



*This book began with a dream. I still remember it vividly,
but I owe thanks to many people who encouraged me along the way.
Ray Bradbury believed in the book and in the muse who wrote most
of it. He was an inspiration and cheerleader always.*



Night after night Elise heard her parents discuss their business prospects. It made her so unbearably sad she finally spoke out against the idea. “I wish y’all wouldn’t open a business here. Can’t you see we don’t belong? Let these people be.”

A stern expression, reminiscent of the Atlanta Edwin, washed over her dad’s face, and her mother gave a disgusted sigh. “Elise, it isn’t like you to interfere in our business. We belong here as much as they do. Maybe more. We can afford to be here. It’s not like we’re tearing down a home to put up a parking garage. It’s more like a blood transfusion. These people should get down on their knees and thank the ones who are putting their money into fixing this place up.”

Elise realized she was treading on dangerous ground, but she couldn’t help sensing how the people felt and had developed a kinship with them she didn’t have with her own family. Progress made the locals feel they didn’t belong any more. She knew what it was like not to belong, but it was worse for them. She’d never belonged. They had, and they missed it.

Elise cleared her throat and tried once more. “But I hear them talking. It’s like the Civil War all over again, neighbor pitted against neighbor. One person wants to keep things like they’ve always been and another doesn’t.”

“So now you’re listening in on people’s conversations! I’ve never known you to be so interested in the concerns of strangers.”

“If we’re going to live here, Mom, they won’t always be strangers.”

“Perhaps not. I surely don’t want to offend a potential customer. But keep your distance. These people are nothing to you. Nothing.”

But they did mean something to Elise, and her heart went out to them. All her life she’d felt like she was on the outside looking in. Many times now she really was on the outside looking in. There was a home several blocks from the Fosters that had a large screened porch on one end. Elise liked to slip out of the house at night and stare at the porch, lit by floor lamps and cooled by two large ceiling fans. Even in Atlanta she’d loved walking their neighborhood after dark, trying to see inside the pale yellow spaces lit from within. Rooms and people in them seemed transformed, softened and surreal. The few times she’d looked inside her own home, she strained to see herself transformed, softened by the yellow glow of lamplight. She couldn’t control the urge, could never quit searching for a glimpse of herself.

The illumination of the screened porch, so much more than a window, was a gift Elise had never expected. She’d seen young people playing Monopoly and thrilled to their jokes and laughter. It was better than a movie. This was real, more real than her own life, which seemed possessed by dreams that somehow blended into her waking hours. Faintly, clear as though etched on glass, she could hear people talking, but that didn’t seem as unusual as the familiarity of what they said.

Miss Annelise, Ruby knows you sneak out at night dressed like a boy. You best watch yourself, missy.

*Don't you talk to me like that, Ruby. You're just imagining things.
Humph!*

The conversation faded, and the voices came from the porch.
“Oh, no, she has Park Place now.”

“She always goes for Park Place.”

“I'm a railroad man myself.” More laughter.

“I don't know why I like Park Place so much.”

“I don't either. You never win.”

Elise laughed with them. It was the small Italian girl called Jill who always wanted Park Place.

“Well, there's more to life than winning,” Jill countered.

“Why didn't you tell your old man that before he sold your house to that big developer?”

Jill stood up, and her paper money fluttered to the floor. “I can't help what my dad did. Everybody hates me now, and I didn't have a thing to do with it.”

“Aw, sit down, Jill. It's just a game.”

“Not any more it isn't! I'm going home.”

The screen door slammed, and Elise stepped farther back into the shadows, glad she'd worn pants that protected her legs from briars growing on the vacant lot.

Someone yelled from the porch, “Maybe you can afford Park Place for real now, Jill. Think about that.”

She turned with one parting shot. “Maybe you can get on the train and leave town too!”

“John, that wasn't nice. Jill's right. It wasn't her fault.”

“Well, my dad wanted to buy that property. Why wasn't his money good enough? No, he sells to a total stranger.”

“The stranger's money wasn't any better. Maybe there was just more of it.”

“Maybe so, but my dad sure was upset.”

It wasn't long before Elise picked up on the scheduled activities hosted on the porch. Monopoly night was fun, but Tuesday night was her favorite when four women of varying ages gathered to play bridge. She moved closer to the porch, shielded from sight by a giant camellia bush and watched as they tapped cards on the table. Slippery sounds echoed from the hands they dealt for bridge.

The woman called Frances reminded Elise a bit of a high-class hooker. She wore a smart pants suit, and her red hair was expertly dyed and coiffed. She was the only woman at the table wearing spike heels and smoking. She blew smoke up over her head and ground her cigarette out in a beanbag ashtray she kept on the floor. "I still can't believe Sarah sold her house to those new people from Atlanta. That house gave her dignity she never deserved, but she always acted like it was her birthright, some special dispensation that had been passed down to her. That's why she always acted like she was a cut above the rest of us. It was that house."

Pulled by the conversation from the porch, Elise had difficulty turning away, but the voices in her own head, growing more familiar each day, came unbidden and gave her pause.

Seth! You've drawn plans for a house?

I've drawn plans for lots of houses, but this one is special, Annelise. You gave me the idea with your talk about your dad's love for boats, and paddle wheelers reminding you of women in long, flouncy dresses. You could make me famous, you know.

You're already famous with me.

She knew the women had to be talking about her house, its previous owner having been someone named Sarah, and there seemed to be some kind of argument about it.

“Now, Frances, don’t be catty. Life wasn’t always kind to Sarah, and anyway, you know there are other beautiful houses here, albeit some of the nicer ones are run down now.”

“Don’t you ‘Now, Frances,’ me, Sue. You always want to play the peacemaker, but you know it’s true. Somehow I think just growing up in that house made Sarah like she is, made her think she was too good for Peyton too.”

“Well, its history had to have an impact. But for what happened, her family might never have had that house in the first place.” This from the woman they called Dallas.

“Impact, my arse.”

Dallas laid her cards on the table. “Frances, don’t be crude. It isn’t becoming, any more than your smoking is. Smoking doesn’t make you sophisticated any more these days.”

“Do I care?”

Sue, tall and plain with short-cropped blond hair, held her cards against her bosom and drawled, “Of course you do. But you can’t let go of that image or that silver cigarette case. And you’ve never cursed, Frances. Why should you start now?”

“Never?” Frances countered.

Sue smiled. “Well, hardly ever.”

“Good lord,” Dallas interrupted, “you two have never gotten over that high school production of *The H. M. S. Pinafore*, have you?”

“Is there a need to get over it, Dallas? That play was a high point for lots of us. But anyway, people can change, you know. Maybe I want to be someone else, someone who curses on a regular basis. Everything else is changing, why shouldn’t I?”

Louise, owner of the porch, interrupted. “Okay, ladies, who wants their iced tea freshened?”

“Iced sugar, you mean,” Frances muttered quietly.

“I heard that, Frances,” Louise said, shaking her head. “I

don't know how Bob has put up with your barbs all these years."

"Bob has no complaints. He always said he wouldn't give *that*," she said, snapping her fingers, "for a girl without a little vinegar."

"He must be a mighty happy man then," Dallas drawled.

"Well, don't you know he is?" Frances smirked.

"This tea pitcher is getting heavy, Frances. Tea or not? I've never heard you complain about my tea before."

"You know I like your tea, Louise, but I hear all these Yankees complaining when they're served sweet tea in a restaurant. Anyway, I need to watch my weight."

"I don't know what's happening to us." Louise let out a deep sigh. "We can't play a decent game of bridge without being at each other's throats. Maybe you don't want to play bridge any more. Want to give Tuesday evenings over to something else?"

Dallas replied in her throaty, cigarette voice. "I vote to keep the bridge club going. I'm a tad older than the rest of you. It keeps my mind active and gives me some place to go at least once a week. It isn't easy being a widow, ladies."

"Frances?" Louise queried.

"Count me in, but I can't promise not to curse."

Louise laughed. "We're not asking for miracles, only a little consideration. And I don't guess I need to poll Sue. She was born with a deck of cards in her hand."

Sue stretched her arms over her head. "A long line of gamblers, I guess."

Frances leapt to the bait. "Too bad you weren't born in a riverboat house."

"Okay," Louise said, "we're playing cards and that's all. No more talk of real estate or I'll bring out the Monopoly board."

You're letting Papa have your house plans? Our house plans, Seth?

I need the money, darling, and I've never seen anyone so taken with a house. He said it was as though I'd read his mind.

But it's our house. I can't believe you're . . .

Please don't cry. Please. Annelise, if I tell you something, will you promise never to tell?

Never?

Never.

I promise.

Your daddy is having the house built for you. It's to be a surprise, a wedding gift when you get married.

Married?

You're sixteen. He figures it won't be long before, before . . .

I fall in love? I've already done that.

My hope is that it'll be our house some day. In a way it's already ours, our idea. No matter what, it'll always belong to us.

Oh, Seth!

Your daddy loved the stable I built, and now these plans even more. Maybe I'll earn his respect and can ask for your hand.

I'm already yours. Not just my hand, all of me, my very spirit. Always.

Sue's voice cut through the night air, and Elise blinked hard and shook her head.

"We can talk about neutral people, can't we, Louise?" Sue placed her cards face down on the table. "I keep wondering if Sarah or Doris or anyone told the new people about the history of the house they bought."

"I doubt Sarah would take the time, and Doris sure wouldn't. Ever know a real estate woman to give a bit of information she didn't have to, and why should they? It's not like a murder was committed there or anything."

Frances coughed. "We don't know that. Remember after the

house had been shut up all those years, and when it was finally sold, the workers sent in to clean and repair things found human bones.”

“I’d nearly forgotten that,” Louise said.

Sue slapped her hand on the table. “Only you could forget something like that, Louise. There was a hidden stairway, or would have been hidden, had the door not been slightly ajar. That’s where they found them.”

“It still wasn’t murder,” Louise insisted. “They figured some vagrant wandered in there and suffocated hiding in that small space.”

“I never bought that for one minute.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t, Dallas.”

“I wasn’t the only one, Sue.”

“Well, nobody wanted a scandal, and it was all history by then anyway.”

“It had been deeded over to Coulton and Annelise. They never found Coulton. Poor man must have been crazy with grief to just walk off and leave, furniture and everything. The house finally went back to Mr. Lovett. Not that it did him any good. He couldn’t bear the memory or the heartache, never set foot in the door after Annelise died. That house has had a life all its own.” Dallas sighed. “If that isn’t a tragedy, I don’t know what is.”

Frances smirked. “You’re right, Dallas. Don’t you suppose the new people have wondered why they couldn’t hire anyone to help clean the place up? The poor, ignorant servant women are scared of that house. Don’t think Sarah didn’t have her hands full keeping help there and her mother before her, probably the grandparents too. They labored under a curse living there.”

Dallas folded her cards. “Stop it, Frances. Such ridiculous rumors have grown up about the place. I feel sorry for the new people, I really do. But maybe they can change things. All the

problems and unhappiness Sarah had there didn't do a thing to improve its image. Poor Sarah. Sometimes I think the only reason Chandler married her was to get her house. He'd always had this idea he wanted to be an architect. He doted on it as an architectural marvel."

"Why, Dallas, I'm surprised at you."

"Surprised how?"

Frances smiled. "Well, now, this is all water under the bridge, but since you think I have my mind set on high school, I'm reminded that a little bird told me you were kind of sweet on Chandler yourself at one time. Are you saying Sarah had the advantage over you by owning that house?"

Dallas sat up straighter. "Wipe that smile off your face, Frances. It doesn't change what you said one bit."

Sue turned her cards face down on the table, hard. "Leave it to you, Frances, to bring up ancient history."

"Well, if that doesn't beat all," Dallas said with obvious disgust. "I may not be a girl any more, Sue, but I surely don't consider myself ancient by any means. And Frances, yes, since you brought it up, at one time I was sweet on Chandler. Oh, ladies, are you so old that you've forgotten how easy it is to love a scoundrel? Oh my God, but it's easy to love a scoundrel. And Chandler was the classic scoundrel, so handsome and dashing, so full of himself. How could I, or anyone else for that matter, ever forget that dark hair and quick smile? When that boy smiled the whole world stopped spinning. And the way he walked like he had springs in his feet. Oh, he was a scoundrel all right."

"If I didn't know better, Dallas, I'd say you never got over him."

"Oh, I got over him all right, Frances. It's easy to love a scoundrel. It's just not easy to be married to one. Sarah could have told you that. He drank her money and womanized her

into ill health. We all know he did. My Tom was worth ten Chandlers. No, a hundred Chandlers.”

“Peyton Roberts was worth more than Chandler too,” Louise added.

“Well, of course he was. He just never had the dash and dander Chandler had, and Sarah couldn’t see beyond that no matter how much Peyton loved her. Furthermore, Peyton made the mistake of trying to ride on the coattails of all his illustrious ancestors. No, I would never have traded my life for Sarah’s, not even for that grand riverboat house.”

“Or a romp in the hay with Chandler?”

Louise gasped. “Frances! Honestly, I can’t believe we’re having this discussion.”

Dallas raised her lovely arched eyebrows. “How do you know I didn’t?”

“Dallas!”

“I didn’t say I did, but then, I didn’t say I didn’t.”

Rolling in soft and quiet as fog, Frances began singing, “*Things are seldom what they seem,*” and Sue followed with, “*Skim milk masquerades as cream . . .*”

Dallas interrupted, “Ladies, I’ve had enough *Pinafore* for one evening.”

“Me too,” Louise said, her voice so soft Elise had trouble hearing her. “Sometimes I feel like that house really was cursed. Built with such good intentions, it never brought anything but heartache to the people who lived there. Sarah’s mother was an invalid most of her life.”

Frances put the back of her hand to her forehead and sighed. “Here we go again.”

Sue picked up her cards. “It could all be coincidence. If there’s a curse on a house, I’d say it’s the Lovett house on the river. That’s where it all began.”

“We’ll never know if there’s a curse on either house, not any more than you’ll know if Chandler had his way with me. Oh, ladies, I was desirable, even without a riverboat house.”

The three women stared open-mouthed at Dallas. She ignored them and studied her cards with downcast eyes.

Frances was the first to regain her composure. “Lord, y’all are giving me chills. Let’s play cards or I’ll start cursing again.”

They laughed, and with the serenity that comes from the security of age and familiarity, they resumed their bridge game.

Only Elise was shaken by the experience. She rubbed her arms, chilled with goose flesh. *A curse? What curse?* She walked back to her beautiful home, determined to avoid the carriage stone. She stumbled over it just the same.

Careful. Don’t trip. I had the carriage stone put in today.

Seth took Annelise’s arm and guided her through the moonless night.

Elise stared downward, puzzled how she could have hit the carriage stone, but maybe the voices had distracted her. What did they have to do with her? Was she not afraid because they were like leftover dreams? She didn’t dare talk to her mother about it. If Margaret thought her fear of mirrors was weird, Elise couldn’t imagine what she’d think if she knew her daughter was hearing voices. She turned and sat on the hard surface, rubbing the toe of her scuffed shoe. It was cold as a tombstone, but she sat for some time with her chin on her hand, staring at the mysterious riverboat house.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



photo credit: Deanne Dunlop

RUTH COE CHAMBERS takes pride in her Florida panhandle roots, and her hometown of Port St. Joe has inspired much of her writing. She attended Florida State University, the University of South Florida and graduated Summa Cum Laude from California State University, Fresno. It was through creative writing classes at the University of South Florida that she found her “voice” and began writing literary fiction. Listed in *Who’s Who of American Women*, she does freelance writing, has recently republished one novel, has self-published its sequel, and has written two award-winning plays. She is currently working on the third novel in her Bay Harbor Trilogy. She has two daughters and lives with her husband and one very spoiled Cairn terrier in Neptune Beach, Florida.

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