

RUTH RENDELL

THE TREE OF HANDS



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OF HANDS

Ruth Rendell



PANTHEON BOOKS, NEW YORK

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Originally published in Great Britain by Hutchinson & Co. Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Rendell, Ruth, 1930—

The tree of hands.

I. Title.

PR6068.E63T7 1985

823'.914

84-19002

ISBN 0-394-53098-5

DESIGNED BY EARL TIDWELL

Manufactured in the United States of America
First American Edition

For Francesca, my godchild, with love

BOOK I

Once, when Benet was about fourteen, they had been in a train together, alone in the carriage, and Mopsa had tried to stab her with a carving knife. Threatened her with it, rather. Benet had been wondering why her mother had brought such a large hand-bag with her, a red one that didn't go with the clothes she was wearing. Mopsa had shouted and laughed and said wild things and then she had put the knife back in her bag. But Benet had been very frightened by then. She lost her head and pulled the emergency handle, which Mopsa called the "communication cord." The train stopped and there had been trouble for everyone involved, and her father had been angry and grimly sad.

She had more or less forgotten it. The memory of it came back quite vividly while she was waiting for Mopsa at Heathrow. Though she had seen Mopsa many times since then, had lived under the same roof with her and seen how she could change, it was the scarved, shawled, streamered figure with its fleece of shaggy hair that she watched for as she waited behind the barrier

among the tour guides with their placards, the anxious Indians, the businessmen's wives. James wanted to come out of the stroller, he couldn't see down there and he wasn't feeling well. Benet picked him up and set him on her hip with her arm round him.

It ought to have been exciting, waiting here. There was something dramatic about the emergence of the first people from behind the wall that hid Customs, almost as if they had escaped into freedom. Benet remembered once meeting Edward here and how wonderful that first sight of him had been. All those people streaming through, all unknown, all strangers, and then Edward, so positively and absolutely Edward that it was as if he were in color and all the rest in black and white. Waiting for Mopsa wasn't like that. Waiting for Edward, if such a thing were conceivable, wouldn't be like that now. There was no one in her world that waiting for would be like that except James, and she couldn't see any reason why she and James should be separated. Not for years and years anyway. She dug in her bag for a tissue and wiped his nose. Poor James. He was beautiful though, he always was, even if his face was wan and his nose pink.

A couple came through, each pushing a tartan suitcase on wheels. The woman behind them held a small suitcase in one hand and a small holdall in the other. It would be hard to say which was carry-on baggage and which had been checked. The cases matched; they were of biscuit-colored stuff you couldn't tell was plastic or leather. She was a drab, colorless, washed-out woman. Her pale, wandering eyes rested on Benet and recognized her. It was that way round—otherwise would Benet ever have known?

Yet this was Mopsa. This was her mad mother who was kissing her, smiling, and giving a dismissive wave of the hand when James, instead of responding to her, buried his face in Benet's shoulder. This was Mopsa in a dowdy gray suit, a pink silk blouse with a gold pin at the collar, her hair cut brusquely short and faded to tarnished silver.

Benet put the cases on the stroller, using it as a baggage trolley. She carried James, who snuffled and stared, round-eyed,

curious, at this new unknown grandmother. Mopsa had developed a brisk, springy walk. Her carriage was erect, her head held high. In the past she had sometimes slouched, sometimes danced, swanned and swayed in her Isadora Duncan moods, but she had never walked briskly like an ordinary woman. Or perhaps she did when I was very young, thought Benet, trying to remember a girl-mother of twenty years before. It was too long ago. All she could recall now was how she had longed for a normal mother like other girls had and took for granted. Now, when she was twenty-eight and it no longer mattered, it seemed she had one. She stopped herself staring. She asked after her father.

"He's fine. He sent his love."

"And you really like living in Spain?"

"I don't say it hasn't its drawbacks but Dad hasn't had a sign of his asthma in three years. It keeps me fit too." Mopsa smiled cheerfully as if her own illness had been no more than a kind of asthma. She talked like one of those neighbors in Edgware had talked. Like Mrs. Fenton, Benet thought, like a middle-aged housewife. "I feel a fraud coming here for these tests," Mopsa said. "There's nothing wrong with me anymore, I said, but they said it wouldn't do any harm and why not have a holiday? Well, I'm on holiday all the time really, aren't I? Are we going in the tube? It must be seven or eight years since I went in the tube."

"I've brought the car," said Benet.

In her teens, she used sometimes to say over and over to herself, I must not hate my mother. The injunction had not always been obeyed. And then she would say, But she's ill, she can't help it, she's mad. She had understood and forgiven but she had not wanted to be with her mother. When she went away to university, she had resolved that she would never go back and, except for short holidays, she never had. Her father had retired and her father and mother had bought themselves a little house near Marbella. Mopsa's face and the backs of her hands were tanned by the sunshine of southern Spain. Benet shifted James onto her other hip and he sniveled and clung to her.

"He's got a nasty cold," said Mopsa. "I wonder if you ought to have brought him out with a cold like that."

"I'd no one to leave him with. You know I've just moved house."

There was a baby seat in the back of the car in which James usually sat contentedly. Benet strapped him in and put Mopsa's cases in the trunk. She would have been grateful if her mother had offered to sit in the back with James, but Mopsa was already in the passenger seat, her seatbelt already fastened, her hands, in rather clumsy black leather gloves, folded in her lap. It didn't seem to occur to her even to talk to James. He was miserable in the back, sneezing sometimes and grizzling quietly. Benet talked to him as she drove, pointing out people and dogs and buildings, anything she thought might be interesting, but she soon became aware of Mopsa's resentment. Mopsa wanted to talk about her own troubles and her own hopes, about Spain and their house and about what she was going to do while in London. Something struck Benet that she had never thought of before, that one always assumes that when mental illness is cured or alleviated one will be left with a nice person, an unselfish, thoughtful, pleasant, sensible person. But of course this wasn't so. Why should it be? Underneath the psychosis there might just as well be normal nastiness as normal niceness. Not that Mopsa was nasty, far from it. Perhaps what she meant was that Mopsa was, had been, used to be, mad—but when the madness lifted, it revealed a solipsist of a very high order, someone who believed the world to revolve around herself.

The house in Hampstead, in the Vale of Peace, still seemed an alien place to return to. It was only three days since Benet had moved in. Benet slid the car into the narrow lane between high banks which led into this hamlet on the edge of the Heath. For half her life, since the day she had come with friends to the fair that is always held on public holidays just off the Spaniards Road, she had dreamed of living here. Then, when it need not be fantasy any longer, when it was possible, she had planned for it. But

Mopsa seemed never to have heard of this celebrated enclave, enbowered by chestnuts and sycamores and Monterey pines, where blue plaques honored poets dead and gone, a painter, an impresario or two. That Shelley had sailed paper boats on the pond and Coleridge had begun, while sitting on a log on the green, another magical epic never to be completed, were items of literary lore that had never reached her. Getting out of the car, she eyed Benet's tall and narrow Victorian villa with something like disappointment. What had she expected? An art deco palace in the Bishop's Avenue?

"Well, I don't suppose you wanted anything too ambitious, just you and the baby on your own."

James wasn't really a baby anymore, Benet thought, unlocking the front door. He was a year and nine months old, saying a good many words, understanding more. He clambered up the flight of steps, happier now that he was home, probably remembering the treasures awaiting him, the toys that littered the floor of the big basement-kitchen-playroom. Mopsa stepped over him to get to the door. Benet wondered how soon it would be before she began on his fatherless state. Or was she, in spite of the enormous improvement, not quite enough, never to be quite enough, of the conventional suburban middle-aged woman for this to weigh with her? Benet hardly expected to escape without a mention of Edward, the disadvantages of illegitimacy, the threat to a boy's normalcy of growing up only with a mother. She ought to be glad, she told herself, that it was Mopsa who had come and not her father. He was still expressing shocked disbelief over James's very existence.

The house was not yet set to rights. Boxes and crates of still unwrapped ornaments, kitchen utensils, china and glass and the unending hundreds of books were ranked along the hallway. Leaving for the airport, Benet had come from her task of setting books on the shelves she had had built in the room that would be her study, from attempting some sort of cataloguing system. Spread across the floor in all its sixteen foreign-language editions

lay her best-selling novel, the source of her affluence, of this house, *The Marriage Knot*. She closed the door to keep James from rampaging among the welter of paperbacks.

Though James seemed even farther from rampaging than he had been in the car. Instead of doing what Benet had expected and rushing back to his newest toy, a xylophone with its octave painted in colours of the spectrum plus one in gold, he had taken himself to his small wicker chair and sat in it, sucking his thumb. His nose had begun to run, and when Benet picked him up, she could hear his breath moving in his chest. It wasn't wheezing exactly, just a sound of his breath moving where there should be no sound. It was warm and cozy in the big basement room, and on a sunny day like this one, bright enough. Benet had had all the kitchen part-fitted with oak units and the floor carpeted in Florentine red and a big cupboard built for James's toys.

Mopsa, having deposited her cases on the bed in the room Benet had got ready for her, came downstairs quite jauntily and said: "Now I'll take us all out for some lunch."

"I don't think I ought to take him out again. He doesn't seem very well. We can eat here. I meant to give you lunch here."

Mopsa showed her displeasure. "It isn't *cold* even by my Spanish standards." She laughed, a metallic, rather cracked sound not unlike that made by striking the lowest key of the xylophone. "You must be a very devoted mother."

Benet made no answer. She too was amazed by what a devoted mother she had become. Of course she had meant to be that. In having James, in purposefully setting out as an unmarried woman to have a child, she had planned a perfect devotion, an ideal childhood, the best of love and of material things. She had not guessed how little she need have calculated, how absolutely committed to him she would be within a moment of his birth.

She made lunch—soup, wholemeal bread, duck pâté, and salad for her and Mopsa, scrambled eggs, fingers of toast, and chocolate ice cream for James. Up at the other end of the room, in the window seat with the little front garden and the stone

garden wall rising up behind it, Mopsa sat reading the paperback she had brought with her on the plane. She hadn't attempted to take James on to her knee. Benet repressed her indignation, told herself not even to feel it. James's favorite lunch didn't tempt him beyond a few mouthfuls.

"He needs a good sleep," said Mopsa.

Probably she was right, though Benet thought she said it more from a desire to be rid of him than for his own benefit. James's bedroom was the room in the house she had seen to first, the only one without a still unemptied crate in it. Benet put his favourite toy, a squashy tiger cub with dangling limbs, into his hands and laid him gently in the cot. James didn't like being put down to sleep in the daytime and usually if this was attempted sat bolt upright at once, putting up importunate arms. This time he lay where he was put, clutching the tiger. His face was flushed as if he might be cutting those awaited back molars. Benet thought there couldn't be much the matter with him. She had had him immunized against every possibly threatening disease. His chest had always been a bit troublesome when he had a cold. It growled now when he breathed in. She sat with him for five minutes until he slept.

"I didn't imagine you'd have all that much maternal feeling," Mopsa said. She had been up to the chaotic living room and found bottles that hadn't yet been put away and poured herself some brandy. She had never been a hard drinker, never approached alcoholism, but she liked a drink and it sometimes affected her strangely. Benet remembered, from years back, her efforts and her father's to deflect Mopsa from the sherry bottle. Mopsa smiled her vague silly smile, parted lips trembling. "It's often the case that you don't want them but you come to love them when they arrive."

"I did want James," said Benet, and to effect a change of subject, one she knew her mother would be happy to embark on, "Tell me about these tests you're having done."

"They haven't got the facilities to do them in Spain. I

always did say there's some enzyme or something that's missing in me, that's all it is, and now it looks as if they're coming round to my way of thinking." Mopsa had for years denied that she was ill at all. It was others who were ill or malicious or lacking in understanding of her. But when realization that she was not normal was inescapable, when in lucid periods she looked back on nightmares, she had come to lay the blame not on psychosis but on a defect in her body's chemistry.

"Take the case of George III," she would say. "They thought he was mad for years. They subjected him to hellish tortures. And now they know he had porphyria and just giving him what his body lacked would have made him sane."

Perhaps she was right. But whatever vital substance she might lack, it now seemed that the deficiency had lately and by natural means made itself good. As Mopsa talked lucidly, and with a good deal of intelligent grasp of detail, of the tests and the complicated processes that would follow them, Benet thought her saner than she had been since she herself was a child. Even the glaze that lay on her greenish-blue eyes seemed to have lifted and been replaced by a more normal inner light.

Mopsa was looking round the room. "Where's your television?"

"I haven't got it."

"You mean you haven't got a set at all? I should be lost without the TV, not that it's very good in Spain. I was looking forward to English TV. Why haven't you got it? It can't be that you can't afford it."

"I write when James is asleep, so that means I mostly write in the evenings and television wouldn't be much use to me."

"He's asleep now. Do you want to do some writing now? Don't take any notice of me. I'll keep quiet and read my book."

Benet shook her head. The peculiar conditions necessary for writing—some measure of solitude, a contemplative atmosphere, a certain preparation of the mind—she felt unable to explain to anyone not involved in the process, least of all Mopsa. Besides,

she was in the highly unusual position of someone who had written down some reminiscences and observations—in her case the time in India with Edward—made them into fiction largely for her own amusement, and suddenly finds she has produced a bestseller. An immediate and enormous bestseller. Now she had to write something else, if not to match *The Marriage Knot*, at least to put up a creditable showing beside it. She was the author of what might prove to be a one-time success faced with the hurdle of the “second book.” It didn’t come easily even when she was feeling tranquil and James slept.

That reminded her, he had been asleep for nearly two hours now. She went upstairs to look at him. He was still sleeping, his face rather flushed and his breathing rough. She could see Edward in his face, especially in the curve of his lips and the modeling of his forehead. One day, when he was grown up, he would have those “English gentleman” looks Edward possessed, flaxen hair, steady blue eyes, strong chin—and perhaps something more than just looks, something more than his father had.

Waiting for him to wake, she stood by the window and watched the setting sun. The sky would become red only after the sun had gone down. Now it was a dark gold, barred with gray, the waters of the Vale of Peace pond sparkling with points of light. A row of Monterey pines on the farther bank stood black and still against the yellow and gray marbling. A good place to live, a fine place for James to grow up in. She had chosen wisely.

Was there some feature of that view, the row of pines perhaps, the sunset, or simply thinking of childhood and an environment for it, that brought back that awful afternoon with Mopsa? She hadn’t thought of it for years. Now she remembered it very clearly, though it was nineteen or twenty years ago, but did she remember what had really happened? It had been the first manifestation of Mopsa’s madness, her paranoid schizophrenia, that Benet had known. She was eight and the cousin who was with them only three or four. Mopsa had taken them into the dining room of the house they lived in in Colindale and locked

the door and bolted it, and then phoned Benet's father at work to say she was going to kill the children and then herself. Or had Mopsa only threatened to remain shut in there with the children until some demand of hers was met? The true version was something between the two probably. Why, anyway, would a dining-room door have a bolt on it? But Benet could very clearly remember Mopsa taking knives out of a drawer, the little cousin screaming, Mopsa pulling heavy pieces of furniture, a sideboard, some other sort of cabinet, across the French windows. Most of all she remembered the door coming down, splintering first, and her uncle breaking through, then her father. They had brought no outside aid; shame and fear of consequences had no doubt prevented this. No one had been hurt, and Mopsa had become quite calm afterwards so that one wouldn't have guessed anything was wrong with her. Until she had started the compulsive stealing, that had been the next thing. It became impossible to say you wanted anything—anything within reason, that is—without Mopsa stealing it for you. Benet remembered her father admiring a record he had heard in someone's house, a popular, even hackneyed classical piece, Handel's *Water Music* most likely. Mopsa had gone to great pains to find that identical recording in a shop, and when she had found it, she stole it, though she could easily have afforded to buy it. She stole to make gifts to those she loved and the element of risk involved in the theft rendered her gift, so some psychiatrist had said, more valuable in her own eyes. Since then the manifestation of her condition had been many and various: sporadic violence, divorcement from reality, inconsequential "mad" acts. . . .

James turned over, sat up and gave an angry yell, rubbing his eyes with his fists. His cries turned to coughing with a rattle in his chest. Benet picked him up and held him against her shoulder. His chest was a sounding box that made almost musical notes. An idea which had been taking shape of asking people round for drinks—a way of passing the evening and quite a good way now Mopsa was behaving so rationally—no longer seemed

feasible. James had a bad cold and would need her attention all evening.

The house felt very warm. She was glad she had had the central heating system overhauled before she moved in. Mopsa, unpacking her case, her bedroom door open, looked the epitome of a sensible, rather ordinary housewife. No doubt it was a part she was acting, had perhaps been acting for years. Roles of various kinds had been common with her in the past, all of them seemingly having coalesced into this form. Or was this the real Mopsa, emerging at last from shed layers of psychotic personae?

Now it was even as if her true name, the mundane Margaret, would have suited her better than that which evoked connotations of wildness and witchcraft, ancient familiars, ducking stools, eye of newt and toe of frog. It was not from *Macbeth* though but *The Winter's Tale* that she had named herself when playing the part of Mopsa in a school production at the age of fifteen. Familiar with it as a mother's name, as others might be with a Mary or Elizabeth, Benet nevertheless suddenly saw it as fantastic, incongruous, something that should have been disposed of at the same time as that fleece of blonde hair. Mopsa's face, a thin and pointed face, always witchlike, though in Benet's childhood that of a young and beautiful witch, had undergone some blurring of the features that was perhaps part of an ageing process. The jawline was no longer hard and sweeping, the lips were less set. The dowdy haircut made her look very slightly pathetic, but possibly no more so than any woman of her age who had no particular purpose in life and was not very well or much loved or needed.

Benet was surprised to find her down in the kitchen making tea for herself. Mopsa generally expected to be waited on wherever she was. Once James was better, Benet thought, they would all go out together. He was almost old enough to be taken to places of interest, to begin anyway. Lunch somewhere nice after Mopsa had been for her hospital appointment, and then if the weather were as good as it had been that day, they might go to