



She's Gone

CRAIG LANCASTER

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ROSS WATCHED HIS FATHER STEP THROUGH THE SCRUBBY BRUSH, the man's calloused leather palms gripping a willow branch with both hands turned up as if he were curling dumbbells. After fifteen, maybe twenty yards, the branch, cut to the shape of an outsized wishbone, began to quiver. After a few steps more, the single point up top swung hard toward the ground.

Dwight Newbry turned to his observers with a gap-toothed smile and pointed at the spot.

"That it?" shouted the man standing to the left of Ross. Then, under his breath so only the boy could hear, he added, "Jesus, I hope not."

"Think so," Dwight called back. "Lemme walk it out a little bit."

"That's a long damn way from where we're putting the house," said the man on Ross's right, the property owner. He retrieved a hanky from his back pocket and mopped his corpulent, sunburned neck.

Dwight pivoted and clomped away from the spot at a forty-five-degree angle and turned again, raised the willow branch and traced his steps. Again, the branch shuddered before violently marking the spot. Three more runs from other angles confirmed it, and Dwight took a stake out of his back pocket and pounded it into the earth.

The man on Ross's left tugged off his mesh JQ Drilling Co. hat and wiped it across his face. "Well, hell," he said. "That's it, then." He kicked at the dirt, diffusing a sandy cloud. "A long stretch, and it's gonna be a son of a bitch digging through this."

Dwight loped back to them, his lopsided grin exposing every ground-down tooth, looking for all the world like it would break his face in half.

"I told you, guys," he shouted at them. "I told you. That there is the place."

"I DON'T GET IT," Ross said on the ride back to town. "A piece of wood tells you where the water is?"

Dwight held the '68 Ford tight to the yellow line as the truck bore down on Miles City. "Yep. That's about the size of it."

"How?"

"It just does."

"It's just piece of wood. What's so special about a piece of wood?"

Dwight chuckled at the boy's exasperation. He hadn't known what to expect when April had called a few weeks earlier. *He's not listening to me anymore, she'd said. It's time to see what you can do with him. Past time, I'd say.* When the boy stepped off the plane a couple of weeks earlier in Billings, he'd come packing two bags and silence. Dwight tried for a few days to draw him out, to get him to talk, and that hadn't worked. It was only after he started bringing Ross along on the occasional job that the youngster opened up, if only a little. The well witching seemed to have

inspired more interest than the posthole digging and the calf branding.

“Nothing special about the wood, boy,” Dwight said. “A wire coat hanger’d work, too. I just prefer the willow.”

The kid balled his fists. “Don’t call me boy.”

Dwight gave him a sly grin and reached over to tousle his hair, but Ross slapped at his father’s hand. *Stupid*, Dwight silently scolded himself. *Too fast*.

“What do you want me to call you, then?” he asked.

“How about Ross? That’s my name after all.”

They were almost to Miles City now, the street lights twinkling at the bottom of the hill as dusk ceded to night.

“It is, at that,” Dwight said. “Your momma ever tell you how we came up with it?”

“No.”

“You want to hear the story?”

Ross squirmed in his seat. Every movement the boy made dripped with aggression, Dwight noted.

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t care.”

“It’s way too good a story to waste on that attitude,” Dwight said. “You think about it, and if you decide you want to know, you ask me proper.”

ROSS SPOKE LITTLE THROUGH DINNER. Only after Dwight put a bowl of ice cream in front of the boy—vanilla, with a hard chocolate shell—did he relent.

“Tell me the story about my name,” he said.

Dwight slipped the boy’s dinner plate under the table and swept crumbs onto it. “You’re sure now?”

“I said I was.”

“I’m just checking. I—” Dwight choked off the rest of what he was tempted to say. In the two weeks Ross had been bunking with him, he’d noticed a creeping tendency in himself to tease the kid, to try to get under his skin, just because the boy was so damned prickly. Dwight took perverse thrill in puncturing the protective layer. He hadn’t seen Ross in four years, and back then he had been a nine-year-old who was a damn sight easier to entertain than the sullen teenager with whom he now shared nearly every hour. The teasing allowed Dwight to blow off some frustration he might otherwise unload in a more destructive way, but he knew it wasn’t closing the gap between them.

“Your momma and me, we were living on the Fort Ord Army base in California, right there on the coast,” Dwight said, sitting down with his own ice cream. “I was just a buck private, nothing too special, but when we had a chance, we liked to go exploring. Growing up here, we

hadn't ever seen a place like that. God, on a clear day, the water looked blue, just like in the movies, and it went on forever."

"I've seen it," the boy said. "Mom took me there last summer."

Dwight cut to it. "Anyways, this one day, we went up north of San Francisco, across the Golden Gate Bridge, in this little town. It was a beautiful day—sunny, warm, even though it must have been late September, early October. We were in a park. Set out a blanket, had some wine, fell asleep. A great day. Anyways, the name of that town was Ross. It was one of our best memories there, so when you came along not too long after that, we figured we had the right name for you."

Dwight looked at his son, waiting. Ross didn't look up.

"That's not much of a story," the boy said, scooping the last bite of ice cream into his mouth.

"I just figured you'd want to hear it," Dwight said, and he winced as he realized that he'd let the boy know he'd been wounded.

"No, you said it was too good a story to waste," Ross said, staring at him. "It wasn't good at all. It sucked."

Dwight tugged at the napkin on the table, straightening it.

"What are you so angry about, Ross?"

"I'm not angry. I'm really glad you and Mom had a great day. That's so awesome. Didn't really stop you from leaving us, though, did it? You're here, she's at home, she doesn't want me, I'm here, I don't want to be with you. It really worked out for me, didn't it?"

Dwight clasped his hands in front of him. "Ross—"

"Shut up."

"Listen—"

"Shut up."

"Ross, about me and your momma—"

"Shut up!" The boy threw back his chair, crashing it against the stained-wood wall of Dwight's trailer. He ran to his room, shaking the doublewide again with a slammed door.

For a long time, Dwight stared into his bowl, waiting for his heart to thump with less urgency. When he finally scooped out some of the melted vanilla, the sound of his spoon clinking against the bowl reverberated in a house that had gone silent.

QUILLEN GAVE THEM A BRISK WAVE THE NEXT MORNING AS THEY PULLED UP AT THE RANCH. Behind him, the mast on the drilling rig stood at attention, ready to seek the water Dwight had zeroed in on a day earlier.

"Thanks for coming," Quillen said, shaking hands with both of them. Ross pulled

Before he left Fargo, his mom had suggested that things had gone badly out here for Dwight and Jill, and so he hadn't pushed that line of questioning. Truth was, he figured he had trouble enough on his own without worrying about the two of them. Now it was a moot point as Dwight, unbidden, revealed all.

back from the man's grip; it felt like the mouth of a vise closing on his hand.

"I tell you, this is gonna be a son of a bitch, trying to dig this out. This ground doesn't hold up for shit." Quillen kicked at the dirt.

"Happy to help. A day's pay is a day's pay," Dwight said.

"Might be more than that, if I have to take another run at it. Hope not."

Ross watched the men in bemusement. Both spread their legs slightly, supporting their torsos with the widened base, like a couple of old football linemen who couldn't stand up straight anymore. Quillen—Jim was his name, Ross remembered—frowned with nearly every word, as if it caused him pain to speak. Ross's father reached back and slipped his hand down the back of his jeans, his palm out. A couple of cocks on the walk, they were.

"Kid," Quillen said.

Ross, startled, looked up. "Me?"

"No, the other kid. Yeah, you. Know how to use a shovel?"

"Yeah."

"I'll give you ten bucks if you keep that hole clear of dirt."

FOUR HOURS INTO THE DIG, Dwight's divining paid off. Water surged through the pipe and sprayed down onto them. The fat splashes of muddy water tingled on Ross's skin, baked pink by the midday sun.

"Hot damn!" Quillen said, leaping from his drilling perch. "Newbry, you're a goddamned well-witchin' fool. Look at her go!" The gusher bubbled out of the top of the mast, stripping caked-on mud from the back of the rig.

Dwight looked skyward in an open-mouthed grin.

"That's it?" Ross asked.

"Well, no, not yet," Quillen said. "Gotta run a pump down into her, but that's sure as shit a

water well.”

He clapped Dwight on the shoulder, and for the first time, Ross looked at his father with something approaching respect.

ROSS AND THE MEN SAT UNDER THE AWNING OUTSIDE THE TRAILER. Even as dusk galloped hard across the sky, the embers of the day broiled anything that dared venture into the light. A bucket of ice holding a six-pack of Pabst and a few root beers for Ross stood sweating on the ground.

“You need a woman’s touch around here, Newbry,” Quillen said, waving his hand at the junked-out cars scattered across what passed for a front yard.

“Had one,” Dwight said.

Quillen tapped his bottle against Dwight’s, and then against Ross’s root beer. “I hear you, partner. I’ve had my own troubles there, too. Still, if you love pussy, what else are you gonna do?”

“Good point.”

“I got a cow or two, I guess,” Quillen said, chuckling. “I’ll have to give it some more thought before it comes to that.”

Ross tried to conjure a memory of Jill’s face. It was no use. He’d met his father’s wife only a couple of times, and she hadn’t made much of an impression on him.

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“I knew it was bad from the start, but I stayed in. I kept thinking if I just hung in there, she’d come around, but she never did.”

“What do you mean?” Quillen said.

“I couldn’t make her happy. She would say, ‘Dwight, you’re just a good ol’ boy, you’ll never amount to anything.’ Well, hell, I’m the guy I was the day she met me. I never told her I’d be anything different than that. So she started going to night school, wanted to become a travel agent. So I went with that. Started going to Billings all the damn time for seminars and stuff. Fine, I said. I went to bed alone a lot of nights. I never complained. And then she comes home one day and says, ‘I’m leaving.’ Just like that. It’s over.”

“When was that?” Ross asked.

Dwight traced a thumb along the lip of the bottle. “Nine weeks ago.”

“Bitch,” Quillen said. “At least she didn’t clean you out, the way my second wife did. Three years ago, and I’m barely holding on. Job’s gone to shit. Drilling these wells, trying to stay afloat.”

“Mine didn’t do it only because there was nothing to take.”

Quillen took a swig, emptying his bottle. “I should have never gotten divorced the first time. I let the best woman I ever had get away.”

Ross looked at his father, wanting him to say it and bracing himself for the competing emotions—pride and anger—he knew would come if Dwight did.

“Yeah,” Dwight said. “Me, too.”

WORD QUICKLY GOT AROUND ABOUT THE JACKPOT WELL UP JORDAN WAY, and the next morning, calls started hitting the Newbry house as soon the sun peeked above the eastern horizon.

“Hell, yeah, we’re interested,” Dwight said, fielding the first one. “Nah, I’m almost certain he can do it. I know I can.” On the couch, across the room, Quillen sat scratching his belly and nodding his head vigorously at the rumor of work.

By midmorning, Dwight had lined up nine well-digging jobs—nine witching jobs for him—and Quillen had ciphered out the math and figured that if things broke right, he could get them done inside of a month and be home by September.

“You got room for me on that couch a few weeks?” Quillen asked.

“You got room for me on the back of that rig?”

There in the living room, both in their underwear, they shook on it.

“**W**HAT GRADE ARE YOU IN, sport?” Quillen asked Ross as they watched the rig make easy work on a segment of pipe. They were on their fourth well in a little more than a week and a half, right on schedule.

Ross, a head taller than the leathery man beside him, glanced at him and said, “I’ll be in eighth.”

“So you’re, what, twelve, thirteen?”

“Thirteen.”

“I’ve got a boy about your age.”

“What’s his name?”

“Mitch.” Quillen pointed at the pipe’s point of entry. “Better go sweep that out, huh?”

Ross did as he was told, approaching the back of the rig and slipping the blade of the shovel alongside the pipe and raking away the churned-up earth. The job done, he loped back alongside Quillen.

“Where’s your son now?” Ross asked.

“He lives with his mom out in Washington.”

“My mom lives in Fargo. She made me come here.”

Quillen nodded at the back of the rig. Dwight had climbed behind the mast and was lubing

some of the mechanical joints. “Adults play a lot of games, kid,” he said. “Might as well get used to that now, but that dad of yours, he’s true blue. I’ve known him for a long time. I trust him. I don’t say that about many people.”

“I don’t know him,” Ross said.

Quillen gave Ross a tiny shove, prompting the boy to look him in the eye. “Hey. Listen. He doesn’t know you, either, but he’s willing to try. I’d give anything to see my boy again. Give him a chance.”

THEY DRAGGED INTO MILES CITY AT SUNDOWN. A brown sedan sat in the driveway.

“Shit,” Dwight said. “It’s Jill.”

“Maybe she’s come back,” Quillen said. “Maybe she misses you.”

Dwight scoffed. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Well, listen,” Quillen said, “I’m gonna leave you to it. I’ll head into town and get a bite to eat and stay out of your way up here.”

Quillen whipped a U-turn in front of the trailer, and Dwight and Ross scooted out. Ross walked behind his father as they headed to the door, and he was sure he saw his old man’s shoulders droop with each step.

They found Jill in the living room, on the couch that had become Quillen’s bed.

“Ross ... wow ... I didn’t expect to see you,” she said, standing and pulling the boy in for a hug he stiffly endured. “You’re so big. What are you doing here?”

“Never mind, Jill,” Dwight said, slipping an arm between them and pulling Ross back. “What do you want?”

She sat down again. “I was wondering if you’d talked to anybody about the, you know, the divorce.”

“I haven’t talked to anyone. You’re the one who left, not me.”

“I was just thinking,” she said, and then she stopped short. “Listen, Ross, would you mind going to your room or outside while me and your dad talk?”

“Stay here, Ross,” Dwight said. “Don’t you tell this boy what to do. It’s his house. He lives here. You don’t, not anymore. Got that?”

“Actually—” Ross said.

“Don’t be like that, Dwight,” she said.

“Actually, I have some stuff to do in my bedroom,” Ross said. He bolted down the hall but couldn’t outrun the voices that were already beginning to boil over as he breached his door and slammed it shut.

LATER THAT EVENING, Dwight and Ross settled into the seat opposite Quillen at the diner. Ross stifled a giggle at their houseguest, who had a clump of mashed potatoes drying fast in his mustache.

“What’d she want?” Quillen asked.

“Don’t want to talk about it,” Dwight said.

The waitress breezed past, and Dwight reached out and tugged on her apron. “Cup of coffee.”

“What about you?” she said, fixing an eye on Ross.

“Root beer.”

“So it was that bad?” Quillen said.

Dwight rubbed his eyes.

“Real bad,” Ross said.

Dwight crashed a heavy elbow into his son’s bicep. “Zip it up, Ross.”

“Well, it was.”

“I said, clam up.”

The rising voices drew the eyes of folks at neighboring tables.

“Guys,” Quillen said. “Take it easy.”

Ross kept going, loudly. “Yeah, you warned her, too, and then you gave her everything you had in your wallet. Why’d you let her push you around? What’s wrong with you?”

“Ross, so help me—”

“Big talker.”

Quillen stood and wrapped a hand around the boy’s wrist, yanking him to his feet. Ross tried to hold him off by digging his feet into the carpeted floor of the restaurant, but Quillen pulled him past the cash register and out the door, twirling him until his back crashed into the grille of the pickup.

“That’s your father,” Quillen yelled, his face inches from the boy’s. “You don’t embarrass him like that.”

“He embarrassed himself.”

“He’s your father!”

Ross stuck out his chin and jabbed a finger toward Quillen. “Just like that? No way. He doesn’t get to decide that now.”

Quillen palmed his forehead and ran a hand down his face. “Look, kid, you just spilled a man’s business in there. He has to live in this town, he has to face these people, and you’ve just put a target on him. What do you think people are going to say?”

Ross stood defiant. “If they say what they heard, it’ll be the truth.”

“Truth’s got nothing to do with it, son. People believe what they want to believe, hear what they want to hear and pass along gossip like it’s a hot potato. You understand what I’m saying?”

“I guess.”

“Don’t give me that. You better know.”

Behind them, a line of big rigs rumbled into the adjacent truck stop, joining a fleet idling behind the building. Diesel hung in the air, flicking at Ross’s nose.

“All right,” the boy said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t tell me. Tell him.”

“OK, I will.”

Quillen paced back and forth in short sweeps, like a target in a penny arcade. He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. “Did he really give her money?”

“Everything he had on him.”

“Shit, we’ve done, what, five wells? That had to have been four-fifty, five hundred bucks. Why would he do that?”

Ross glanced past Quillen through the front window of the diner. He could see the back of his father’s head. The guy couldn’t even muster energy for his own fight. “Because he’s an idiot.”

“Come on, Ross, cut it out.”

“She said she was nearly done with travel-agent class but just needed some money to get by. Said she was thinking about moving back. Said she missed him. Said she thought she still loved him.”

Quillen shook his head. “That whore. She’s not coming back. She’s gone.”

“Yeah,” Ross said. “Her and the money.”

DIGGING WENT POORLY IN EKALAKA, leaving them stuck on their sixth well when late August came and Ross traded morning rides with Quillen and Dwight for a seat on the school bus to Washington Middle School.

His mother called midmonth and asked if he wanted to come home. Ross surprised everyone—her, Dwight and especially himself—by saying he’d stick with it awhile.

The new routine wedged more distance between father and son. Quillen and Dwight left the trailer at daybreak, forcing Ross to get up with them and eat breakfast. After that, he tried to concentrate on homework for a couple of hours while waiting for the bus. In the afternoons, he returned to an empty trailer, waiting two, sometimes three hours for the men’s arrival, with no company but a TV that had bad reception. After that came dinner downtown and, generally, beer on the porch.

Dwight struggled at fatherhood, a condition he’d never had to confront before and one that left him out of his depth. Each morning, he put a handful of change on the kitchen counter for the boy, which Ross was to use to get through lunch at school. In the evenings, after the late

news signed off, he'd order the boy to bed on those rare nights when he hadn't succumbed to his own slumber long before. Beyond that, structure didn't exist. Ross grew lazy in his work, and his grades—never worth crowing about—faltered ever more. Having no friends, and being a stranger who'd been dropped into a new school in a new town without any introduction, the boy descended into loneliness. Homework gave way to brief, intense crying jags in the morning, after Dwight and Quillen cleared out, as he braced himself for the bus.

And then the beatings started.

The jocks who Ross delighted in taunting in the classroom—a surreptitious flipoff here, a profane putdown there—caught him behind the gymnasium the first time. The biggest kid, Mike Perry, the son of the football coach, bloodied his nose. Ross made it home ahead of his father that afternoon and washed the stained clothes before he was found out.

Other things he couldn't hide. The black eye. The lip split so badly that Dwight took him to the emergency clinic and had it stitched up. Ross told his father that he'd just been inattentive, walking into open lockers and such, but Dwight knew.

"I'm gonna talk to your principal," he said.

"Dad, don't do that."

"This here's bullshit, Ross. It can't go on."

Ross came uncorked. He threw his math textbook across the room, crashing it into picture frames festooned on an end table. "If you do that, it'll be a hundred times worse than this. I'll never live that down. You might as well put a target on me."

"I'm not gonna let you get beat on every day."

Quillen, heretofore having watched the debate in silence, waded in.

"He's right, you know," he told Dwight. "The easiest way for this boy to solve this kind of problem is to learn to fight back."

QUILLEN AND ROSS FACED EACH OTHER, hands wrapped in dish towels that Dwight had cut lengthwise into ribbons after an ineffective protest. "Fighting ain't gonna solve anything," he said to Quillen. To that, Quillen replied, "If it stops the beatings, it sure as hell will." The debate ended there.

"You got a couple of things going for you," Quillen told Ross. "You're a tall kid, which will give you leverage, and you've got long arms, which'll let you hit somebody from a distance without being hit yourself. Now, are you right-handed or left-handed?"

"Right," Ross said.

"OK, fine." Quillen positioned the boy in a classic boxing stance, his left foot forward, shoulders square, his left hand tucked into a fist and held level with his left eye, his right hand

also in a fist, held parallel to his right jaw. “Tuck your chin down into your chest. No targets,” he said.

“This feels weird,” Ross said.

“It will, for a little while. Then it’ll feel natural. Now, stay just like that, watch me and do what I do.”

Quillen faced the boy and struck the same pose, a mirror image of Ross.

“I’m gonna show you four punches, and it’ll probably be three more than you’ll ever need. Now, this is a left jab.” Quillen shot out his left hand, making a quarter turn with the fist as his arm reached full extension. Lickety-split, the hand whipped back into its starting position.

“See that?” he said. “There’s not much body movement. Just the arm and your shoulders as you turn that fist over. Then it pops into place, guarding your face. Now try it.”

Ross pushed his arm out tentatively, and it dropped to his side as he reeled it back in.

“Get your hands up. Remember your defense. Now, really throw it.”

The boy jabbed with more urgency.

“Again. Your power should come from your feet.”

Ross threw his hand harder.

“Again.”

He threw.

“Again.”

He threw.

“Real good.”

And so it went the rest of the afternoon, past dinner time, into the dark. With Dwight watching, not saying a word, Quillen showed the boy how to throw a right cross, a taut left hook, an uppercut. He showed him how to move laterally and forward, cutting down an opponent’s space. They finished with Quillen, in his cowboy boots, scruffing side to side in the front yard, holding his palms up and giving Ross a moving target. The boy zeroed in, learned to judge distance, began landing clean punches with a heavy thwap against Quillen’s hands. When Ross got lazy and dropped his hands, Quillen would pattycake him on the cheek and the chin, letting him know that his defenses were down. Ross learned fast.

“Shouldn’t I be hitting these guys in the body, too?” Ross said when they ended the lesson, both drenched in sweat. Ross’s T-shirt clung to his back and his ribs.

“If you were in a boxing ring, sure. You’d have to. But in a street fight, you want to end it fast. Fastest way is to punch a man in the face. Ain’t too many guys who can take that, and a bully gets religion real fast when you hit him hard enough. I’ll tell you another thing. You probably won’t need more than that long left jab. A guy gets in a street fight, he’s liable to load up for bear, come swinging his arm way out wide with a haymaker. You can hit a guy in the nose three times

before that fist'll come around. You do that, and he won't throw a second punch. Guaranteed."

The next day, Ross had his chance to test Quillen's theory. The coach's kid cornered him on the far end of the football field and squared off. The bigger boy reared back a right hand, like an arrow in a bow, and Ross let loose a left that crashed into the kid's nose with a sickening sound, like a hammer pounding a sausage. The right hand that followed knocked out a tooth and put Mike Perry on his ass, and that's where he stayed.

QUILLEN AND DWIGHT FINISHED THE WELLS A FEW DAYS LATER, late September, and the old driller packed up and left. The sudden emptiness in the house rattled Ross and left him wishing he could have followed his newfound friend.

When Quillen moved out, Dwight withdrew into his own sadness. Ross heard his father's side of the occasional phone call with Jill—the pleading, the cajoling her to come home, which she never did. Ross could read the score, and he wondered why his father could not.

When Jill caught word of the drilling windfall—Quillen had put a grand in Dwight's hands on his way out, for services rendered and for room and board—she came back to town, and the three of them had a dinner out, prime rib. Ross couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his father happy like that, chatting and smiling and stopping old friends for a handshake and a clap on the shoulder. The boy was thankful for that moment and fearful of the next one.

The next morning, he found his father at the kitchen table, in his underwear, his eyes red.

"Where's Jill?" Ross asked.

Dwight gripped his coffee cup with both hands, white-knuckled. "She's gone."

"Are you OK?"

"I just want an answer," Dwight said, looking up at his boy. "If it's over, tell me it's over. If it's not, come home." He looked down at the table.

"Dad, you should tell her how it is."

"I did."

"What did you say?"

"I told her to come home."

"What did she say?"

"She said she needed some money."

"You didn't."

Dwight's shoulders slumped.

"Jesus. You gave her the money?"

"Not all of it."

“How much?”

“Not all of it.”

Outside, the school bus beckoned with a honk. Ross gathered up his books.

“Are you all right?” he asked his father.

Dwight didn't look up. “Have a good day at school, son.”

NINE HOURS LATER, Ross returned home to a different man. Dwight met him at the door wearing a pressed shirt and tie, western slacks and cowboy boots. He was cleanshaven and smelled of cheap drugstore cologne.

“Whoa,” the boy said. “What's this?”

“Jill's coming home.”

“When will she be here?”

“Any minute.”

Ross unloaded his backpack on the kitchen table and headed for the refrigerator.

“Ross, I'll be in the bathroom,” his father said. “When she gets here, just let her in, OK?”

The boy sank his teeth into an apple. He mumbled in the affirmative.

Ross dallied at the fridge, considering all and finding nothing. He wondered if there was enough money left to go to the grocery store. Two of them had enough trouble finding a decent meal now that Quillen was gone, but they made it work. He wondered how having three people in the house was going to go.

As Ross cut back across the house to the couch, the impossibility of it all sorted itself out in his mind, and the questions landed in sickening succession. *Why's she coming back? What's changed? Why now?* Ross detoured for the bathroom door.

“Dad—”

The response came in a concussive pop, and the boy, shot through with adrenaline, flung his weight into the door. It gave a little and then threw him off, but in that instant, he could see the bathroom mirror and the reflected splash of red on the wall. Tears gathered in his eyes as he again battered the door, yelping, and this time the cheap, hollow-cored door ripped away from the locking mechanism.

Dwight lay slumped against the wall, head askew, face engorged, eyes dead. All of him, dead. Blood poured from his nose and mouth and ears, onto his shirt, pooling on the linoleum. The pistol he'd placed in his mouth lay now at his side, in his blood.

The boy picked up the gun. His father's warm plasma ran along his fingers, into his palm.

He backed out of the bathroom. He heard the car's tires on the gravel driveway. Jill honked to let them know she'd arrived.

Ross cocked the gun and headed for the front door.