

WILLA

Stephen King

You don't see what's right in front of your eyes, she'd said, but sometimes he did. He supposed he wasn't entirely undeserving of her scorn, but he wasn't entirely blind, either. And as the dregs of sunset faded to bitter orange over the Wind River Range, David looked around the station and saw that Willa was gone. He told himself he wasn't sure, but that was only his head—his sinking stomach was sure enough.

He went to find Lander, who liked her a bit. Who called her spunky when Willa said Amtrak was full of shit for leaving them stranded like this. A lot of them didn't care for her at all, stranded by Amtrak or not.

"It smells like wet crackers in here!" Helen Palmer shouted at him as David walked past. She had found her way to the bench in the corner, as she always did, eventually. The Rhinehart woman was minding her for the time being, giving the husband a little break, and she gave David a smile.

"Have you seen Willa?" David asked.

The Rhinehart woman shook her head, still smiling.

"We got fish for supper!" Mrs. Palmer burst out furiously. A knuckle of blue veins beat in the hollow of her temple. A few people looked around. "First one t'ing an' den anudder!"

"Hush, Helen," the Rhinehart woman said. Maybe her first name was Sally, but David thought he would have remembered a name like that; there were so few Sallys these days. Now the world belonged to the Ambers, Ashleys and Tiffanys. Willa was another endangered species, and just thinking that made his stomach sink down again.

"Like crackers!" Helen spat. "Them dirty old crackers up to camp!"

Henry Lander was sitting on a bench under the clock. He had his arm around his wife. He glanced up

and shook his head before David could ask. “She’s not here. Sorry. Gone into town if you’re lucky. Bugged out for good if you’re not.” And he made a hitchhiking gesture.

David didn’t believe his fiancée would hitchhike west on her own—the idea was crazy—but he believed she wasn’t here. Had known even before counting heads, actually, and a snatch of some old book or poem about winter occurred to him: A cry of absence, absence in the heart.

The station was a narrow wooden throat. Down its length, people either strolled aimlessly or simply sat on benches under the fluorescent lights. The shoulders of the ones who sat had that special slump you saw only in places like this, where people waited for whatever had gone wrong to be made right so the broken journey could be mended. Few people came to places like Crowheart Springs, Wyoming on purpose.

“Don’t you go haring after her, David,” Ruth Lander said. “It’s getting dark, and there’s plenty of critters out there. Not just coyotes, either. That book salesman with the limp says he saw a couple of wolves on the other side of the tracks, where the freight depot is.”

“Biggers,” Henry said. “That’s his name.”

“I don’t care if his name is Jack D. Ripper,” Ruth said. “The point is, you’re not in Kansas anymore, David.”

“But if she went—”

“She went while it was still daylight,” Henry Lander said, as if daylight would stop a wolf (or a bear) from attacking a woman on her own. For all David knew, it might. He was an investment banker, not a wildlife expert. A young investment banker, at that.

“If the pick-up train comes and she’s gone, she’ll miss it.” He couldn’t seem to get this simple fact into their heads. It wasn’t getting traction, in the current lingo of his office back in Chicago.

Henry raised his eyebrows. “Are you telling me that both of you missing it will improve things somehow?”

If they both missed it, they’d either catch a bus or wait for the next train together. Surely Henry and Ruth Lander saw that. Or maybe not. What David mostly saw when he looked at them—what was right in front of his eyes—was that special weariness reserved for people temporarily stuck in West Overalls. And who else cared for Willa? If she dropped out of sight in the High Plains, who besides David Sanderson would spare a thought? There was even some active dislike for her. That bitch Ursula Davis had told him once that if Willa’s mother had left the *a* off the end of her name, “it would have been just about perfect.”

“I’m going to town and look for her,” he said.

Henry sighed. “Son, that’s very foolish.”

“We can’t be married in San Francisco if she gets left behind in Crowheart Springs,” he said, trying to make a joke of it.

Dudley was walking by. David didn’t know if Dudley was the man’s first or last name, only that he was an executive with Staples office supply and had been on his way to Missoula for some sort of regional meeting. He was ordinarily very quiet, so the donkey heehaw of laughter he expelled into the growing shadows was beyond surprising; it was shocking. “If the train comes and you miss it,” he said, “you can

hunt up a justice of the peace and get married right here. When you get back east, tell all your friends you had a real Western shotgun wedding. Yeehaw, partner.”

“Don’t do this,” Henry said. “We won’t be here much longer.”

“So I should leave her? That’s nuts.”

He walked on before Lander or his wife could reply. Georgia Andreeson was sitting on nearby bench and watching her daughter caper up and down the dirty tile floor in her red traveling dress. Pammy Andreeson never seemed to get tired. David tried to remember if he had seen her asleep since the train derailed at the Wind River junction point and they had wound up here like someone’s forgotten package in the dead letter office. Once, maybe, with her head in her mother’s lap. But that might be a false memory, created out of his belief that five-year-olds were supposed to sleep a lot.

Pammy hopped from tile to tile, a prank in motion, seeming to use the squares as a giant hopscotch board. Her red dress jumped around her plump knees.

“I knew a man, his name was Danny,” she chanted in monotonous one-note holler. It made David’s fillings ache. “He tripped and fell, on his fanny. I knew a man, his name was David. He tripped and fell, on his bavid.” She giggled and pointed at David.

“Pammy, stop,” Georgia Andreeson said. She smiled at David and brushed her hair from the side of her face. He thought the gesture unutterably weary, and thought she had a long road ahead with the high-spirited Pammy, especially with no Mr. Andreeson in evidence.

“Did you see Willa?” he asked.

“Gone,” she said, and pointed to the door with the sign over it reading TO SHUTTLE, TO TAXIS, CALL AHEAD FROM COURTESY PHONE FOR HOTEL VACANCIES.

Here was Biggers, limping toward him. “I’d avoid the great outdoors, unless armed with a high-powered rifle. There are wolves. I’ve seen them.”

“I knew a girl, her name was Willa,” Pammy chanted. “She had a headache, and took a pilla.” She collapsed to the floor, shouting with laughter.

Biggers, the salesman, hadn’t waited for a reply. He was limping back down the length of the station. His shadow grew long, shortened in the glow of the hanging fluorescents, then grew long again.

Phil Palmer was leaning in the doorway beneath the sign about the shuttle and the taxis. He was a retired insurance man. He and his wife were on their way to Portland. The plan was to stay with their oldest son and his wife for a while, but Palmer had confided to David and Willa that Helen would probably never be coming back east. She had cancer as well as Alzheimer’s. Willa called it a two-fer. When David told her that was a little cruel, Willa had looked at him, started to say something and then had only shaken her head.

Now Palmer asked, as he always did: “Hey, mutt—got a butt?”

To which David answered, as he always did: “I don’t smoke, Mr. Palmer.”

And Palmer finished: “Just testing you, kiddo.”

As David stepped out onto the concrete platform where detraining passengers waited for the shuttle to Crowheart Springs, Palmer frowned. “Not a good idea, my young friend.”

Something—it might have been a large dog but probably wasn’t—lifted a howl from the other side of the railway station, where the sage and broom grew almost up to the tracks. A second voice joined it, creating harmony. They trailed off together.

“See what I mean, jellybean?” And Palmer smiled as if he’d conjured those howls just to prove his point.

David turned, his light jacket rippling around him in the keen breeze, and started down the steps. He went fast, before he could change his mind, and only the first step was really hard. After that he just thought about Willa.

“David,” Palmer said, not joshing now, not joking around. “Don’t.”

“Why not? She did. Besides, the wolves are over there.” He jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. “If that’s what they are.”

“Course that’s what they are. And no, they probably won’t come at you—I doubt if they’re specially hungry this time of year. But there’s no need for both of you to spend another God-knows-how-long in the middle of nowhere just because she got to missing the bright lights.”

“You don’t seem to understand—she’s my girl.”

“I’m going to tell you a hard truth, my friend: If she really considered herself your girl, she wouldn’t have done what she did. You think?”

At first David said nothing, because he wasn’t sure what he thought. Possibly because he often didn’t see what was right in front of his eyes. Willa had said so. Finally he turned back to look at Phil Palmer leaning in the doorway above him. “I think you don’t leave your fiancée stranded in the middle of nowhere. That’s what I think.”

Palmer sighed. “I almost hope one of those trash-pine lobos does decide to put the bite on your city ass. It might smarten you up. Little Willa Stuart cares for nobody but herself, and everyone sees it but you.”

“If I pass a Nite Owl store or a 7-Eleven, you want me to pick you up a pack of cigarettes?”

“Why the fuck not?” Palmer said. Then, just as David was walking across NO PARKING TAXI ZONE painted on the empty curbless street: “David!”

David turned back.

“The shuttle won’t be back until tomorrow, and it’s three miles to town. Says so, right on the back wall of the information booth. That’s six miles, round-trip. On foot. Take you two hours, and that’s not counting the time it might take you track her down.”

David raised his hand to indicate he heard, but kept going. The wind was off the mountains, and cold, but he liked the way it rippled his clothes and combed back his hair. At first he watched for wolves, scanning one side of the road and then the other, but when he saw none, his thoughts returned to Willa. And really, his mind had been fixed on little else since the second or third time he had been with her.

She’d gotten to missing the bright lights; Palmer was almost certainly right about that much, but David

didn't believe she cared for nobody but herself. The truth was she'd just gotten tired of waiting around with a bunch of sad old sacks moaning about how they were going to be late for this, that and the other. The town over yonder probably didn't amount to much, but in her mind it must have held some possibility for fun, and that had outweighed the possibility of Amtrak sending a special to pick them up while she was gone.

And where, exactly, would she have gone looking for fun?

He was sure there were no what you'd call nightclubs in Crowheart Springs, where the passenger station was just a long green shed with WYOMING and "THE EQUALITY STATE" painted on the side in red, white and blue. No nightclubs, no discos, but there were undoubtedly bars, and he thought she'd settle for one of those. If she couldn't go clubbin', she'd go jukin'.

Night came on and the stars unrolled across the sky from east to west like a rug with spangles in it. A half-moon rose between two peaks and sat there, casting a sickroom glow over this stretch of the highway and the open land on both sides of it. The wind whistled beneath the eaves of the station, but out here it made a strange open humming that was not quite a vibration. It made him think of Pammy Andreeson's hopscotch chant.

He walked listening for the sound of an oncoming train behind him. He didn't hear that; what he heard when the wind dropped was a minute but perfectly audible click-click-click. He turned and saw a wolf standing about 20 paces behind him on the broken passing line of Route 26. It was almost as big as a calf, its coat as shaggy as a Russian hat. In the star shine its fur looked black, its eyes a dark urine yellow. It saw David looking and stopped. Its mouth dropped open in a grin, and it began to pant, the sound of a small engine.

There was no time to be afraid. He took a step toward it, clapped his hands and shouted, "Get out of here! Go on, now!"

The wolf turned tail and fled, leaving a pile of steaming droppings behind on Route 26. David grinned but managed to keep from laughing out loud; he thought that would be tempting the gods. He felt both scared and absurdly, totally cool. He thought of changing his name from David Sanderson to Wolf Frightener. That would be quite the name for an investment banker.

Then he did laugh a little—he couldn't help it—and turned toward Crowheart Springs again. This time he walked looking over his shoulder as well as from side to side, but the wolf didn't come back. What came was a certainty that he would hear the shriek of the special coming to pick up the others; the part of their train that was still on the tracks would have been cleared away from the junction, and soon the people waiting in the station back there would be on their way again—the Palmers, the Landers, the limping Biggers, the dancing Pammy and all the rest.

Well, so what? Amtrak would hold their luggage in San Francisco; surely they could be trusted to get that much right. He and Willa could find the local bus station. Greyhound must have discovered Wyoming.

He came upon a Budweiser can and kicked it awhile. Then he kicked it crooked, off into the scrub, and as he was debating whether or not to go after it, he heard faint music: a bass line and the cry of a pedal steel guitar, which always sounded to him like chrome teardrops. Even in happy songs.

She was there, listening to that music. Not because it was the closest place with music, but because it was the right place. He knew it. So he left the beer can and walked on toward the pedal steel, his sneakers scuffing up dust that the wind whipped away. The sound of the drum kit came next, then a red

neon arrow below a sign that just read 26. Well, why not? This was Route 26, after all. It was a perfectly logical name for a honky-tonk.

It had two parking lots, the one in front paved and packed with pickup trucks and cars, most American and most at least five years old. The lot on the left was gravel. In that one, ranks of long-haul semis stood under brilliant blue-white arc sodiums. By now David could also hear the rhythm and lead guitars, and read the marquee over the door: ONE NIGHT ONLY THE DERAILERS \$5 COVER SORRY.

The Derailers, he thought. Well, she certainly found the right group.

David had a five in his wallet, but the foyer of 26 was empty. Beyond it, a big hardwood dance floor was crammed with slow-dancing couples, most wearing jeans and cowboy boots and clutching each other's butts as the band worked its way deeper into "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights." It was loud, lachrymose and—as far as David Sanderson could tell—note perfect. The smells of beer, sweat, Brut and Wal-Mart perfume hit him like a punch in the nose. The laughter and conversation—even a footloose yeehaw cry from the far side of the dance floor—were like sounds heard in a dream you have again and again at certain critical turns of life: the dream of being unprepared for a big exam, the dream of being naked in public, the dream of falling, the dream in which you hurry toward a corner in some strange city, sure your fate lies on the far side.

David considered putting his five back in his wallet, then leaned into the ticket booth and dropped it on the desk in there, which was bare except for a pack of Lucky Strikes sitting on a Danielle Steel paperback. Then he went into the crowded main room.

The Derailers swung their way into something upbeat and the younger dancers began to pogo like kids at a punk show. To David's left, two dozen or so older couples began a pair of line dances. He looked again and realized there was only one line-dancing group, after all. The far wall was a mirror, making the dance floor look twice as big as it really was.

A glass shattered. "You pay, partner!" the lead singer called as The Derailers hit the instrumental break, and the dancers applauded his wit, which probably seemed fairly sparkling, David thought, if you were running hot on the tequila highway.

The bar was a horseshoe with a neon replica of the Wind River Range floating overhead. It was red, white and blue; in Wyoming, they did seem to love their red, white and blue. A neon sign in similar colors proclaimed YOU ARE IN GOD'S COUNTRY PARTNER. It was flanked by the Budweiser logo on the left and the Coors logo on the right. The crowd waiting to be served was four-deep. A trio of bar-tenders in white shirts and red vests flashed cocktail shakers like six-guns.

It was a barn of a place—there had to be 500 people whooping it up—but he had no concerns about finding Willa. My mojo's working, he thought as he cut a corner of the dance floor, almost dancing himself as he avoided various gyrating cowboys and cowgirls.

Beyond the bar and the dance floor was a dark little lounge with high-backed booths. Quartets were crammed into most of these, usually with a pitcher or two for sustenance, their reflections in the mirrored wall turning each party of four into eight. Only one of the booths wasn't full up. Willa sat by herself, her high-necked flower-print dress looking out of place among the Levi's, denim skirts and pearl-button shirts. Nor had she bought herself a drink or anything to eat—the table was bare.

She didn't see him at first. She was watching the dancers. Her color was high, and there were deep dimples at the corners of her mouth. She looked nine miles out of place, but he had never loved her

more. This was Willa on the edge of a smile.

“Hi, David,” she said as he slid in beside her. “I was hoping you’d come. I thought you would. Isn’t the band great? They’re so loud!” She almost had to yell to be heard, but he could see she liked that, too. And after her initial glance at him, she went back to looking at the dancers.

“They’re good, all right,” he said. They were, too. He could feel himself responding in spite of his anxiety, which had returned. Now that he’d actually found her, he was worried all over again about missing that damned pick-up train. “The lead singer sounds like Buck Owens.”

“Does he?” She looked at him, smiling. “Who’s Buck Owens?”

“It doesn’t matter. We ought to go back to the station. Unless you want to be stranded here another day, that is.”

“That might not be so bad. I kind of like this pla—whoa, look out!”

A glass arched across the dance floor, sparkling briefly green and gold in the stage gels, and shattered somewhere out of sight. There were cheers and some applause—Willa was also applauding—but David saw a couple of beefcakes with the words SECURITY and SERENITY printed on their T-shirts moving in on the approximate site of the missile launch.

“This is the kind of place where you can count on four fistfights in the parking lot before 11,” David said, “and often one free-for-all inside just before last call.”

She laughed, pointed her forefingers at him like guns. “Good! I want to see!”

“And I want us to go back,” he said. “If you want to go honky-tonking in San Francisco, I’ll take you. It’s a promise.”

She stuck out her lower lip and shook back her sandy-blond hair. “It wouldn’t be the same. It wouldn’t, and you know it. In San Francisco they probably drink... I don’t know... macrobiotic beer.”

That made him laugh. As with the idea of an investment banker named Wolf Frightener, the idea of macrobiotic beer was just too rich. But the anxiety was there, under the laughter; in fact, wasn’t it fueling the laughter?

“We’re gonna take a short break and be right back,” the lead singer said, wiping his brow. “Y’all drink up, now, and remember—I’m Tony Villanueva, and we are The Derailers.”

“That’s our cue to put on our diamond shoes and depart,” David said, and took her hand. He slid out of the booth, but she didn’t come. She didn’t let go of his hand, either, though, and he sat down again feeling a touch of panic. Thinking he now knew how a fish felt when it realized it couldn’t throw the hook, that old hook was in good and tight and Mr. Trout was bound for the bank, where he would flop his final flop. She was looking at him with those same killer blue eyes and deep dimples: Willa on the edge of a smile, his wife-to-be, who read novels in the morning and poetry at night and thought the TV news was... what did she call it? Ephemera.

“Look at us,” she said, and turned her head away from him.

He looked at the mirrored wall on their left. There he saw a nice young couple from the East Coast, stranded in Wyoming. In her print dress she looked better than he did, but he guessed that was always

going to be the case. He looked from the mirror-Willa to the real thing with his eyebrows raised.

“No, look again,” she said. The dimples were still there, but she was serious now—as serious as she could be in this party atmosphere, anyway. “And think about what I told you.”

It was on his lips to say, You’ve told me many things, and I think about all of them, but that was a lover’s reply, pretty and essentially meaningless. And because he knew what thing she meant, he looked again without saying anything. This time he really looked, and there was no one in the mirror. He was looking at the only empty booth in 26. He turned to Willa, flabbergasted... yet somehow not surprised.

“Didn’t you even wonder how a presentable female could be sitting here all by herself when the place is juiced and jumping?” she asked.

He shook his head. He hadn’t. There were quite a few things he hadn’t wondered, at least until now. When he’d last had something to eat or drink, for instance. Or what time it was, or when it had last been daylight. He didn’t even know exactly what had happened to them. Only that the Northern Flyer had left the tracks and now they were by some coincidence here listening to a country-western group called—

“I kicked a can,” he said. “Coming here I kicked a can.”

“Yes,” she said, “and you saw us in the mirror the first time you looked, didn’t you? Perception isn’t everything, but perception and expectation together?” She winked, then leaned toward him. Her breast pressed against his upper arm as she kissed his cheek, and the sensation was lovely—surely the feel of living flesh. “Poor David. I’m sorry. But you were brave to come. I really didn’t think you would, that’s the truth.”

“We need to go back and tell the others.”

Her lips pressed together. “Why?”

“Because—”

Two men in cowboy hats led two laughing women in jeans, Western shirts and ponytails toward their booth. As they neared it, an identical expression of puzzlement—not quite fear—touched their faces, and they headed back toward the bar instead. They feel us, David thought. Like cold air pushing them away—that’s what we are now.

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

Willa laughed. It was a weary sound. “You remind me of the old guy who used to sell the oatmeal on TV.”

“Hon, they think they’re waiting for a train to come and pick them up!”

“Well, maybe there is!” He was almost frightened by her sudden ferocity. “Maybe the one they’re always singing about, the gospel train, the train to glory, the one that don’t carry no gamblers or midnight ramblers...”

“I don’t think Amtrak runs to heaven,” David said. He was hoping to make her laugh, but she looked down at her hands almost sullenly, and he had a sudden intuition. “Is there something else you know? Something we should tell them? There is, isn’t there?”

“I don’t know why we should bother when we can just stay here,” she said, and was that petulance in her voice? He thought it was. This was a Willa he had never even suspected. “You may be a little nearsighted, David, but at least you came. I love you for that.” And she kissed him again.

“There was a wolf, too,” he said. “I clapped my hands and scared it off. I’m thinking of changing my name to Wolf Frightener.”

She stared at him for a moment with her mouth open, and David had time to think: I had to wait until we were dead to really surprise the woman I love. Then she dropped against the padded back of the booth, roaring with laughter. A waitress who happened to be passing dropped a full tray of beers with a crash and swore colorfully.

“Wolf Frightener!” Willa cried. “I want to call you that in bed! ‘Oh, oh, Wolf Frightener, you so big! You so hairy!’”

The waitress was staring down at the foaming mess, still cursing like a sailor on shore leave. All the while keeping well away from that one empty booth.

David said, “Do you think we still can? Make love, I mean?”

Willa wiped at her streaming eyes and said, “Perception and expectation, remember? Together they can move mountains.” She took his hand again. “I still love you, and you still love me. Don’t you?”

“Am I not Wolf Frightener?” he asked. He could joke, because his nerves didn’t believe he was dead. He looked past her, into the mirror, and saw them. Then just himself, his hand holding nothing. Then they were both gone. And still... he breathed, he smelled beer and whiskey and perfume.

A busboy had come from somewhere and was helping the waitress mop up the mess. “Felt like I stepped down,” David heard her saying. Was that the kind of thing you heard in the afterlife?

“I guess I’ll go back with you,” she said, “but I’m not staying in that boring station with those boring people when this place is around.”

“Okay,” he said.

“Who’s Buck Owens?”

“I’ll tell you all about him,” David said. “Roy Clark, too. But first tell me what else you know.”

“Most of them I don’t even care about,” she said, “but Henry Lander’s nice. So’s his wife.”

“Phil Palmer’s not bad, either.” She wrinkled her nose. “Phil the Pill.”

“What do you know, Willa?”

“You’ll see for yourself, if you really look.”

“Wouldn’t it be simpler if you just—”

Apparently not. She rose until her thighs pressed against the edge of the table, and pointed. “Look! The band is coming back!”

The moon was high when he and Willa walked back to the road, holding hands. David didn't see how that could be—they had stayed for only the first two songs of the next set—but there it was, floating all the way up there in the spangled black. That was troubling, but something else troubled him even more.

“Willa,” he said, “what year is it?”

She thought it over. The wind rippled her dress as it would the dress of any live woman. “I don't exactly remember,” she said at last. “Isn't that odd?”

“Considering I can't remember the last time I ate a meal or drank a glass of water? Not too odd. If you had to guess, what would you say? Quick, without thinking.”

“Nineteen... eighty-eight?”

He nodded. He would have said 1987 himself. “There was a girl in there wearing a T-shirt that said CROWHEART SPRINGS HIGH SCHOOL, CLASS OF '03. And if she was old enough to be in a roadhouse—”

“Then '03 must have been at least three years ago.”

“That's what I was thinking.” He stopped. “It can't be 2006, Willa, can it? I mean, the 21st century?”

Before she could reply, they heard the click-click-click of toenails on asphalt. This time more than just one set; this time there were four wolves behind them on the highway. The biggest, standing in front of the others, was the one that had come up behind David on his walk toward Crowheart Springs. He would have known that shaggy black pelt anywhere. Its eyes were brighter now. A half-moon floated in each like a drowned lamp.

“They see us!” Willa cried in a kind of ecstasy. “David, they see us!” She dropped to one knee on a white dash of the broken passing line and held out her right hand. She made a clucking noise and said, “Here, boy! Come on!”

“Willa, I don't think that's such good idea.”

She paid no attention, a very Willa thing to do. Willa had her own ideas about things. It was she who had wanted to go from Chicago to San Francisco by rail—because, she said, she wanted to know what it felt like to fuck on a train. Especially one that was going fast and rocking a little.

“Come on, big boy, come to your mama!”

The big lobo came, trailed by its mate and their two... did you call them yearlings? As it stretched its muzzle (and all those shining teeth) toward the slim outstretched hand, the moon filled its eyes perfectly for a moment, turning them silver. Then, just before its long snout could touch her skin, the wolf uttered a series of piercing yips and flung itself backward so sharply that for a moment rose on its rear legs, front paws boxing the air and the white plush on its belly exposed. The others scattered. The big lobo executed a midair twist and ran into the scrubland to the right of the road, still yipping, with his tail tucked. The rest followed.

Willa rose and looked at David with an expression of hard grief that was too much to bear. He dropped his eyes to his feet instead. “Is this why you brought me out into the dark when I was listening to music?” she asked. “To show me what I am now? As if I didn't know!”

“Willa, I’m sorry.”

“Not yet, but you will be.” She took his hand again. “Come on, David.”

Now he risked a glance. “You’re not mad at me?”

“Oh, a little—but you’re all I’ve got now, and I’m not letting you go.”

Shortly after seeing the wolves, David spied a Budweiser can lying on the shoulder of the road. He was almost positive it was the one he had kicked along ahead of him until he’d kicked it crooked, out into the sage. Here it was again, in its original position... because he had never kicked it at all, of course. Perception isn’t everything, Willa had said, but perception and expectation together? Put them together and you had a Reese’s peanut butter cup of the mind.

He kicked the can out into the scrubland, and when they were past that spot, he looked back and there it lay, right where it had been since some cowboy—maybe on his way to 26—had chucked it from the window of his pickup truck. He remembered that on *Hee Haw*—that old show starring Buck Owens and Roy Clark—they used to call pickup trucks cowboy Cadillacs.

“What are you smiling about?” Willa asked him.

“Tell you later. Looks like we’re going to have plenty of time.”

They stood outside the Crowheart Springs railway station, holding hands in the moonlight like Hansel and Gretel outside the candy house. To David the long building’s green paint looked ashy gray in the moonlight, and although he knew WYOMING and “THE EQUALITY STATE” were printed in red, white and blue, they could have been any colors at all. He noticed a sheet of paper, protected from the elements by plastic, stapled to one of the posts flanking the wide steps leading up to the double doors. Phil Palmer still leaned there.

“Hey, mutt!” Palmer called down. “Got a butt?”

“Sorry, Mr. Palmer,” David said.

“Thought you were going to bring me back a pack.”

“I didn’t pass a store,” David said.

“They didn’t sell cigarettes where you were, doll?” Palmer asked. He was the kind of man who called all women of a certain age doll; you knew that just looking at him, as you knew that if you happened to pass the time of day with him on a steamy August afternoon, he’d tip his hat back on his head to wipe his brow and tell you it wasn’t the heat, it was the humidity.

“I’m sure they did,” Willa said, “but I would have had trouble buying them.”

“Want to tell me why, sugarpie?”

“Why do you think?”

But Palmer crossed his arms over his narrow chest and said nothing. From somewhere inside, his wife cried, “We got fish for supper! First one t’ing an’ den anudder! I hate the smell of this place! Crackers!”

“We’re dead, Phil,” David said. “That’s why. Ghosts can’t buy cigarettes.”

Palmer looked at him for several seconds, and before he laughed, David saw that Palmer more than believed him: Palmer had known all along. “I’ve heard plenty of reasons for not bringing someone what he asked for,” he said, “but I have to think that takes the prize.”

“Phil—”

From inside: “Fish for supper! Oh, gah-dammit!”

“Excuse me, kiddies,” Palmer said. “Duty calls.” And he was gone. David turned to Willa, thinking she’d ask him what else he had expected, but Willa was looking at the notice posted beside the stairs.

“Look at that,” she said. “Tell me what you see.”

At first he saw nothing, because the moon was shining on the protective plastic. He took a step closer, then one to the left, moving Willa aside to do it.

“At the top it says NO SOLICITING BY ORDER OF SUBLETTE COUNTY SHERIFF, then some fine print—blah-blah-blah—and at the bottom—”

She gave him an elbow. Not gently, either. “Stop shitting around and look at it, David. I don’t want to be here all night.”

You don’t see what’s right in front of your eyes.

He turned away from the station and stared at the railroad tracks shining in the moonlight. Beyond them was a thick white neck of stone with a flat top—that that’s a mesa, pardner, jest like in them old John Ford movies.

He looked back at the posted notice, and wondered how he ever could have mistaken TRESPASSING for SOLICITING, a big bad investment banker like Wolf Frightener Sanderson.

“It says NO TRESPASSING BY ORDER OF SUBLETTE COUNTY SHERIFF,” he said.

“Very good. And under the blah-blah-blah, what about there?”

At first he couldn’t read the two lines at the bottom at all; at first those two lines were just incomprehensible symbols, possibly because his mind, which wanted to believe none of this, could find no innocuous translation. So he looked away to the railroad tracks once more and wasn’t exactly surprised to see that they no longer gleamed in the moonlight; now the steel was rusty, and weeds were growing between the ties. When he looked back again, the railway station was a slumped derelict with its windows boarded up and most of the shingles on its roof gone. NO PARKING TAXI ZONE had disappeared from the asphalt, which was crumbling and full of potholes. He could still read WYOMING and “THE EQUALITY STATE” on the side of the building, but now the words were ghosts. Like us, he thought.

“Go on,” Willa said—Willa, who had her own ideas about things, Willa who saw what was in front of her eyes and wanted you to see too, even when seeing was cruel. “That’s your final exam. Read those two lines at the bottom and then we can get this show on the road.”

He sighed. “It says THIS PROPERTY IS CONDEMNED. And then DEMOLITION SCHEDULED

JUNE 2007.”

“You get an A. Now let’s go see if anyone else wants to go to town and hear The Derailers. I’ll tell Palmer to look on the bright side—we can’t buy cigarettes, but for people like us there’s never a cover charge.”

Only nobody wanted to go to town.

“What does she mean, we’re dead? Why does she want to say an awful thing like that?” Ruth Lander asked David, and what killed him (so to speak) wasn’t the reproach in her voice but the look in her eyes before she pressed her face against the shoulder of Henry’s corduroy jacket. Because she knew too.

“Ruth,” he said, “I’m not telling you this to upset you—”

“Then stop!” she cried, her voice muffled.

David saw that all of them but Helen Palmer were looking at him with anger and hostility. Helen was nodding and muttering between her husband and the Rhinehart woman, whose first name was probably Sally. They were standing under the fluorescents in little groups... only when he blinked, the fluorescents were gone. Then the stranded passengers were just dim figures standing in the shattered moonlight that managed to find its way in through the boarded-up windows. The Landers weren’t sitting on a bench; they were sitting on a dusty floor near a little cluster of empty crack vials—yes, it seemed that crack had managed to find its way even out here to John Ford country—and there was a faded circle on one wall not far from the corner where Helen Palmer squatted and muttered. Then David blinked again and the fluorescents were back. So was the big clock, hiding that faded circle.

Henry Lander said, “Think you better go along now, David.”

“Listen a minute, Henry,” Willa said.

Henry switched his gaze to her, and David had no trouble reading the distaste that was there. Any liking Henry might once have had for Willa Stuart was gone now.

“I don’t want to listen,” Henry said. “You’re upsetting my wife.”

“Yeah,” a fat young man in a Seattle Mariners cap said. David thought his name was O’Casey. Something Irish with an apostrophe in it, anyway. “Zip it, baby girl!”

Willa bent toward Henry, and Henry recoiled from her slightly, as if her breath were bad. “The only reason I let David drag me back here is because they are going to demolish this place! Can you say wrecking ball, Henry? Surely you’re bright enough to get your head around that concept.”

“Make her stop!” Ruth cried, her voice muffled.

Willa leaned even closer, eyes bright in her narrow, pretty face. “And when the wrecking ball leaves and the dump trucks haul away the crap that used to be this railway station—this old railway station—where will you be?”

“Leave us alone, please,” Henry said.

“Henry—as the chorus girl said to the archbishop, denial is not a river in Egypt.”

Ursula Davis, who had disliked Willa from the first, stepped forward, leading with her chin. “Fuck off, you troublesome bitch.”

Willa swung around. “Don’t any of you get it? You’re dead, we’re all dead, and the longer you stay in one place, the harder it’s going to be to ever go anywhere else!”

“She’s right,” David said.

“Yeah, and if she said the moon was cheese, you’d say provolone,” Ursula said. She was a tall, forbiddingly handsome woman of about 40. “Pardon my French, but she’s got you so pussy-whipped it isn’t funny.”

Dudley let out that startling donkey bray again, and the Rhinehart woman began to snifle.

“You’re upsetting the passengers, you two.” This was Rattner, the little conductor with the apologetic face. He hardly ever spoke. David blinked, the station lensed dark and moonlit again for another moment, and he saw that half of Rattner’s head was gone. The rest of his face had been burned black.

“They’re going to demolish this place and you’ll have nowhere to go!” Willa cried. “Fucking... nowhere!” She dashed angry tears from her cheeks with both fists. “Why don’t you come to town with us? We’ll show you the way. At least there are people... and lights... and music.”

“Mumma, I want to hear some music,” Pammy Andreeson said.

“Hush,” her mother said.

“If we were dead, we’d know it,” Bigger said.

“He’s got you there, son,” Dudley said, and dropped David a wink. “What happened to us? How did we get dead?”

“I... don’t know,” David said. He looked at Willa. Willa shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

“You see?” Rattner said. “It was a derailment. Happens... well, I was going to say all the time, but that’s not true, even out here where the rail system needs a fair amount of work, but every now and then, at one of the junction points—”

“We faw down,” Pammy Andreeson said. David looked at her, really looked, and for a moment saw a corpse, burned bald, in a rotting rag of a dress. “Down and down and down. Then—” She made a growling, rattling sound in her throat, put her small, grimy hands together and tossed them apart: every child’s sign language for explosion.

She seemed about to say something more, but before she could, her mother suddenly slapped her across the face hard enough to expose her teeth in a momentary sneer and drive spit from the corner of her mouth. Pammy stared up for a moment in shocked disbelief, then broke into a strident, one-note wail even more painful than her hopscotch chant.

“What do we know about lying, Pamela?” Georgia Andreeson yelled, grabbing the child by her upper arm. Her fingers sank in almost out of sight.

“She’s not lying!” Willa said. “We went off the tracks and into the gorge! Now I remember, and you do too! Don’t you? Don’t you? It’s on your face! It’s on your fucking face!”

Without looking in her direction, Georgia Andreeson flipped Willa the bird. Her other hand shook Pammy back and forth. David saw a child flop in one direction, a charred corpse in the other. What had caught fire? Now he remembered the drop, but what had caught fire? He didn’t remember, perhaps because he didn’t want to remember.

“What do we know about lying?” Georgia Andreeson shouted.

“It’s wrong, Mama!” the child blubbered.

The woman dragged her off into the darkness, the child still screaming that one monotonous note.

There was a moment of silence in their wake—all of them listening to Pammy being dragged into exile—and then Willa turned to David. “Had enough?”

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Don’t let the doorknob hitcha where the good Lord splitcha!” Biggers advised, madly exuberant, and Dudley yodeled laughter.

David let Willa lead him toward the double doors, where Phil was leaning just inside, his arms still crossed on his chest. Then David pulled free of Willa’s hand and went to Helen Palmer sitting in the corner, rocking back and forth. She looked up at him with dark, bewildered eyes. “We got fish for supper,” she said in what was little more than a whisper.

“I don’t know about that,” he said, “but you were right about the smell of the place. Old dirty crackers.” He looked back and saw the rest of them staring at him and Willa in the moonlit dimness that could be fluorescent light if you wanted it to be badly enough. “It’s the smell places get when they’ve been closed up along time, I guess,” he said.

“Better buzz, cuz,” Phil Palmer said. “No one wants to buy what you’re selling.”

“Don’t I know it,” David said, and followed Willa into the moonlit dark. Behind him, like a rueful whisper of wind, he heard Helen Palmer say, “First one t’ing an’ den anudder.”

The miles back to 26 made their score nine for the night, but David wasn’t a bit tired. He supposed ghosts didn’t get tired, just as they didn’t get hungry or thirsty. Besides, it was a different night. The moon was full now, shining like a silver dollar high in the sky, and 26’s front parking was empty. In the gravel lot around to the side, a few semis stood silent, and one rumbled sleepily with its running lights glowing. The marquee sign now read: COMING THIS WEEKEND THE NIGHTHAWKS BRING YOUR HONEY SPEND YOUR MONEY.

“That’s cute,” Willa said. “Will you bring me, Wolf Frightener? Am I not your honey?”

“You are and I will,” David said. “The question is what do we do now? Because the honky-tonk is closed.”

“We go in anyway, of course,” she said.

“It’ll be locked up.”

“Not if we don’t want it to be. Perception, remember? Perception and expectation.”

He remembered, and when he tried the door, it opened. The barroom smells were still there, now mixed with the pleasant odor of some pine-scented cleaner. The stage was empty and the stools were on the bar with their legs sticking up, but the neon replica of the Wind River Range was still on, either because the management left it that way after closing or because that was the way he and Willa wanted it. That seemed more likely. The dance floor seemed very big now that it was empty, especially with the mirror wall to double it. The neon mountains shimmered upside down in its polished depths.

Willa breathed deep. “I smell beer and perfume,” she said. “A hot rod smell. It’s lovely.”

“You’re lovely,” he said.

She turned to him. “Then kiss me, cowboy.”

He kissed her there on the edge of the dance floor, and judging by what he was feeling, love-making wasn’t out of the question. Not at all.

She kissed both corners of his mouth, then stepped back. “Put a quarter in the jukebox, would you? I want to dance.”

David went over to the juke at the end of the bar, dropped a quarter and played D19—“Wasted Days and Wasted Nights,” the Freddy Fender version. Out in the parking lot, Chester Dawson, who had decided to lay over here a few hours before resuming his journey to Seattle with a load of electronics, raised his head, thinking he heard music, decided it was part of a dream he’d been having and went back to sleep.

David and Willa moved slowly around the empty floor, sometimes reflected in the mirror wall and sometimes not.

“Willa—”

“Hush a little, David. Baby wants to dance.”

David hushed. He put his face in her hair and let the music take him. He thought they would stay here now, and that from time to time people would see them. 26 might even get a reputation for being haunted, but probably not; people didn’t think of ghosts much while they were drinking, unless they were drinking alone. Sometimes when they were closing up, the bartender and the last waitress (the one with the most seniority, the one responsible for splitting the tips) might have an uneasy sense of being watched. Sometimes they’d hear music even after the music had stopped, or catch movement in the mirror next to the dance floor or the one in the lounge. Usually just from the tail of the eye. David thought they could have finished up in better places, but on the whole, 26 wasn’t bad. Until closing there were people. And there would always be music.

He did wonder what would become of the others when the wrecking ball tore apart their illusion—and it would. Soon. He thought of Phil Palmer trying to shield his terrified, howling wife from falling debris that couldn’t hurt her because she was not, properly speaking, even there. He thought of Pammy Andreeson cowering in her shrieking mother’s arms. Rattner, the soft-spoken conductor, saying, Just be calm, folks, in a voice that couldn’t be heard over the roar of the big yellow machines. He thought of the book salesman, Biggers, trying to run away on his bad leg, lurching and finally falling while the wrecking ball

swung and the dozers snarled and bit and the world came down.

He liked to think their train would come before then—that their combined expectation would make it come—but he didn't really believe it. He even considered the idea that the shock might extinguish them and they'd simply whiff out like candle flames in a strong gust of wind, but he didn't believe that, either. He could see them too clearly after the bulldozers and dump trucks and back-end loaders were gone, standing by the rusty disused railway tracks in the moonlight while a wind blew down from the foothills, whining around the mesa and beating at the broomgrass. He could see them huddled together under a billion High Country stars, still waiting for their train.

“Are you cold?” Willa asked him.

“No—why?”

“You shivered.”

“Maybe a goose walked over my grave,” he said. He closed his eyes, and they danced together on the empty floor. Sometimes they were in the mirror, and when they slipped from view there was only a country song playing in an empty room lit by a neon mountain range.