

A Death

BY STEPHEN KING

Jim Trusdale had a shack on the west side of his father's gone-to-seed ranch, and that was where he was when Sheriff Barclay and half a dozen deputized townsmen found him, sitting in the one chair by the cold stove, wearing a dirty barn coat and reading an old issue of the *Black Hills Pioneer* by lantern light. Looking at it, anyway.

Sheriff Barclay stood in the doorway, almost filling it up. He was holding his own lantern. "Come out of there, Jim, and do it with your hands up. I ain't drawn my pistol and don't want to."

Trusdale came out. He still had the newspaper in one of his raised hands. He stood there looking at the sheriff with his flat gray eyes. The sheriff looked back. So did the others, four on horseback and two on the seat of an old buckboard with "Hines Mortuary" printed on the side in faded yellow letters.

"I notice you ain't asked why we're here," Sheriff Barclay said.

"Why are you here, Sheriff?"

"Where is your hat, Jim?"

Trusdale put the hand not holding the newspaper to his head as if to feel for his hat, which was a brown plainsman and not there.

"In your place, is it?" the sheriff asked. A cold breeze kicked up, blowing the horses' manes and flattening the grass in a wave that ran south.

"No," Trusdale said. "I don't believe it is."

"Then where?"

"I might have lost it."

"You need to get in the back of the wagon," the sheriff said.

"I don't want to ride in no funeral hack," Trusdale said. "That's bad luck."

"You got bad luck all over," one of the men said. "You're painted in it. Get in."

Trusdale went to the back of the buckboard and climbed up. The breeze kicked again, harder, and he turned up the collar of his barn coat.

The two men on the seat of the buckboard got down and stood either side of it. One drew his gun; the other did not. Trusdale knew their faces but not their names. They were town men. The sheriff

and the other four went into his shack. One of them was Hines, the undertaker. They were in there for some time. They even opened the stove and dug through the ashes. At last they came out.

“No hat,” Sheriff Barclay said. “And we would have seen it. That’s a damn big hat. Got anything to say about that?”

“It’s too bad I lost it. My father gave it to me back when he was still right in the head.”

“Where is it, then?”

“Told you, I might have lost it. Or had it stoled. That might have happened, too. Say, I was going to bed right soon.”

“Never mind going to bed. You were in town this afternoon, weren’t you?”

“Sure he was,” one of the men said, mounting up again. “I seen him myself. Wearing that hat, too.”

“Shut up, Dave,” Sheriff Barclay said. “Were you in town, Jim?”

“Yes sir, I was,” Trusdale said.

“In the Chuck-a-Luck?”

“Yes sir, I was. I walked from here, and had two drinks, and then I walked home. I guess the Chuck-a-Luck’s where I lost my hat.”

“That’s your story?”

Trusdale looked up at the black November sky. “It’s the only story I got.”

“Look at me, son.”

Trusdale looked at him.

“That’s your story?”

“Told you, the only one I got,” Trusdale said, looking at him.

Sheriff Barclay sighed. “All right, let’s go to town.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re arrested.”

“Ain’t got a brain in his fuckin’ head,” one of the men remarked. “Makes his daddy look smart.”

They went to town. It was four miles. Trusdale rode in the back of the mortuary wagon, shivering against the cold. Without turning around, the man holding the reins said, “Did you rape her as well as steal her dollar, you hound?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Trusdale said.

The rest of the trip continued in silence except for the wind. In town, people lined the street. At first they were quiet. Then an old woman in a brown shawl ran after the funeral hack in a sort of limping hobble and spat at Trusdale. She missed, but there was a spatter of applause.

At the jail, Sheriff Barclay helped Trusdale down from the wagon. The wind was brisk, and smelled of snow. Tumbleweeds blew straight down Main Street and toward the town water tower, where they piled up against a shakepole fence and rattled there.

“Hang that baby killer!” a man shouted, and someone threw a rock. It flew past Trusdale’s head and clattered on the board sidewalk.

Sheriff Barclay turned and held up his lantern and surveyed the crowd that had gathered in front of the mercantile. “Don’t do that,” he said. “Don’t act foolish. This is in hand.”

The sheriff took Trusdale through his office, holding him by his upper arm, and into the jail. There were two cells. Barclay led Trusdale into the one on the left. There was a bunk and a stool and a waste bucket. Trusdale made to sit down on the stool, and Barclay said, “No. Just stand there.”

The sheriff looked around and saw the possemen crowding into the doorway. “You all get out of here,” he said.

“Otis,” the one named Dave said, “what if he attacks you?”

“Then I will subdue him. I thank you for doing your duty, but now you need to scat.”

When they were gone, Barclay said, “Take off that coat and give it to me.”

Trusdale took off his barn coat and began shivering. Beneath he was wearing nothing but an undershirt and corduroy pants so worn the wale was almost gone and one knee was out. Sheriff Barclay went through the pockets of the coat and found a twist of tobacco in a page of an R.W. Sears Watch Company catalogue, and an old lottery ticket promising a payoff in pesos. There was also a black marble.

“That’s my lucky marble,” Trusdale said. “I had it since I was a boy.”

“Turn out your pants pockets.”

Trusdale turned them out. He had a penny and three nickels and a folded-up news clipping about the Nevada silver rush that looked as old as the Mexican lottery ticket.

“Take off your boots.”

Trusdale took them off. Barclay felt inside them. There was a hole in one sole the size of a dime.

“Now your stockings.”

Barclay turned them inside out and tossed them aside.

“Drop your pants.”

“I don’t want to.”

“No more than I want to see what’s in there, but drop them anyway.”

Trusdale dropped his pants. He wasn’t wearing underdrawers.

“Turn around and spread your cheeks.”

Trusdale turned, grabbed his buttocks, and pulled them apart. Sheriff Barclay winced, sighed, and poked a finger into Trusdale’s anus. Trusdale groaned. Barclay removed his finger, wincing again at the soft pop, and wiped his finger on Trusdale’s undershirt.

“Where is it, Jim?”

“My hat?”

“You think I went up your ass looking for your hat? Or through the ashes in your stove? Are you being smart?”

Trusdale pulled up his trousers and buttoned them. Then he stood shivering and barefoot. An hour earlier he had been at home, reading his newspaper and thinking about starting a fire in the stove, but that seemed long ago.

“I’ve got your hat in my office.”

“Then why did you ask about it?”

“To see what you’d say. That hat is all settled. What I really want to know is where you put the girl’s silver dollar. It’s not in your house, or your pockets, or up your ass. Did you get to feeling guilty and throw it away?”

“I don’t know about no silver dollar. Can I have my hat back?”

“No. It’s evidence. Jim Trusdale, I’m arresting you for the murder of Rebecca Cline. Do you have anything you want to say to that?”

“Yes, sir. That I don’t know no Rebecca Cline.”

The sheriff left the cell, closed the door, took a key from the wall, and locked it. The tumblers screeched as they turned. The cell mostly housed drunks and was rarely locked. He looked in at Trusdale and said, “I feel sorry for you, Jim. Hell ain’t too hot for a man who’d do such a thing.”

“What thing?”

The sheriff clumped away without any reply.

Trusdale stayed there in the cell, eating grub from Mother's Best, sleeping on the bunk, shitting and pissing in the bucket, which was emptied every two days. His father didn't come to see him, because his father had gone foolish in his eighties, and was now being cared for by a couple of squaws, one Sioux and the other Cheyenne. Sometimes they stood on the porch of the deserted bunkhouse and sang hymns in harmony. His brother was in Nevada, hunting for silver.

Sometimes children came and stood in the alley outside his cell, chanting, "Hangman, hangman, come on down." Sometimes men stood out there and threatened to cut off his privates. Once, Rebecca Cline's mother came and said she would hang him herself, were she allowed. "How could you kill my baby?" she asked through the barred window. "She was only ten years old, and 'twas her birthday."

"Ma'am," Trusdale said, standing on the bunk so that he could look down at her upturned face. "I didn't kill your baby nor no one."

"Black liar," she said, and went away.

Almost everyone in town attended the child's funeral. The squaws went. Even the two whores who plied their trade in the Chuck-a-Luck went. Trusdale heard the singing from his cell, as he squatted over the bucket in the corner.

Sheriff Barclay telegraphed Fort Pierre, and after a week or so the circuit-riding judge came. He was newly appointed and young for the job, a dandy with long blond hair down his back like Wild Bill Hickok. His name was Roger Mizell. He wore small round spectacles, and in both the Chuck-a-Luck and Mother's Best proved himself a man with an eye for the ladies, although he wore a wedding band.

There was no lawyer in town to serve as Trusdale's defense, so Mizell called on George Andrews, owner of the mercantile, the hostelry, and the Good Rest Hotel. Andrews had got two years of higher education at a business school back East. He said he would serve as Trusdale's attorney only if Mr. and Mrs. Cline agreed.

"Then go see them," Mizell said. He was in the barbershop, tilted back in the chair and taking a shave. "Don't let the grass grow under your feet."

"Well," Mr. Cline said, after Andrews had stated his business, "I got a question. If he doesn't have someone to stand for him, can they still hang him?"

"That would not be American justice," Andrews said. "And although we are not one of the United States just yet, we will be soon."

"Can he wriggle out of it?" Mrs. Cline asked.

"No, ma'am," Andrews said. "I don't see how."

"Then do your duty and God bless you," Mrs. Cline said.

The trial lasted through one November morning and halfway into the afternoon. It was held in the municipal hall, and on that day there were snow flurries as fine as wedding lace. Slate-gray clouds

rolling toward town threatened a bigger storm. Roger Mizell, who had familiarized himself with the case, served as prosecuting attorney as well as judge.

“Like a banker taking out a loan from himself and then paying himself interest,” one of the jurors was overheard to say during the lunch break at Mother’s Best, and although nobody disagreed with this, no one suggested that it was a bad idea. It had a certain economy, after all.

Prosecutor Mizell called half a dozen witnesses, and Judge Mizell never objected once to his line of questioning. Mr. Cline testified first, and Sheriff Barclay came last. The story that emerged was a simple one. At noon on the day of Rebecca Cline’s murder, there had been a birthday party, with cake and ice cream. Several of Rebecca’s friends had attended. Around two o’clock, while the little girls were playing Pin the Tail on the Donkey and Musical Chairs, Jim Trusdale entered the Chuck-a-Luck and ordered a knock of whiskey. He was wearing his plainsman hat. He made the drink last, and when it was gone he ordered another.

Did he at any point take off the hat? Perhaps hang it on one of the hooks by the door? No one could remember.

“Only I never seen him without it,” Dale Gerard, the barman, said. “He was partial to that hat. If he did take it off, he probably laid it on the bar beside him. He had his second drink, and then he went on his way.”

“Was his hat on the bar when he left?” Mizell asked.

“No, sir.”

“Was it on one of the hooks when you closed up shop for the night?”

“No, sir.”

Around three o’clock that day, Rebecca Cline left her house at the south end of town to visit the apothecary on Main Street. Her mother had told her she could buy some candy with her birthday dollar, but not eat it, because she had had sweets enough for one day. When five o’clock came and she hadn’t returned home, Mr. Cline and some other men began searching for her. They found her in Barker’s Alley, between the stage depot and the Good Rest. She had been strangled. Her silver dollar was gone. It was only when the grieving father took her in his arms that the men saw Trusdale’s broad-brimmed leather hat. It had been hidden beneath the skirt of the girl’s party dress.

During the jury’s lunch hour, hammering was heard from behind the stage depot and not ninety paces from the scene of the crime. This was the gallows going up. The work was supervised by the town’s best carpenter, whose name, appropriately enough, was Mr. John House. Big snow was coming, and the road to Fort Pierre would be impassable, perhaps for a week, perhaps for the entire winter. There were no plans to jug Trusdale in the local calaboose until spring. There was no economy in that.

“Nothing to building a gallows,” House told folks who came to watch. “A child could build one of these.”

He told how a lever-operated beam would run beneath the trapdoor, and how it would be axle-greased to make sure there wouldn't be any last-minute holdups. "If you have to do a thing like this, you want to do it right the first time," House said.

In the afternoon, George Andrews put Trusdale on the stand. This occasioned some hissing from the spectators, which Judge Mizell gavelled down, promising to clear the courtroom if folks couldn't behave themselves.

"Did you enter the Chuck-a-Luck Saloon on the day in question?" Andrews asked when order had been restored.

"I guess so," Trusdale said. "Otherwise I wouldn't be here."

There was some laughter at that, which Mizell also gavelled down, although he was smiling himself and did not issue a second admonition.

"Did you order two drinks?"

"Yes, sir, I did. Two was all I had money for."

"But you got another dollar right quick, didn't you, you hound!" Abel Hines shouted.

Mizell pointed his gavel first at Hines, then at Sheriff Barclay, sitting in the front row. "Sheriff, escort that man out and charge him with disorderly conduct, if you please."

Barclay escorted Hines out but did not charge him with disorderly conduct. Instead, he asked what had got into him.

"I'm sorry, Otis," Hines said. "It was seeing him sitting there with his bare face hanging out."

"You go on downstreet and see if John House needs some help with his work," Barclay said. "Don't come back in here until this mess is over."

"He's got all the help he needs, and it's snowing hard now."

"You won't blow away. Go on."

Meanwhile, Trusdale continued to testify. No, he hadn't left the Chuck-a-Luck wearing his hat, but hadn't realized it until he got to his place. By then, he said, he was too tired to walk all the way back to town in search of it. Besides, it was dark.

Mizell broke in. "Are you asking this court to believe you walked four miles without realizing you weren't wearing your damn hat?"

"I guess since I wear it all the time I just figured it must be there," Trusdale said. This elicited another gust of laughter.

Barclay came back in and took his place next to Dave Fisher. "What are they laughing at?"

“Dummy don’t need a hangman,” Fisher said. “He’s tying the knot all by himself. It shouldn’t be funny, but it’s pretty comical, just the same.”

“Did you encounter Rebecca Cline in that alley?” George Andrews asked in a loud voice. With every eye on him, he had discovered a heretofore hidden flair for the dramatic. “Did you encounter her and steal her birthday dollar?”

“No, sir,” Trusdale said.

“Did you kill her?”

“No, sir. I didn’t even know who she was.”

Mr. Cline rose from his seat and shouted, “You did it, you lying son of a bitch!”

“I ain’t lying,” Trusdale said, and that was when Sheriff Barclay believed him.

“I have no further questions,” Andrews said, and walked back to his seat.

Trusdale started to get up, but Mizell told him to sit still and answer a few more questions.

“Do you continue to contend, Mr. Trusdale, that someone stole your hat while you were drinking in the Chuck-a-Luck, and that someone put it on, and went into the alley, and killed Rebecca Cline, and left it there to implicate you?”

Trusdale was silent.

“Answer the question, Mr. Trusdale.”

“Sir, I don’t know what ‘implicate’ means.”

“Do you expect us to believe someone framed you for this heinous murder?”

Trusdale considered, twisting his hands together. At last he said, “Maybe somebody took it by mistake and threw it away.”

Mizell looked out at the rapt gallery. “Did anyone here take Mr. Trusdale’s hat by mistake?”

There was silence, except for the snow hitting the windows. The first big storm of winter had arrived. That was the winter townsfolk called the Wolf Winter, because the wolves came down from the Black Hills in packs to hunt for garbage.

“I have no more questions,” Mizell said. “And due to the weather we are going to dispense with any closing statements. The jury will retire to consider a verdict. You have three choices, gentlemen—innocent, manslaughter, or murder in the first degree.”

“Girlslaughter, more like it,” someone remarked.

Sheriff Barclay and Dave Fisher retired to the Chuck-a-Luck. Abel Hines joined them, brushing snow from the shoulders of his coat. Dale Gerard served them schooners of beer on the house.

“Mizell might not have had any more questions,” Barclay said, “but I got one. Never mind the hat. If Trusdale killed her, how come we never found that silver dollar?”

“Because he got scared and threw it away,” Hines said.

“I don’t think so. He’s too bone-stupid. If he’d had that dollar, he’d have gone back to the Chuck-a-Luck and drunk it up.”

“What are you saying?” Dave asked. “That you think he’s innocent?”

“I’m saying I wish we’d found that cartwheel.”

“Maybe he lost it out a hole in his pocket.”

“He didn’t have any holes in his pockets,” Barclay said. “Only one in his boot, and it wasn’t big enough for a dollar to get through.” He drank some of his beer. The tumbleweeds blowing up Main Street looked like ghostly brains in the snow.

The jury took an hour and a half. “We voted to hang him on the first ballot,” Kelton Fisher said later, “but we wanted it to look decent.”

Mizell asked Trusdale if he had anything to say before sentence was passed.

“I can’t think of nothing,” Trusdale said. “Just I never killed that girl.”

The storm blew for three days. John House asked Barclay how much he reckoned Trusdale weighed, and Barclay said he guessed the man went around one-forty. House made a dummy out of burlap sacks and filled it with stones, weighing it on the hostelry scales until the needle stood pat on one-forty. Then he hanged the dummy while half the town stood around in the snowdrifts and watched. The trial run went all right.

On the night before the execution, the weather cleared. Sheriff Barclay told Trusdale he could have anything he wanted for dinner. Trusdale asked for steak and eggs, with home fries on the side soaked in gravy. Barclay paid for it out of his own pocket, then sat at his desk cleaning his fingernails and listening to the steady clink of Trusdale’s knife and fork on the china plate. When it stopped, he went in. Trusdale was sitting on his bunk. His plate was so clean Barclay figured he must have lapped up the last of the gravy like a dog. He was crying.

“Something just come to me,” Trusdale said.

“What’s that, Jim?”

“If they hang me tomorrow morning, I’ll go into my grave with steak and eggs still in my belly. It won’t have no chance to work through.”

For a moment, Barclay said nothing. He was horrified not by the image but because Trusdale had thought of it. Then he said, “Wipe your nose.”

Trusdale wiped it.

“Now listen to me, Jim, because this is your last chance. You were in that bar in the middle of the afternoon. Not many people in there then. Isn’t that right?”

“I guess it is.”

“Then who took your hat? Close your eyes. Think back. See it.”

Trusdale closed his eyes. Barclay waited. At last Trusdale opened his eyes, which were red from crying. “I can’t even remember was I wearing it.”

Barclay sighed. “Give me your plate, and mind that knife.”

Trusdale handed the plate through the bars with the knife and fork laid on it, and said he wished he could have some beer. Barclay thought it over, then put on his heavy coat and Stetson and walked down to the Chuck-a-Luck, where he got a small pail of beer from Dale Gerard. Undertaker Hines was just finishing a glass of wine. He followed Barclay out.

“Big day tomorrow,” Barclay said. “There hasn’t been a hanging here in ten years, and with luck there won’t be another for ten more. I’ll be gone out of the job by then. I wish I was now.”

Hines looked at him. “You really don’t think he killed her.”

“If he didn’t,” Barclay said, “whoever did is still walking around.”

The hanging was at nine o’clock the next morning. The day was windy and bitterly cold, but most of the town turned out to watch. Pastor Ray Rowles stood on the scaffold next to John House. Both of them were shivering in spite of their coats and scarves. The pages of Pastor Rowles’s Bible fluttered. Tucked into House’s belt, also fluttering, was a hood of homespun cloth dyed black.

Barclay led Trusdale, his hands cuffed behind his back, to the gallows. Trusdale was all right until he got to the steps, then he began to buck and cry.

“Don’t do this,” he said. “Please don’t do this to me. Please don’t hurt me. Please don’t kill me.”

He was strong for a little man, and Barclay motioned Dave Fisher to come and lend a hand. Together they muscled Trusdale, twisting and ducking and pushing, up the twelve wooden steps. Once, he bucked so hard all three of them almost fell off, and arms reached up to catch them if they did.

“Quit that and die like a man!” someone shouted.

On the platform, Trusdale was momentarily quiet, but when Pastor Rowles commenced Psalm 51, he began to scream. “Like a woman with her tit caught in the wringer,” someone said later in the Chuck-a-Luck.

“Have mercy on me, O God, after Thy great goodness,” Rowles read, raising his voice to be heard above the condemned man’s shrieks to be let off. “According to the multitude of Thy mercies, do away with mine offenses.”

When Trusdale saw House take the black hood out of his belt, he began to pant like a dog. He shook his head from side to side, trying to dodge the hood. His hair flew. House followed each jerk patiently, like a man who means to bridle a skittish horse.

“Let me look at the mountains!” Trusdale bellowed. Runners of snot hung from his nostrils. “I’ll be good if you let me look at the mountains one more time!”

But House only jammed the hood over Trusdale’s head and pulled it down to his shaking shoulders. Pastor Rowles was droning on, and Trusdale tried to run off the trapdoor. Barclay and Fisher pushed him back onto it. Down below, someone cried, “Ride ’em, cowboy!”

“Say amen,” Barclay told Pastor Rowles. “For Christ’s sake, say amen.”

“Amen,” Pastor Rowles said, and stepped back, closing his Bible with a clap.

Barclay nodded to House. House pulled the lever. The greased beam retracted and the trap dropped. So did Trusdale. There was a crack when his neck broke. His legs drew up almost to his chin, then fell back limp. Yellow drops stained the snow under his feet.

“There, you bastard!” Rebecca Cline’s father shouted. “Died pissing like a dog on a fireplug. Welcome to Hell.” A few people clapped.

The spectators stayed until Trusdale’s corpse, still wearing the black hood, was laid in the same hurry-up wagon he’d ridden to town in. Then they dispersed.

Barclay went back to the jail and sat in the cell Trusdale had occupied. He sat there for ten minutes. It was cold enough to see his breath. He knew what he was waiting for, and eventually it came. He picked up the small bucket that had held Trusdale’s last drink of beer and vomited. Then he went into his office and stoked up the stove.

He was still there eight hours later, trying to read a book, when Abel Hines came in. He said, “You need to come down to the funeral parlor, Otis. There’s something I want to show you.”

“What?”

“No. You’ll want to see it for yourself.”

They walked down to the Hines Funeral Parlor & Mortuary. In the back room, Trusdale lay naked on a cooling board. There was a smell of chemicals and shit.

“They load their pants when they die that way,” Hines said. “Even men who go to it with their heads up. They can’t help it. The sphincter lets go.”

“And?”

“Step over here. I figure a man in your job has seen worse than a pair of shitty drawers.”

They lay on the floor, mostly turned inside out. Something gleamed in the mess. Barclay leaned closer and saw it was a silver dollar. He reached down and plucked it from the crap.

“I don’t understand it,” Hines said. “Son of a bitch was locked up a good long time.”

There was a chair in the corner. Barclay sat down on it so heavily he made a little *woof* sound. “He must have swallowed it the first time when he saw our lanterns coming. And every time it came out he cleaned it off and swallowed it again.”

The two men stared at each other.

“You believed him,” Hines said at last.

“Fool that I am, I did.”

“Maybe that says more about you than it does about him.”

“He went on saying he was innocent right to the end. He’ll most likely stand at the throne of God saying the same thing.”

“Yes,” Hines said.

“I don’t understand. He was going to hang. Either way, he was going to hang. Do you understand it?”

“I don’t even understand why the sun comes up. What are you going to do with that cartwheel? Give it back to the girl’s mother and father? It might be better if you didn’t, because...” Hines shrugged.

Because the Clines knew all along. Everyone in town knew all along. He was the only one who hadn’t known. Fool that he was.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with it,” he said.

The wind gusted, bringing the sound of singing. It was coming from the church. It was the Doxology.