STEPHEN
KING

THE
INSTITUTE

A NOVEL

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For my grandsons:
Ethan, Aidan, and Ryan

And Samson called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines . . .

And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left.

And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.

Judges, Chapter 16

But whoso shall offend one of these little ones . . . it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Matthew, Chapter 18

According to the National Center for
Missing and Exploited Children, roughly
800,000 children are reported missing
each year in the United States.
Most are found.
Thousands are not.

THE INSTITUTE

THE NIGHT KNOCKER

1

Half an hour after Tim Jamieson's Delta flight was scheduled to leave Tampa for the bright lights and tall buildings of New York, it was still parked at the gate. When a Delta agent and a blond woman with a security badge hanging around her neck entered the cabin, there were unhappy, premonitory murmurings from the packed residents of economy class.

"May I have your attention, please!" the Delta guy called.

"How long's the delay gonna be?" someone asked. "Don't sugarcoat it."

"The delay should be short, and the captain wants to assure you all that your flight will arrive approximately on time. We have a federal officer who needs to board, however, so we'll need someone to give up his or her seat."

A collective groan went up, and Tim saw several people unlimber their cell phones in case of trouble. There had been trouble in these situations before.

"Delta Air Lines is authorized to offer a free ticket to New York on the next outbound flight, which will be tomorrow morning at 6:45 AM—"

Another groan went up. Someone said, "Just shoot me."

The functionary continued, undeterred. "You'll be given a hotel voucher for tonight, plus four hundred dollars. It's a good deal, folks. Who wants it?"

He had no takers. The security blond said nothing, only surveyed the crowded economy-class cabin with all-seeing but somehow lifeless eyes.

"Eight hundred," the Delta guy said. "Plus the hotel voucher and the complimentary ticket."

"Guy sounds like a quiz show host," grunted a man in the row ahead of Tim's.

There were still no takers.

"Fourteen hundred?"

And still none. Tim found this interesting but not entirely surprising. It wasn't just because a six forty-five flight meant getting up before God, either. Most of his fellow economy-class passengers were family groups headed home after visiting various Florida attractions, couples sporting beachy-keen sunburns, and beefy, red-faced, pissed-off-looking guys who probably had business in the Big Apple worth considerably more than fourteen hundred bucks.

Someone far in the back called, "Throw in a Mustang convertible and a trip to Aruba for two, and you can have both our seats!" This sally provoked laughter. It didn't sound terribly friendly.

The gate agent looked at the blond with the badge, but if he hoped for help there, he got none. She just continued her survey, nothing moving but her eyes. He sighed and said, "Sixteen hundred."

Tim Jamieson suddenly decided he wanted to get the fuck off this plane and hitchhike north. Although such an idea had never so much as crossed his mind before

this moment, he found he could imagine himself doing it, and with absolute clarity. There he was, standing on Highway 301 somewhere in the middle of Hernando County with his thumb out. It was hot, the lovebugs were swarming, there was a billboard advertising some slip-and-fall attorney, "Take It on the Run" was blaring from a boombox sitting on the concrete-block step of a nearby trailer where a shirtless man was washing his car, and eventually some Farmer John would come along and give him a ride in a pickup truck with stake sides, melons in the back, and a magnetic Jesus on the dashboard. The best part wouldn't even be the cash money in his pocket. The best part would be standing out there by himself, miles from this sardine can with its warring smells of perfume, sweat, and hair spray.

The second-best part, however, would be squeezing the government tit for a few dollars more.

He stood up to his perfectly normal height (five-ten and a fraction), pushed his glasses up on his nose, and raised his hand. "Make it two thousand, sir, plus a cash refund of my ticket, and the seat is yours."

2

The voucher turned out to be for a cheesedog hotel located near the end of Tampa International's most heavily used runway. Tim fell asleep to the sound of airplanes, awoke to more of the same, and went down to ingest a hardboiled egg and two rubber pancakes from the complimentary breakfast buffet. Although far from a gourmet treat, Tim ate heartily, then went back to his room to wait for nine o'clock, when the banks opened.

He cashed his windfall with no trouble, because the bank knew he was coming and the check had been approved in advance; he had no intention of waiting around in the cheesedog hotel for it to clear. He took his two thousand in fifties and twenties, folded it into his left front pocket, reclaimed his duffel bag from the bank's security guard, and called an Uber to take him to Ellenton. There he paid the driver, strolled to the nearest 301-N sign, and stuck out his thumb. Fifteen minutes later he was picked up by an old guy in a Case gimme cap. There were no melons in the back of his pickup, and no stake sides, but otherwise it pretty much conformed to his vision of the previous night.

"Where you headed, friend?" the old guy asked.

"Well," Tim said, "New York, eventually. I guess."

The old guy spat a ribbon of tobacco juice out the window. "Now why would any man in his right mind want to go there?" He pronounced it *raht mahnd*.

"I don't know," Tim said, although he did; an old service buddy had told him there was plenty of private security work in the Big Apple, including some for companies that would give more weight to his experience than to the Rube Goldberg fuckup that had ended his career in Florida policing. "I'm just hoping to get to Georgia tonight. Maybe I'll like that better."

"Now you're talking," the old guy said. "Georgia ain't bad, specially if you like peaches. They gi' me the backdoor trots. You don't mind some music, do you?"

"Not at all."

"Got to warn you, I play it loud. I'm a little on the deef side."

"I'm just happy to be riding."

It was Waylon Jennings instead of REO Speedwagon, but that was okay with Tim. Waylon was followed by Shooter Jennings and Marty Stuart. The two men in the mud-streaked Dodge Ram listened and watched the highway roll. Seventy miles up the line, the old guy pulled over, gave Tim a tip of his Case cap, and wished him a real fahn day.

Tim didn't make Georgia that night—he spent it in another cheesedog motel next to a roadside stand selling orange juice—but he got there the following day. In the town of Brunswick (where a certain kind of tasty stew had been invented), he took two weeks' work in a recycling plant, doing it with no more forethought than he had put into deciding to give up his seat on the Delta flight out of Tampa. He didn't need the money, but it seemed to Tim that he needed the time. He was in transition, and that didn't happen overnight. Also, there was a bowling alley with a Denny's right next door. Hard to beat a combo like that.

3

With his pay from the recycling plant added to his airline windfall, Tim was standing on the Brunswick ramp of I-95 North and feeling pretty well-heeled for a rambling man. He stood there for over an hour in the sun, and was thinking of giving up and going back to Denny's for a cold glass of sweet tea when a Volvo station wagon pulled over. The back was filled with cartons. The elderly woman behind the wheel powered down the passenger-side window and peered at him through thick glasses. "Although not large, you look

well-muscled," she said. "You are not a rapist or a psychotic, are you?"

"No, ma'am," Tim told her, thinking: But what else *would* I say?

"Of course you would say that, wouldn't you? Are you going as far as South Carolina? Your duffel bag suggests that you are."

A car swept around her Volvo and sped up the ramp, horn blaring. She took no notice, only kept her serene gaze fixed on Tim.

"Yes, ma'am. All the way to New York."

"I'll take you to South Carolina—not far into that benighted state, but a little way—if you'll help me out a bit in return. One hand washes the other, if you see what I mean."

"You scratch my back and I scratch yours," Tim said, grinning.

"There will be no scratching of any kind, but you may get in."

Tim did so. Her name was Marjorie Kellerman, and she ran the Brunswick library. She also belonged to something called the Southeastern Library Association. Which, she said, had no money because "Trump and his cronies took it all back. They understand culture no more than a donkey understands algebra."

Sixty-five miles north, still in Georgia, she stopped at a pokey little library in the town of Pooler. Tim unloaded the cartons of books and dollied them inside. He dollied another dozen or so cartons out to the Volvo. These, Marjorie Kellerman told him, were bound to the Yemassee Public Library, about forty miles further north, across the South Carolina state line. But not

long after passing Hardeeville, their progress came to a stop. Cars and trucks were stacked up in both lanes, and more quickly filled in behind them.

"Oh, I hate it when this happens," Marjorie said, "and it always seems to in South Carolina, where they're too cheap to widen the highway. There's been a wreck somewhere up ahead, and with only two lanes, nobody can get by. I'll be here half the day. Mr. Jamieson, you may be excused from further duty. If I were you, I would exit my vehicle, walk back to the Hardeeville exit, and try your luck on Highway 17."

"What about all those cartons of books?"

"Oh, I'll find another strong back to help me unload," she said, and smiled at him. "To tell you the truth, I saw you standing there in the hot sun and just decided to live a little dangerously."

"Well, if you're sure." The traffic clog was making him feel claustrophobic. The way he'd felt stuck halfway back in economy class of the Delta flight, in fact. "If you're not, I'll hang in. It's not like I'm racing a deadline or anything."

"I'm sure," she said. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Jamieson."

"Likewise, Ms. Kellerman."

"Do you need monetary assistance? I can spare ten dollars, if you do."

He was touched and surprised—not for the first time—by the ordinary kindness and generosity of ordinary folks, especially those without much to spare. America was still a good place, no matter how much some (including himself, from time to time) might disagree. "No, I'm fine. Thank you for the offer."

He shook her hand, got out, and walked back along the I-95 breakdown lane to the Hardeeville exit. When a ride was not immediately forthcoming on US 17, he strolled a couple of miles to where it joined State Road 92. Here a sign pointed toward the town of DuPray. By then it was late afternoon, and Tim decided he had better find a motel in which to spend the night. It would undoubtedly be another of the cheesedog variety, but the alternatives—sleeping outside and getting eaten alive by skeeters or in some farmer's barn—were even less appealing. And so he set out for DuPray.

Great events turn on small hinges.

4

An hour later he was sitting on a rock at the edge of the two-lane, waiting for a seemingly endless freight train to cross the road. It was headed in the direction of DuPray at a stately thirty miles an hour: boxcars, autoracks (most loaded with wrecks rather than new vehicles), tankers, flatcars, and gondolas loaded with God knew what evil substances that might, in the event of a derailment, catch the piney woods afire or afflict the DuPray populace with noxious or even fatal fumes. At last came an orange caboose where a man in bib overalls sat in a lawn chair, reading a paperback and smoking a cigarette. He looked up from his book and tipped Tim a wave. Tim tipped one right back.

The town was two miles further on, built around the intersection of SR 92 (now called Main Street) and two other streets. DuPray seemed to have largely escaped the chain stores that had taken over the bigger towns;

there was a Western Auto, but it was closed down, the windows soaped over. Tim noted a grocery store, a drug store, a mercantile that appeared to sell a little bit of everything, and a couple of beauty salons. There was also a movie theater with FOR SALE OR RENT on the marquee, an auto supply store that fancied itself the DuPray Speed Shop, and a restaurant called Bev's Eatery. There were three churches, one Methodist, two off-brand, all of the come-to-Jesus variety. There were no more than two dozen cars and farm trucks scattered along the slant-parking spaces that lined the business district. The sidewalks were nearly deserted.

Three blocks up, after yet another church, he spied the DuPray Motel. Beyond it, where Main Street presumably reverted to SR 92, there was another rail crossing, a depot, and a row of metal roofs glittering in the sun. Beyond these structures, the piney woods closed in again. All in all, it looked to Tim like a town out of a country ballad, one of those nostalgia pieces sung by Alan Jackson or George Strait. The motel sign was old and rusty, suggesting the place might be as closed-down as the movie theater, but since the afternoon was now ebbing away and it appeared to be the only game in town when it came to shelter, Tim headed for it.

Halfway there, after the DuPray Town Office, he came to a brick building with ladders of ivy climbing the sides. On the neatly mowed lawn was a sign proclaiming this the Fairlee County Sheriff's Department. Tim thought it must be a poor-ass county indeed, if this town was its seat.

Two cruisers were parked in front, one of them a newish sedan, the other an elderly, mud-splashed

4Runner with a bubble light on the dash. Tim looked toward the entrance—the almost unconscious glance of a drifter with quite a lot of cash money in his pocket—walked on a few steps, then turned back for a closer look at the notice boards flanking the double doors. At one of the notices in particular. Thinking he must have read it wrong but wanting to make sure.

Not in this day and age, he thought. Can't be.

But it was. Next to a poster reading IF YOU THOUGHT MARIJUANA IS LEGAL IN SOUTH CAROLINA, **THINK AGAIN**, was one that read simply NIGHT KNOCKER WANTED. APPLY WITHIN.

Wow, he thought. Talk about a blast from the past.

He turned toward the rusty motel sign and paused again, thinking about that help-wanted sign. Just then one of the police station doors opened and a lanky cop came out, settling his cap on his red hair. The latening sun twinkled on his badge. He took in Tim's workboots, dusty jeans, and blue chambray shirt. His eyes dwelled for a moment on the duffel bag slung over Tim's shoulder before moving to his face. "Can I help you, sir?"

The same impulse that had made him stand up on the plane swept over him now. "Probably not, but who knows?"

5

The redheaded cop was Deputy Taggart Faraday. He escorted Tim inside, where the familiar smells of bleach and ammonia cakes wafted into the office from the four-cell holding area in the back. After introduc-

ing Tim to Veronica Gibson, the middle-aged deputy working dispatch this afternoon, Faraday asked to see Tim's driver's license and at least one other piece of identification. What Tim produced in addition to his DL was his Sarasota Police ID, making no attempt to hide the fact that it had expired nine months before. Nevertheless, the attitudes of the deputies changed slightly when they saw it.

"You're not a resident of Fairlee County," Ronnie Gibson said.

"No," Tim agreed. "Not at all. But I could be if I got the night knocker job."

"Doesn't pay much," Faraday said, "and in any case it's not up to me. Sheriff Ashworth hires and fires."

Ronnie Gibson said, "Our last night knocker retired and moved down to Georgia. Ed Whitlock. He got ALS, that Lou Gehrig's thing. Nice man. Tough break. But he's got people down there to take care of him."

"It's always the nice ones who get hit with the shit," Tag Faraday said. "Give him a form, Ronnie." Then, to Tim: "We're a small outfit here, Mr. Jamieson, crew of seven and two of them part-time. All the taxpayers can afford. Sheriff John's currently out on patrol. If he's not in by five, five-thirty at the latest, he's gone home to supper and won't be in until tomorrow."

"I'll be here tonight in any case. Assuming the motel's open, that is."

"Oh, I think Norbert's got a few rooms," Ronnie Gibson said. She exchanged a glance with the redhead and they both laughed.

"I'm guessing it might not be a four-star establishment."

"No comment on that," Gibson said, "but I'd check the sheets for those little red bugs before you lie down, if I was you. Why'd you leave Sarasota PD, Mr. Jamieson? You're young to retire, I'd say."

"That's a matter I'll discuss with your chief, assuming he grants me an interview."

The two officers exchanged another, longer look, then Tag Faraday said, "Go on and give the man an application, Ronnie. Nice to meet you, sir. Welcome to DuPray. Act right and we'll get along fine." With that he departed, leaving the alternative to good behavior open to interpretation. Through the barred window, Tim saw the 4Runner back out of its spot and roll off down DuPray's short main street.

The form was on a clipboard. Tim sat down in one of the three chairs against the lefthand wall, placed his duffel between his feet, and began filling it out.

Night knocker, he thought. I will be goddamned.

6

Sheriff Ashworth—Sheriff John to most of the townsfolk as well as to his deputies, Tim discovered—was a big-bellied slow walker. He had basset hound jowls and a lot of white hair. There was a ketchup stain on his uniform shirt. He wore a Glock on his hip and a ruby ring on one pinkie. His accent was strong, his attitude was good-ole-boy friendly, but his eyes, deep in their fatty sockets, were smart and inquisitive. He could have been typecast in one of those southern-cliché movies like *Walking Tall*, if not for the fact that he was black. And something else: a framed certificate

of graduation from the FBI's National Academy in Quantico hung on the wall next to the official portrait of President Trump. That was not the sort of thing you got by mailing in cereal boxtops.

"All right, then," Sheriff John said, rocking back in his office chair. "I haven't got long. Marcella hates it when I'm late for dinner. Unless there's some sort of crisis, accourse."

"Understood."

"So let's get right to the good part. Why'd you leave Sarasota PD and what are you doing here? South Cah'lina doesn't have too many beaten tracks, and DuPray idn't exactly on any of them."

Ashworth probably wouldn't be on the phone to Sarasota tonight, but he would be in the morning, so there was no point in gilding the lily. Not that Tim wanted to. If he didn't get the night knocker job, he would spend the night in DuPray and move on in the morning, continuing his stop-and-start progress to New York, a journey he now understood to be a necessary hiatus between what had happened one day late last year at Sarasota's Westfield Mall and whatever might happen next. All that aside, honesty was the best policy, if only because lies—especially in an age when almost all information was available to anyone with a keyboard and a Wi-Fi connection—usually came back to haunt the liar.

"I was given a choice between resignation and dismissal. I chose resignation. No one was happy about it, least of all me—I liked my job and I liked the Gulf Coast—but it was the best solution. This way I get a little money, nothing like a full pension, but better than nothing. I split it with my ex-wife."

"Cause? And make it simple so I can get to my dinner while it's still hot."

"This won't take long. At the end of my shift one day last November, I swung into the Westfield Mall to buy a pair of shoes. Had to go to a wedding. I was still in uniform, okay?"

"Okay."

"I was coming out of the Shoe Depot when a woman ran up and said a teenager was waving a gun around up by the movie theater. So I went up there, double-time."

"Did you draw your weapon?"

"No sir, not then. The kid with the gun was maybe fourteen, and I ascertained that he was either drunk or high. He had another kid down and was kicking him. He was also pointing the gun at him."

"Sounds like that Cleveland deal. The cop who shot the black kid who was waving a pellet gun."

"That was in my mind when I approached, but the cop who shot Tamir Rice swore he thought the kid was waving a real gun around. I was pretty sure the one I saw wasn't real, but I couldn't be *completely* sure. Maybe you know why."

Sheriff John Ashworth seemed to have forgotten about dinner. "Because your subject was pointing it at the kid he had on the floor. No sense pointing a fake gun at someone. Unless, I s'pose, the kid on the ground didn't know that."

"The perp said later he was *shaking* it at the kid, not pointing it. Saying 'It's mine, motherfucker, you don't take what's mine.' I didn't see that. To me he looked like he was pointing it. I yelled at him to drop the weapon and put his hands up. He either didn't hear

me or didn't pay any attention. He just went on kicking and pointing. Or shaking, if that's what he was doing. In any case, I drew my sidearm." He paused. "If it makes any difference, these kids were white."

"Not to me, it doesn't. Kids were fighting. One was down and getting hurt. The other had what might or might not have been a real gun. So did you shoot him? Tell me it didn't come to that."

"No one got shot. But . . . you know how people will gather around to watch a fistfight, but tend to scatter once a weapon comes out?"

"Sure. If they've got any sense, they run like hell."

"That happened, except for a few people who stayed even then."

"The ones filming it with their phones."

Tim nodded. "Four or five wannabe Spielbergs. Anyway, I pointed my gun at the ceiling and fired what was supposed to be a warning shot. It might have been a bad decision, but in that moment it seemed like the right one. The only one. There are hanging lights in that part of the mall. The bullet hit one of them and it came down dead-center on a lookie-loo's head. The kid with the gun dropped it, and as soon as it hit the floor, I knew for sure it wasn't real because it bounced. Turned out to be a plastic squirt gun made to look like a .45 auto. The kid who was on the floor getting kicked had some bruises and a few cuts, nothing that looked like it would need stitches, but the bystander was unconscious and stayed that way for three hours. Concussion. According to his lawyer he's got amnesia and blinding headaches."

"Sued the department?"

"Yes. It'll go on for a while, but he'll end up getting something."

Sheriff John considered. "If he hung around to film the altercation, he may not get all that much, no matter how bad his headaches are. I suppose the department landed you with reckless discharge of a weapon."

They had, and it would be nice, Tim thought, if we could leave it at that. But they couldn't. Sheriff John might look like an African-American version of Boss Hogg in *The Dukes of Hazzard*, but he was no dummy. He was clearly sympathetic to Tim's situation—almost any cop would be—but he'd still check. Better he got the rest of the story from Tim himself.

"Before I went into the shoe store, I went into Beachcombers and had a couple of drinks. The responding officers who took the kid into custody smelled it on my breath and gave me the test. I blew oh-six, under the legal limit but not good considering I had just fired my sidearm and put a man in the hospital."

"You ordinarily a drinking man, Mr. Jamieson?"

"Quite a lot in the six months or so after my divorce, but that was two years ago. Not now." Which is, of course, what I *would* say, he thought.

"Uh-huh, uh-huh, now let's see if I got this right." The sheriff stuck up a fat index finger. "You were off duty, which means if you'd been out of uniform, that woman never would have run up to you in the first place."

"Probably not, but I would have heard the commotion and gone to the scene anyway. A cop is never really off duty. As I'm sure you know."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh, but would you have had your gun?"

"No, it would have been locked in my car."

Ashworth popped a second finger for that point, then added a third. "The kid had what was probably a fake gun, but it could have been real. You couldn't be sure, one way or the other."

"Yes."

Here came finger number four. "Your warning shot struck a light, not only bringing it down but bringing it down on an innocent bystander's head. If, that is, you can call an asshole filming with a cell phone an innocent bystander."

Tim nodded.

Up popped the sheriff's thumb. "And before this altercation occurred, you just happened to have ingested two alcoholic drinks."

"Yes. And while I was in uniform."

"Not a good decision, not a good . . . what do they call it . . . *optic*, but I'd still have to say you had one insane run of bad luck." Sheriff John drummed his fingers on the edge of his desk. The ruby pinkie ring punctuated each roll with a small click. "I think your story is too outrageous not to be true, but I believe I'll call your previous place of employment and check it for myself. If for no other reason than to hear the story again and marvel anew."

Tim smiled. "I reported to Bernadette DiPino. She's the Sarasota Chief of Police. And you better get home to dinner, or your wife is going to be mad."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh, you let me worry about Marcy." The sheriff leaned forward over his stomach. His eyes were brighter than ever. "If I Breathalyzed you right now, Mr. Jamieson, what would you blow?"

"Go ahead and find out."

"Don't believe I will. Don't believe I need to." He leaned back; his office chair uttered another long-suffering squall. "Why would you want the job of night knocker in a pissant little burg like this? It only pays a hundred dollars a week, and while it doesn't amount to much in the way of trouble Sunday to Thursday, it can be an aggravation on Friday and Saturday nights. The strip club in Penley closed down last year, but there are several gin mills and juke joints in the immediate area."

"My grandfather was a night knocker in Hibbing, Minnesota. The town where Bob Dylan grew up? This was after he retired from the State Police. He was the reason I wanted to be a cop when I was growing up. I saw the sign, and just thought . . ." Tim shrugged. What *had* he thought? Pretty much the same thing as when he'd taken the job in the recycling plant. A whole lot of nothing much. It occurred to him that he might be, mentally speaking, at least, in sort of a hard place.

"Following in your grandpop's footsteps, uh-huh." Sheriff John clasped his hands over his considerable belly and stared at Tim—those bright, inquisitive eyes deep in their pockets of fat. "Consider yourself retired, is that the deal? Just looking for something to while away the idle hours? A little young for that, wouldn't you say?"

"Retired from the police, yes. That's over. A friend said he could get me security work in New York, and I wanted a change of scene. Maybe I don't have to go to New York to get one." He guessed what he really wanted was a change of heart. The night knocker job might not accomplish that, but then again it might.

"Divorced, you say?"

"Yes."

"Kids?"

"No. She wanted them, I didn't. Didn't feel I was ready."

Sheriff John looked down at Tim's application. "It says here you're forty-two. In most cases—probably not all—if you're not ready by then . . ."

He trailed off, waiting in best cop fashion for Tim to fill the silence. Tim didn't.

"You may be headed to New York eventually, Mr. Jamieson, but right now you're just drifting. That fair to say?"

Tim thought it over and agreed it *was* fair.

"If I give you this job, how do I know you won't take a notion to just drift on out of here two weeks or a month from now? DuPray idn't the most interesting place on earth, or even in South Cah'lina. What I'm asking, sir, is how do I know you're dependable?"

"I'll stick around. Always assuming you feel like I'm doing the job, that is. If you decide I'm not, you'll can me. If I should decide to move on, I'll give you plenty of notice. That's a promise."

"Job's not enough to live on."

Tim shrugged. "I'll find something else if I need to. You want to tell me I'd be the only guy around here working two jobs to make ends meet? And I've got a little put by to get started on."

Sheriff John sat where he was for a little while, thinking it over, then got to his feet. He did it with surprising agility for such a heavy man. "You come around tomorrow morning and we'll see what we're gonna do about this. Around ten would be about right."

Which will give you plenty of time to talk to Sarasota PD, Tim thought, and see if my story checks out. Also to discover if there are other smudges on my record.

He stood himself and stuck out his hand. Sheriff John's grip was a good strong one. "Where will you be staying tonight, Mr. Jamieson?"

"That motel down the way, if there's a vacant room."

"Oh, Norbert'll have plenty of vacant rooms," the sheriff said, "and I doubt if he'll try to sell you any of the herb. You've still got a little of the cop look about you, seems to me. If you don't have a problem digesting fried food, Bev's down the street is open until seven. I'm partial to the liver and onions, myself."

"Thanks. And thanks for talking to me."

"Not at all. Interesting conversation. And when you check in at the DuPray, tell Norbert Sheriff John said to give you one of the good rooms."

"I'll do that."

"But I'd still take a look for bugs before you climb into the rack."

Tim smiled. "I already got that advice."

7

Dinner at Bev's Eatery was chicken-fried steak, green beans, and peach cobbler to follow. Not bad. The room he was assigned at the DuPray Motel was a different matter. It made the ones Tim had stayed in during his ramble north look like palaces. The air conditioner in the window rattled busily, but didn't cool things off much. The rusty shower head dripped, and there

seemed to be no way to stop it. (He finally put a towel under it to muffle the clockwork sound.) The shade on the bedside lamp was burned in a couple of places. The room's one picture—an unsettling composition depicting a sailing ship crewed entirely by grinning and possibly homicidal black men—hung crooked. Tim straightened it, but it immediately fell crooked again.

There was a lawn chair outside. The seat sagged and the legs were as rusty as the defective shower head, but it held him. He sat there with his legs stretched out, slapping at bugs and watching the sun burn its orange furnace light through the trees. Looking at it made him feel happy and melancholy at the same time. Another nearly endless freight appeared around quarter past eight, rolling across the state road and past the warehouses on the outskirts of town.

"That damn Georgia Southern's always late."

Tim looked around and beheld the proprietor and sole evening employee of this fine establishment. He was rail thin. A paisley vest hung off his top half. He wore his khakis high-water, the better to display his white socks and elderly Converse sneakers. His vaguely ratlike face was framed by a vintage Beatle haircut.

"Do tell," Tim said.

"Doesn't matter," Norbert said, shrugging. "The even' train always goes right through. The midnight train *most* always does unless it's got diesel to unload or fresh fruit n vegimals for the grocery. There's a junction down yonder." He crossed his index fingers to demonstrate. "The one line goes to Atlanta, Birmin'am, Huntsville, places like 'at. T'other comes up from Jacksonville and goes on to Charleston, Wilmington,

Newport News, places like 'at. It's the day freights that mostly stop. Y'all thinkin about warehouse work? They usually a man or two short over there. Got to have a strong back, though. Not for me."

Tim looked at him. Norbert shuffled his sneakers and gave a grin that exposed what Tim thought of as gone-country teeth. They were there, but looked as if they might be gone soon.

"Where's your car?"

Tim just kept looking.

"Are you a cop?"

"Just now I'm a man watching the sun go down through the trees," Tim said, "and I would as soon do it alone."

"Say nummore, say nummore," Norbert said, and beat a retreat, pausing only for a single narrow, assessing glance over his shoulder.

The freight eventually passed. The red crossing lights quit. The barriers swung up. The two or three vehicles that had been waiting started their engines and got moving. Tim watched the sun go from orange to red as it sank—*red sky at night, sailor's delight*, his night knocker gramp would have said. He watched the shadows of the pines lengthen across SR 92 and join together. He was quite sure he wasn't going to get the night knocker job, and maybe that was for the best. DuPray felt far from everything, not just a sidetrack but a damn near no-track. If not for those four warehouses, the town probably wouldn't exist. And what was the *point* of their existence? To store TVs from some northern port like Wilmington or Norfolk, so they could eventually be shipped on to Atlanta or Mari-

etta? To store boxes of computer supplies shipped from Atlanta so they could eventually be loaded up again and shipped to Wilmington or Norfolk or Jacksonville? To store fertilizer or dangerous chemicals, because in this part of the United States there was no law against it? Around and around it went, and what was round *had* no point, any fool knew that.

He went inside, locked his door (stupid; the thing was so flimsy a single kick would stave it in), shucked down to his underwear, and lay on the bed, which was saggy but bugless (as far as he had been able to ascertain, at least). He put his hands behind his head and stared at the picture of the grinning black men manning the frigate or whatever the hell you called a ship like that. Where were they going? Were they pirates? They looked like pirates to him. Whatever they were, it would eventually come to loading and unloading at the next port of call. Maybe everything did. And everyone. Not long ago he had unloaded himself from a Delta flight bound for New York. After that he had loaded cans and bottles into a sorting machine. Today he had loaded books for a nice lady librarian at one place and unloaded them at another. He was only here because I-95 had loaded up with cars and trucks waiting for the wreckers to come and haul away some unfortunate's crashed car. Probably after an ambulance had loaded up the driver and unloaded him at the nearest hospital.

But a night knocker doesn't load or unload, Tim thought. He just walks and knocks. That is, Grandpa would have said, the beauty part.

He fell asleep, waking only at midnight, when another freight went rumbling through. He used the

bathroom and, before going back to bed, took down the crooked picture and leaned the crew of grinning black men facing the wall.

Damn thing gave him the willies.

8

When the phone in his room rang the next morning, Tim was showered and sitting in the lawn chair again, watching the shadows that had covered the road at sunset melt back the other way. It was Sheriff John. He didn't waste time.

"Didn't think your Chief would be in this early, so I looked you up online, Mr. Jamieson. Seems like you failed to note a couple of things on your application. Didn't bring them up in our conversation, either. You got a lifesaving commendation in 2017, and nabbed Sarasota PD's Sworn Officer of the Year in 2018. Did you just forget?"

"No," Tim said. "I applied for the job on the spur of the moment. If I'd had more time to think, I'd have put those things down."

"Tell me about the alligator. I grew up on the edge of Little Pee Dee Swamp, and I love a good gator story."

"It's not a very good one, because it wasn't a very big gator. And I didn't save the kid's life, but the story does have its funny side."

"Let's hear it."

"Call came in from the Highlands, which is a private golf course. I was the closest officer. The kid was up a tree near one of the water hazards. He was eleven,

twelve, something like that, and yelling his head off. The gator was down below."

"Sounds like Little Black Sambo," Sheriff John said. "Only as I recollect, there were tigers instead of a gator in that story, and if it was a private golf course, I bet the kid up that tree wadn't black."

"No, and the gator was more asleep than awake," Tim said. "Just a five-footer. Six at most. I borrowed a five-iron from the kid's father—he was the one who put me in for the commendation—and whacked him a couple of times."

"Whacked the gator, I'm thinking, not the dad."

Tim laughed. "Right. The gator went back to the water hazard, the kid climbed down, and that was it." He paused. "Except I got on the evening news. Waving a golf club. The newscaster joked about how I 'drove' it off. Golf humor, you know."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh, and the Officer of the Year thing?"

"Well," Tim said, "I always showed up on time, never called in sick, and they had to give it to somebody."

There was silence for several moments on the other end of the line. Then Sheriff John said, "I don't know if you call that becomin modesty or low self-esteem, but I don't much care for the sound of it either way. I know that's a lot to put out there on short acquaintance, but I'm a man who speaks his mind. I shoot from the lip, some folks say. My wife, for one."

Tim looked at the road, looked at the railroad tracks, looked at the retreating shadows. Spared a glance for the town water tower, looming like a robot invader in

a science fiction movie. It was going to be another hot day, he judged. He judged something else, as well. He could have this job or lose it right here and now. It all depended on what he said next. The question was, did he really want it, or had it just been a whim born of a family story about Grandpa Tom?

"Mr. Jamieson? Are you still there?"

"I earned that award. There were other cops it could have gone to, I worked with some fine officers, but yeah, I earned it. I didn't bring a whole lot with me when I left Sarasota—meant to have the rest shipped if I caught on to something in New York—but I brought the citation. It's in my duffel. I'll show you, if you want."

"I do," Sheriff John said, "but not because I don't believe you. I'd just like to see it. You're ridiculously overqualified for the job of night knocker, but if you really want it, you start at eleven tonight. Eleven to six, that's the deal."

"I want it," Tim said.

"All right."

"Just like that?"

"I'm also a man who trusts his instincts, and I'm hiring a night knocker, not a Brinks guard, so yeah, just like that. No need to come in at ten. You catch a little more sleep and drop by around noon. Officer Gullickson will give you the rundown. Won't take long. It ain't rocket science, as they say, although you're apt to see some road rockets on Main Street Saturday nights after the bars close."

"All right. And thank you."

"Let's see how thankful you are after your first week-

end. One more thing. You are not a sheriff's deputy, and you are not authorized to carry a firearm. You run into a situation you can't handle, or you consider dangerous, you radio back to the house. We good on that?"

"Yes."

"We better be, Mr. Jamieson. If I find out you're packing a gun, you'll be packing your bags."

"Understood."

"Then get some rest. You're about to become a creature of the night."

Like Count Dracula, Tim thought. He hung up, put the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door, drew the thin and dispirited curtain over the window, set his phone, and went back to sleep.

9

Deputy Wendy Gullickson, one of the Sheriff's Department's part-timers, was ten years younger than Ronnie Gibson and a knockout, even with her blond hair pulled back in a bun so tight it seemed to scream. Tim made no attempt to charm her; it was clear her charm shield was up and fully powered. He wondered briefly if she'd had someone else in mind for the night knocker job, maybe a brother or a boyfriend.

She gave him a map of DuPray's not-much-to-it business district, a handheld belt radio, and a time clock that also went on his belt. There were no batteries, Deputy Gullickson explained; he wound it up at the start of each shift.

"I bet this was state of the art back in 1946," Tim said. "It's actually sort of cool. Retro."

She didn't smile. "You punch your clock at Fromie's Small Engine Sales and Service, and again at the rail depot at the west end of Main. That's one-point-six miles each way. Ed Whitlock used to make four circuits each shift."

Which came to almost thirteen miles. "I won't need Weight Watchers, that's for sure."

Still no smile. "Ronnie Gibson and I will work out a schedule. You'll have two nights a week off, probably Mondays and Tuesdays. The town's pretty quiet after the weekend, but sometimes we may have to shift you. If you stick around, that is."

Tim folded his hands in his lap and regarded her with a half-smile. "Do you have a problem with me, Deputy Gullickson? If you do, speak up now or hold your peace."

Her complexion was Nordic fair, and there was no hiding the flush when it rose in her cheeks. It only added to her good looks, but he supposed she hated it, just the same.

"I don't know if I do or not. Only time will tell. We're a good crew. Small but good. We all pull together. You're just some guy who walked in off the street and landed a job. People in town joke about the night knocker, and Ed was a real good sport about all the ribbing, but it's important, especially in a town with a policing force as small as ours."

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," Tim said. "My grandpa used to say that. He was a night knocker, Officer Gullickson. That's why I applied for the job."

Maybe she thawed a little at that. "As for the time

clock, I agree that it's archaic. All I can say is get used to it. Night knocker is an analog job in a digital age. At least in DuPray, it is."

10

Tim discovered what she meant soon enough. He was basically a beat cop circa 1954, only without a gun or even a nightstick. He had no power to arrest. A few of the larger town businesses were equipped with security devices, but most of the smaller shops had no such technology. At places like DuPray Mercantile and Oberg's Drug, he checked to make sure the green security lights were burning and there was no sign of intruders. For the smaller ones, he shook doorknobs and doorhandles, peered through the glass, and gave the traditional triple knock. Occasionally this brought a response—a wave or a few words—but mostly it didn't, which was fine. He made a chalk mark and moved on. He followed the same procedure on his return trip, this time erasing the marks as he went. The process reminded him of an old Irish joke: *If you get there first, Paddy, chalk a mark on the door. If I get there first, I'll rub it out*. There seemed no practical reason for the marks; it was simply tradition, perhaps dating all the way back, through a long chain of night knockers, to reconstruction days.

Thanks to one of the part-time deputies, Tim found a decent place to stay. George Burkett told him that his mother had a small furnished apartment over her garage and she'd rent it to him cheap if he was interested. "Only two rooms, but pretty nice. My brother lived there a couple of years before he moved down to

Florida. Caught on at that Universal theme park in Orlando. Makes a decent wage."

"Good for him."

"Yeah, but the prices they charge for things in Florida . . . whoo, out of sight. Got to warn you, Tim, if you take the place, you can't play music loud late at night. Mom don't like music. She didn't even like Floyd's banjo, which he could play like a house on fire. They used to argue about it something awful."

"George, I'm rarely home at night."

Officer Burkett—mid-twenties, goodhearted and cheerful, not overburdened with native intelligence—brightened at this. "Right, forgot about that. Anyway, there's a little Carrier up there, not much, but it keeps the place cool enough so you can sleep—Floyd could, at least. You indrested?"

Tim was, and although the window-shaker unit really wasn't up to much, the bed was comfortable, the living room was cozy, and the shower didn't drip. The kitchen was nothing but a microwave and a hotplate, but he was taking most of his meals at Bev's Eatery anyway, so that was all right. And the rent couldn't be beat: seventy a week. George had described his mother as something of a dragon, but Mrs. Burkett turned out to be a good old soul with a southern drawl so thick he could only understand half of what she said. Sometimes she left a piece of cornbread or a slice of cake wrapped in waxed paper outside his door. It was like having a Dixie elf for a landlady.

Norbert Hollister, the rat-faced motel owner, had been right about DuPray Storage & Warehousing; they were chronically short-staffed and always hiring. Tim

guessed that in places where the work was manual labor recompensed by the smallest per-hour wage allowed by law (in South Carolina, that came to seven and a quarter an hour), high turnover was typical. He went to see the foreman, Val Jarrett, who was willing to put him on for three hours a day, starting at eight in the morning. That gave Tim time to get cleaned up and eat a meal after he finished his night knocker shift. And so, in addition to his nocturnal duties, he once more found himself loading and unloading.

The way of the world, he told himself. The way of the world. And just for now.

11

As his time in the little southern town passed, Tim Jamieson fell into a soothing routine. He had no intention of staying in DuPray for the rest of his life, but he could see himself still hanging around at Christmas (perhaps putting up a tiny artificial tree in his tiny over-the-garage apartment), maybe even until next summer. It was no cultural oasis, and he understood why the kids were mostly wild to escape its monochrome boringness, but Tim luxuriated in it. He was sure that would change in time, but for now it was okay.

Up at six in the evening; dinner at Bev's, sometimes alone, sometimes with one of the deputies; night knocker tours for the next seven hours; breakfast at Bev's; running a forklift at DuPray Storage & Warehousing until eleven; a sandwich and a Coke or sweet tea for lunch in the shade of the rail depot; back to Mrs. Burkett's; sleep until six. On his days off, he sometimes

slept for twelve hours at a stretch. He read legal thrillers by John Grisham and the entire Song of Ice and Fire series. He was a big fan of Tyrion Lannister. Tim knew there was a TV show based on the Martin books, but felt no need to watch it; his imagination provided all the dragons he needed.

As a cop, he had become familiar with Sarasota's night side, as different from that vacation town's surf-and-sun days as Mr. Hyde was from Dr. Jekyll. The night side was often disgusting and sometimes dangerous, and although he had never sunk to using that odious cop slang for dead addicts and abused prostitutes—NHI, no humans involved—ten years on the force had made him cynical. Sometimes he brought those feelings home (try *often*, he told himself when he was willing to be honest), and they had become part of the acid that had eaten away at his marriage. Those feelings were also, he supposed, one of the reasons he had remained so closed off to the idea of having a kid. There was too much bad stuff out there. Too many things that could go wrong. An alligator on a golf course was the very least of it.

When he took the night knocker job, he would not have believed that a township of fifty-four hundred (much of it in the outlying rural areas) could have a night side, but DuPray did, and Tim discovered he liked it. The people he met on the night side were actually the best part of the job.

There was Mrs. Goolsby, with whom he exchanged waves and quiet hellos on most nights as he started his first tour. She sat out on her porch glider, moving gently back and forth, sipping from a cup that might have

contained whiskey, soda pop, or chamomile tea. Sometimes she was still there on his second return swing. It was Frank Potter, one of the deputies with whom he sometimes ate dinner at Bev's, who told him that Mrs. G. had lost her husband the year before. Wendell Goolsby's big rig had slid off the side of a Wisconsin highway during a blizzard.

"She ain't fifty yet, but Wen n Addie were married a long, long time, just the same," Frank said. "Got hitched back when neither of em was old enough to vote or buy a legal drink. Like that Chuck Berry song, the one about the teenage wedding. That kind of hookup usually doesn't last long, but theirs did."

Tim also made the acquaintance of Orphan Annie, a homeless woman who many nights slept on an air mattress in the alley running between the sheriff's office and the DuPray Mercantile. She also had a little tent in a field behind the rail depot, and when it rained, she slept there.

"Annie Ledoux is her real name," Bill Wicklow said when Tim asked. Bill was the oldest of the DuPray deputies, a part-timer who seemed to know everyone in town. "She's been sleepin back in that alley for years. Prefers it to the tent."

"What does she do when the weather turns cold?" Tim asked.

"Goes up to Yemassee. Ronnie Gibson takes her most times. They're related somehow, third cousins or something. There's a homeless shelter there. Annie says she doesn't use it unless she has to, on account of it's full of crazy people. I tell her look who's talkin, girlfriend."

Tim checked her alley hideaway once a night, and

visited her tent one day after his warehouse shift, mostly out of simple curiosity. Planted in the dirt out front were three flags on bamboo poles: a stars and stripes, a stars and bars, and one Tim didn't recognize.

"That's the flag of Guiana," she said when he asked. "Found it in the trash barrel behind the Zoney's. Pretty, ennit?"

She was sitting in an easy chair covered with clear plastic and knitting a scarf that looked long enough for one of George R. R. Martin's giants. She was friendly enough, exhibiting no sign of what one of Tim's fellow Sarasota officers had named "homeless paranoid syndrome," but she was a fan of late-night talk radio on WMDK, and her conversation sometimes wandered off into strange byroads that had to do with flying saucers, walk-ins, and demonic possession.

One night when he found her reclining on her air mattress in the alley, listening to her little radio, he asked her why she stayed there when she had a tent that looked to be in tip-top condition. Orphan Annie—perhaps sixty, perhaps eighty—looked at him as though he were mad. "Back here I'm close to the po-lice. You know what's behind the depot and them warehouses, Mr. J.?"

"Woods, I guess."

"Woods and bog. Miles of slash and muck and deadfalls that go on all the way to Georgia. There's *critters* out there, and some bad human beings, too. When it's pissing down and I have to stay in my tent, I tell myself nothing's likely to come out in a rainstorm, but I still don't sleep good. I got a knife and I keep it handy, but I don't think it'd be much help against some swamp rat hopped up on crank."

Annie was thin to the point of emaciation, and Tim took to bringing her small treats from Bev's before punching in for his short shift of loading and unloading at the warehouse complex. Sometimes it was a bag of boiled peanuts or Mac's Cracklins, sometimes a moon pie or a cherry tart. Once it was a jar of Wickles that she grabbed and held between her scrawny breasts, laughing with pleasure.

"Wickies! I ain't had a Wicky since Hector was a pup! Why are you so good to me, Mr. J.?"

"I don't know," Tim said. "I guess I just like you, Annie. Can I try one of those?"

She held out the jar. "Sure. You got to open it, anyway, my hands too sore with the arthritis." She held them out, displaying fingers so badly twisted that they looked like pieces of driftwood. "I can still knit n sew, but Lord knows how much longer that'll keep up."

He opened the jar, winced a little at the strong smell of vinegar, and fished out one of the pickle chips. It was dripping with something that could have been formaldehyde, for all he knew.

"Gi'me back, gi'me back!"

He handed her the jar and ate the Wickle. "Jesus, Annie, my mouth may never unpucker."

She laughed, displaying her few remaining teeth. "They best with bread n butter n a nice cold RC. Or a beer, but I don't drink that anymore."

"What's that you're knitting? Is it a scarf?"

"The Lord shall not come in His own raiment," Annie said. "You go on now, Mr. J., and do your duty. Watch out for men in black cars. George Allman on the radio talks about them all the time. You know where

they come from, don't you?" She cocked a knowing glance at him. She might have been joking. Or not. With Orphan Annie it was hard to tell.

Corbett Denton was another denizen of DuPray's night side. He was the town barber, and known locally as Drummer, for some teenage exploit no one seemed exactly clear on, only that it had resulted in a month's suspension from the regional high school. He might have been wild in his salad days, but those were far behind him. Drummer was now in his late fifties or early sixties, overweight, balding, and afflicted with insomnia. When he couldn't sleep, he sat on the stoop of his shop and watched DuPray's empty main drag. Empty, that was, except for Tim. They exchanged the desultory conversational gambits of mere acquaintances—the weather, baseball, the town's annual Summer Sidewalk Sale—but one night Denton said something that put Tim on yellow alert.

"You know, Jamieson, this life we think we're living isn't real. It's just a shadow play, and I for one will be glad when the lights go out on it. In the dark, all the shadows disappear."

Tim sat down on the stoop under the barber pole, its endless spiral now stilled for the night. He took off his glasses, polished them on his shirt, put them back on. "Permission to speak freely?"

Drummer Denton flicked his cigarette into the gutter, where it splashed brief sparks. "Go right ahead. Between midnight and four, everyone should have permission to speak freely. That's my opinion, at least."

"You sound like a man suffering from depression."

Drummer laughed. "Call you Sherlock Holmes."

"You ought to go see Doc Roper. There are pills that will brighten your attitude. My ex takes them. Although getting rid of me probably brightened her attitude more." He smiled to show this was a joke, but Drummer Denton didn't smile back, just got to his feet.

"I know about those pills, Jamieson. They're like booze and pot. Probably like the ecstasy the kids take nowadays when they go to their raves, or whatever they call them. Those things make you believe for a while that all of this is real. That it matters. But it's not and it doesn't."

"Come on," Tim said softly. "That's no way to be."

"In my opinion, it's the only way to be," the barber said, and walked toward the stairs leading to his apartment above the barber shop. His gait was slow and lumbering.

Tim looked after him, disquieted. He thought Drummer Denton was one of those fellows who might decide some rainy night to kill himself. Maybe take his dog with him, if he had one. Like some old Egyptian pharaoh. He considered talking to Sheriff John about it, then thought of Wendy Gullickson, who still hadn't unbent much. The last thing he wanted was for her or any of the other deputies to think he was getting above himself. He was no longer law enforcement, just the town's night knocker. Best to let it go.

But Drummer Denton never quite left his mind.

12

On his rounds one night near the end of June, he spotted two boys walking west down Main Street with knapsacks on their backs and lunchboxes in their

hands. They might have been headed off to school, had it not been two in the morning. These nocturnal promenaders turned out to be the Bilson twins. They were pissed at their parents, who had refused to take them to the Dunning Agricultural Fair because their report cards had been unacceptable.

"We got mostly Cs and din't fail nothing," Robert Bilson said, "and we got promoted. What's so bad about that?"

"It ain't right," Roland Bilson chimed in. "We're going to be at the fair first thing in the morning and get jobs. We heard they always need roundabouts."

Tim thought about telling the boy the correct word was *roustabouts*, then decided that was beside the point. "Kids, I hate to pop your balloon, but you're what? Eleven?"

"Twelve!" they chorused.

"Okay, twelve. Keep your voices down, people are sleeping. No one is going to hire you on at that fair. What they're going to do is slam you in the Dollar Jail on whatever excuse they've got for a midway and keep you there until your parents show up. Until they do, folks are going to come by and gawk at you. Some may throw peanuts or pork rinds."

The Bilson twins stared at him with dismay (and perhaps some relief).

"Here's what you do," Tim said. "You go on back home right now, and I'll walk behind you, just to make sure you don't change your collective mind."

"What's a collective mind?" Robert asked.

"A thing twins are reputed to have, at least according to folklore. Did you use the door or go out a window?"

"Window," Roland said.

"Okay, that's how you go back in. If you're lucky, your folks will never know you were out."

Robert: "You won't tell them?"

"Not unless I see you try it again," Tim said. "Then I'll not only tell them what you did, I'll tell them about how you sassed me when I caught you."

Roland, shocked: "We didn't do no such thing!"

"I'll lie," Tim said. "I'm good at it."

He followed them, and watched as Robert Bilson made a step with his hands to help Roland into the open window. Tim then did Robert the same favor. He waited to see if a light would go on somewhere, signaling imminent discovery of the would-be runaways, and when none did, he resumed his rounds.

13

There were more people out and about on Friday and Saturday nights, at least until midnight or one in the morning. Courting couples, mostly. After that there might be an invasion of what Sheriff John called the road rockets, young men in souped-up cars or trucks who went blasting down DuPray's empty main street at sixty or seventy miles an hour, racing side by side and waking people up with the ornery blat of their glass-pack mufflers. Sometimes a deputy or an SP trooper would run one of them down and write him up (or jail him if he blew .09), but even with four DuPray officers on duty during weekend nights, arrests were relatively rare. Mostly they got away with it.

Tim went to see Orphan Annie. He found her sit-

ting outside her tent, knitting slippers. Arthritis or not, her fingers moved like lightning. He asked if she'd like to make twenty dollars. Annie said a little money always came in handy, but it would depend on what the job was. He told her, and she cackled.

"Happy to do it, Mr. J. If you throw in a couple of bottles of Wickles, that is."

Annie, whose motto seemed to be "go big or go home," made him a banner thirty feet long and seven feet wide. Tim attached it to a steel roller he made himself, welding together pieces of pipe in the shop of Fromie's Small Engine Sales and Service. After explaining to Sheriff John what he wanted to do and receiving permission to give it a try, Tim and Tag Faraday hung the roller on a cable above Main Street's three-way intersection, anchoring the cable to the false fronts of Oberg's Drug on one side and the defunct movie theater on the other.

On Friday and Saturday nights, around the time the bars closed, Tim yanked a cord that unfurled the banner like a window shade. On either side, Annie had drawn an old-fashioned flash camera. The message beneath read **SLOW DOWN, IDIOT! WE ARE PHOTOGRAPHING YOUR LICENSE PLATE!**

They were doing no such thing, of course (although Tim did note down tag numbers when he had time to make them out), but Annie's banner actually seemed to work. It wasn't perfect, but what in life was?

In early July, Sheriff John called Tim into his office. Tim asked if he was in trouble.

"Just the opposite," Sheriff John said. "You're doing a good job. That banner thing sounded crazy to me,

but I have to admit that I was wrong and you were right. It was never the midnight drag races that bothered me, anyway, nor the folks complaining that we were too lazy to put a stop to it. The same people, mind you, who vote down a law enforcement payroll increase year after year. What bothers me are the messes we have to clean up when one of those stampeders hits a tree or a telephone pole. Dead is bad, but the ones who are never the same after one night of stupid hooraw . . . I sometimes think they're worse. But June was okay this year. Better than okay. Maybe it was just an exception to the general rule, but I don't think so. I think it's the banner. You tell Annie she might have saved some lives with that one, and she can sleep in one of the back cells any night she wants once it's cold weather."

"I'll do that," Tim said. "As long as you keep a stock of Wickles, she'll be there plenty."

Sheriff John leaned back. His chair groaned more despairingly than ever. "When I said you were overqualified for the night knocker job, I didn't know the half of it. We're going to miss you when you move on to New York."

"I'm in no hurry," Tim said.

14

The only business in town that stayed open twenty-four hours a day was the Zoney's Go-Mart out by the warehouse complex. In addition to beer, soda, and chips, Zoney's sold an off-brand gasoline called Zoney Juice. Two handsome Somali brothers, Absimil and Gutaale Dobira, alternated on the night shift from midnight

to eight. On a dog-hot night in mid-July, as Tim was chalking and knocking his way up the west end of Main, he heard a bang from the vicinity of Zoney's. It wasn't especially loud, but Tim knew a gunshot when he heard one. It was followed by a yell of either pain or anger, and the sound of breaking glass.

Tim broke into a run, time clock banging against his thigh, hand automatically feeling for the butt of a gun that was no longer there. He saw a car parked at the pumps, and as he approached the convenience store, two young men came charging out, one of them with a handful of something that was probably cash. Tim dropped to one knee, watching as they got into the car and roared away, tires sending up puffs of blue smoke from the oil- and grease-stained tarmac.

He pulled his walkie from his belt. "Station, this is Tim. Who's there, come on back to me."

It was Wendy Gullickson, sounding sleepy and put-out. "What do you want, Tim?"

"There's been a two-eleven at Zoney's. A shot was fired."

That woke her up. "Jesus, a robbery? I'll be right th—"

"No, just listen to me. Two perpetrators, male, white, teens or twenties. Compact car. Might have been a Chevy Cruze, no way to tell the color under those gas station fluorescents, but late model, North Carolina plate, starts WTB-9, couldn't make out the last three digits. Get it out there to whoever's on patrol and the State Police before you do *anything* else!"

"What—"

He clicked off, re-holstered the walkie, and sprinted

for the Zoney's. The glass front of the counter was trashed and the register was open. One of the Dobira brothers lay on his side in a growing pool of blood. He was gasping for breath, each inhale ending in a whistle. Tim knelt beside him. "Gotta turn you on your back, Mr. Dobira."

"Please don't . . . hurts . . ."

Tim was sure it did, but he needed to look at the damage. The bullet had gone in high on the right side of Dobira's blue Zoney's smock, which was now a muddy purple with blood. More was spilling from his mouth, soaking his goatee. When he coughed, he sprayed Tim's face and glasses with fine droplets.

Tim grabbed his walkie again, and was relieved that Gullickson hadn't left her post. "Need an ambulance, Wendy. Fast as they can make it from Dunning. One of the Dobira brothers is down, looks like the bullet clipped his lung."

She acknowledged, then started to ask a question. Tim cut her off again, dropped his walkie on the floor, and pulled off the tee-shirt he was wearing. He pressed it against the hole in Dobira's chest. "Can you hold that for a few seconds, Mr. Dobira?"

"Hard . . . to breathe."

"I'm sure it is. Hold it. It'll help."

Dobira pressed the wadded-up shirt to his chest. Tim didn't think he'd be able to hold it for long, and he couldn't expect an ambulance for at least twenty minutes. Even that would be a miracle.

Gas-n-go convenience stores were heavy on snacks but light on first aid supplies. There was Vaseline, however. Tim grabbed a jar, and from the next aisle a

box of Huggies. He tore it open as he ran back to the man on the floor. He removed the tee-shirt, now sodden with blood, gently pulled up the equally sodden blue smock, and began to unbutton the shirt Dobira wore beneath.

"No, no, no," Dobira moaned. "Hurts, you don't touch, please."

"Got to." Tim heard an engine approaching. Blue jackpot lights started to spark and dance in the shards of broken glass. He didn't look around. "Hang on, Mr. Dobira."

He hooked a glob of Vaseline out of the jar and packed it into the wound. Dobira cried out in pain, then looked at Tim with wide eyes. "Can breathe . . . a little better."

"This is just a temporary patch, but if your breathing's better, your lung probably didn't collapse." At least not entirely, Tim thought.

Sheriff John came in and took a knee next to Tim. He was wearing a pajama top the size of a mainsail over his uniform pants, and his hair was every whichway.

"You got here quick," Tim said.

"I was up. Couldn't sleep, so I was making myself a sandwich when Wendy called. Sir, are you Gutaale or Absimil?"

"Absimil, sir." He was still wheezing, but his voice was stronger. Tim took one of the disposable diapers, still folded up, and pressed it against the wound. "Oh, that is painful."

"Was it a through-and-through, or is it still in there?" Sheriff John asked.

"I don't know, and I don't want to turn him over

again to find out. He's relatively stable, so we gotta just wait for the ambulance."

Tim's walkie crackled. Sheriff John plucked it gingerly from the litter of broken glass. It was Wendy. "Tim? Bill Wicklow spotted those guys out on Deep Meadow Road and lit them up."

"It's John, Wendy. Tell Bill to show caution. They're armed."

"They're down, is what they are." She might have been sleepy before, but Wendy was wide awake now, and sounding satisfied. "They tried to run and ditched their car. One's got a broken arm, the other one's cuffed to the bull bars on Bill's ride. State Police are en route. Tell Tim he was right about it being a Cruze. How's Dobira?"

"He'll be fine," Sheriff John said. Tim wasn't entirely sure of that, but he understood that the sheriff had been talking to the wounded man as well as Deputy Gullickson.

"I gave them the money from the register," Dobira said. "It is what we are told to do." He sounded ashamed, even so. *Deeply* ashamed.

"That was the right thing," Tim said.

"The one with the gun shot me, anyway. Then the other one broke in the counter. To take . . ." More coughing.

"Hush, now," Sheriff John said.

"To take the lottery tickets," Absimil Dobira said. "The ones you scratch off. We must have them back. Until bought, they are the property of . . ." He coughed weakly. "Of the state of South Carolina."

Sheriff John said, "Be quiet, Mr. Dobira. Stop

worrying about those damn scratchers and save your strength."

Mr. Dobira closed his eyes.

15

The next day, while Tim was eating his lunch on the porch of the rail depot, Sheriff John pulled up in his personal vehicle. He mounted the steps and looked at the sagging seat of the other available chair. "Think that'll hold me?"

"Only one way to find out," Tim said.

Sheriff John sat down gingerly. "Hospital says Dobira's going to be okay. His brother's with him—Gutaale—and he says he's seen those two dirtbags before. Couple of times."

"Dey wuz casin da joint," Tim said.

"No doubt. I sent Tag Faraday over to take both brothers' statements. Tag's the best I've got, which I probably didn't need to tell you."

"Gibson and Burkett aren't bad."

Sheriff John sighed. "No, but neither of them would have moved as fast or as decisively as you did last night. And poor Wendy probably just would have stood there gawking, if she didn't faint dead away."

"She's good on dispatch," Tim said. "Made for the job. Just my opinion, you know."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh, and a whiz at clerical—reorganized all our files last year, plus got everything on flash drives—but on the road, she's damn near useless. She loves being on the team, though. How would *you* like to be on the team, Tim?"

"I didn't think you could afford another cop's salary. Did you all at once get a payroll increase?"

"Don't I wish. But Bill Wicklow's turning in his badge at the end of the year. I was thinking maybe you and him could swap jobs. He walks and knocks, you put on a uniform and get to carry a gun again. I asked Bill. He says night knocking would suit him, at least for a while."

"Can I think about it?"

"I don't know why not." Sheriff John stood up. "End of the year's still five months away. But we'd be glad to have you."

"Does that include Deputy Gullickson?"

Sheriff John grinned. "Wendy's hard to win over, but you got a long way down that road last night."

"Really? And if I asked her out to dinner, what do you think she'd say?"

"I think she'd say yes, as long as it wasn't Bev's you were thinking of taking her to. Good-looking girl like her is going to expect the Roundup in Dunning, at the very least. Maybe that Mexican joint down in Hardeeville."

"Thanks for the tip."

"Not a problem. You think about that job."

"I will."

He did. And was still thinking of it when all hell broke loose on a hot night later that summer.

THE SMART KID

1

On a fine Minneapolis morning in April of that year—Tim Jamieson still months from his arrival in DuPray—Herbert and Eileen Ellis were being ushered into the office of Jim Greer, one of three guidance counselors at the Broderick School for Exceptional Children.

"Luke's not in trouble, is he?" Eileen asked when they were seated. "If he is, he hasn't said anything."

"Not at all," Greer said. He was in his thirties, with thinning brown hair and a studious face. He was wearing a sport shirt open at the collar and pressed jeans. "Look, you know how things work here, right? How things have to work, given the mental capacity of our students. They are graded but not *in* grades. They can't be. We have ten-year-olds with mild autism who are doing high school math but still reading at a third-grade level. We have kids who are fluent in as many as four languages but have trouble multiplying fractions. We teach them in all subjects, and we board ninety per cent of them—we have to, they come from all parts of the United States and a dozen or so from abroad—but we center our attention on their special talents, whatever those happen to be. That makes the tradi-

tional system, where kids advance from kindergarten to twelfth grade, pretty useless to us."

"We understand that," Herb said, "and we know Luke's a smart kid. That's why he's here." What he didn't add (certainly Greer knew it) was that they never could have afforded the school's astronomical fees. Herb was the foreman in a plant that made boxes; Eileen was a grammar school teacher. Luke was one of the Brod's few day students, and one of the school's *very* few scholarship students.

"Smart? Not exactly."

Greer looked down at an open folder on his otherwise pristine desk, and Eileen had a sudden premonition: either they were going to be asked to withdraw their son, or his scholarship was going to be canceled—which would make withdrawal a necessity. Yearly tuition fees at the Brod were forty thousand dollars a year, give or take, roughly the same as Harvard. Greer was going to tell them it had all been a mistake, that Luke wasn't as bright as they had all believed. He was just an ordinary kid who read far above his level and seemed to remember it all. Eileen knew from her own reading that eidetic memory was not exactly uncommon in young children; somewhere between ten and fifteen per cent of all normal kids possessed the ability to remember almost everything. The catch was that the talent usually disappeared when children became adolescents, and Luke was nearing that point.

Greer smiled. "Let me give it to you straight. We pride ourselves on teaching exceptional children, but we've never had a student at the Broderick quite like

Luke. One of our emeritus teachers—Mr. Flint, now in his eighties—took it on himself to give Luke a tutorial on the history of the Balkans, a complicated subject, but one that casts great light on the current geopolitical situation. So Flint says, anyway. After the first week, he came to me and said that his experience with your son must have been like the experience of the Jewish elders, when Jesus not only taught them but rebuked them, saying it wasn't what went into their mouths that made them unclean, but what came out of them."

"I'm lost," Herb said.

"So was Billy Flint. That's my point."

Greer leaned forward.

"Understand me now. Luke absorbed two semesters' worth of extremely difficult postgraduate work in a single week, and drew many of the conclusions Flint had intended to make once the proper historical groundwork had been laid. On some of those conclusions Luke argued, and very convincingly, that they were 'received wisdom rather than original thought.' Although, Flint added, he did so very politely. Almost apologetically."

"I'm not sure how to respond to that," Herb said. "Luke doesn't talk much about his school work, because he says we wouldn't understand."

"Which is pretty much true," Eileen said. "I might have known something about the binomial theorem once, but that was a long time ago."

Herb said, "When Luke comes home, he's like any other kid. Once his homework's done, and his chores, he boots up the Xbox or shoots hoops in the drive-

way with his friend Rolf. He still watches *SpongeBob SquarePants*." He considered, then added, "Although usually with a book in his lap."

Yes, Eileen thought. Just lately, *Principles of Sociology*. Before that, William James. Before that, the AA Big Book, and before that, the complete works of Cormac McCarthy. He read the way free-range cows graze, moving to wherever the grass is greenest. That was a thing her husband chose to ignore, because the strangeness of it frightened him. It frightened her as well, which was probably one reason why she knew nothing of Luke's tutorial on Balkan history. He hadn't told her because she hadn't asked.

"We have prodigies here," Greer said. "In fact, I'd rate well over fifty per cent of the Brod's student body as prodigies. But they are limited. Luke is different, because Luke is *global*. It isn't one thing; it's everything. I don't think he'll ever play professional baseball or basketball—"

"If he takes after my side of the family, he'll be too short for pro basketball." Herb was smiling. "Unless he's the next Spud Webb, that is."

"Hush," Eileen said.

"But he plays with enthusiasm," Greer continued. "He enjoys it, doesn't consider it wasted time. He's no klutz on the athletic field. He gets along fine with his mates. He's not introverted or emotionally dysfunctional in any way. Luke is your basic moderately cool American kid wearing rock band tees and his cap around backward. He might not be that cool in an ordinary school—the daily trudge might drive him crazy—but I think even there he'd be okay; he'd just

pursue his studies on his own." He added hastily: "Not that you'd want to road-test that."

"No, we're happy with him here," Eileen said. "Very. And we know he's a good kid. We love him like crazy."

"And he loves you. I've had several conversations with Luke, and he makes that crystal clear. To find a child this brilliant is extremely rare. To find one who's also well-adjusted and well-grounded—who sees the outward world as well as the one inside his own head—is even rarer."

"If nothing's wrong, why are we here?" Herb asked. "Not that I mind hearing you sing my kid's praises, don't get that idea. And by the way, I can still beat his ass at HORSE, although he's got a decent hook shot."

Greer leaned back in his chair. The smile disappeared. "You're here because we're reaching the end of what we can do for Luke, and he knows it. He's expressed an interest in doing rather unique college work. He would like to major in engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, and in English at Emerson, across the river in Boston."

"What?" Eileen asked. "At the *same time*?"

"Yes."

"What about the SATs?" It was all Eileen could think of to say.

"He'll take them next month, in May. At North Community High. And he'll knock the roof off those tests."

I'll have to pack him a lunch, she thought. She had heard the cafeteria food at North Comm was awful.

After a moment of stunned silence, Herb said, "Mr. Greer, our boy is *twelve*. In fact, he just turned twelve

last month. He may have the inside dope on Serbia, but he won't even be able to raise a mustache for another three years. You . . . this . . ."

"I understand how you feel, and we wouldn't be having this conversation if my colleagues in guidance and the rest of the faculty didn't believe he was academically, socially, and emotionally capable of doing the work. And yes, at *both* campuses."

Eileen said, "I'm not sending a twelve-year-old halfway across the country to live among college kids old enough to drink and go to the clubs. If he had relatives he could stay with, that might be different, but . . ."

Greer was nodding along with her. "I understand, couldn't agree more, and Luke knows he's not ready to be on his own, even in a supervised environment. He's very clear-headed about that. Yet he's becoming frustrated and unhappy with his current situation, because he's hungry to learn. Famished, in fact. I don't know what fabulous gadgetry is in his head—none of us do, probably old Flint came closest when he talked about Jesus teaching the elders—but when I try to visualize it, I think of a huge, gleaming machine that's running at only two per cent of its capacity. Five per cent at the very most. But because this is a *human* machine, he feels . . . hungry."

"Frustrated and unhappy?" Herb said. "Huh. We don't see that side of him."

I do, Eileen thought. Not all the time, but sometimes. Yes. That's when the plates rattle or the doors shut by themselves.

She thought of Greer's huge, gleaming machine, something big enough to fill three or even four buildings the size of warehouses, and working at doing what,

exactly? No more than making paper cups or stamping out aluminum fast food trays. They owed him more, but did they owe him this?

"What about the University of Minnesota?" she asked. "Or Concordia, in St. Paul? If he went to one of those places, he could live at home."

Greer sighed. "You might as well consider taking him out of the Brod and putting him in an ordinary high school. We're talking about a boy for whom the IQ scale is useless. He knows where he wants to go. He knows what he needs."

"I don't know what we can do about it," Eileen said. "He might be able to get scholarships to those places, but we *work* here. And we're far from rich."

"Well now, let's talk about that," Greer said.

2

When Herb and Eileen returned to the school that afternoon, Luke was jiving around in front of the pick-up lane with four other kids, two boys and two girls. They were laughing and talking animatedly. To Eileen they looked like kids anywhere, the girls in skirts and leggings, their bosoms just beginning to bloom, Luke and his friend Rolf in baggy cords—this year's fashion statement for young men—and tee-tops. Rolf's read BEER IS FOR BEGINNERS. He had his cello in its quilted case and appeared to be pole-dancing around it as he held forth on something that might have been the spring dance or the Pythagorean theorem.

Luke saw his parents, paused long enough to dap Rolf, then grabbed his backpack and dove into the back-

seat of Eileen's 4Runner. "Both Ps," he said. "Excellent. To what do I owe this extraordinary honor?"

"Do you really want to go to school in Boston?" Herb asked.

Luke was not discomposed; he laughed and punched both fists in the air. "Yes! Can I?"

Like asking if he can spend Friday night at Rolf's house, Eileen marveled. She thought of how Greer had expressed what their son had. He'd called it *global*, and that was the perfect word. Luke was a genius who had somehow not been distorted by his own outsized intellect; he had absolutely no compunctions about mounting his skateboard and riding his one-in-a-billion brain down a steep sidewalk, hellbent for election.

"Let's get some early supper and talk about it," she said.

"Rocket Pizza!" Luke exclaimed. "How about it? Assuming you took your Prilosec, Dad. Did you?"

"Oh, believe me, after today's meeting, I'm totally current on that."

3

They got a large pepperoni and Luke demolished half all by himself, along with three glasses of Coke from the jumbo pitcher, leaving his parents to marvel at the kid's digestive tract and bladder as well as his mind. Luke explained that he had talked to Mr. Greer first because "I didn't want to freak you guys out. It was your basic exploratory conversation."

"Putting it out to see if the cat would take it," Herb said.