

By Stephen King and published by Hodder & Stoughton

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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?'

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'Not at all.'

'Got to warn you, I play it loud. I'm a little on the deaf 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 break-down 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 introducing 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 isn'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 awhile, 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 longsuffering 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 ginmills 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.