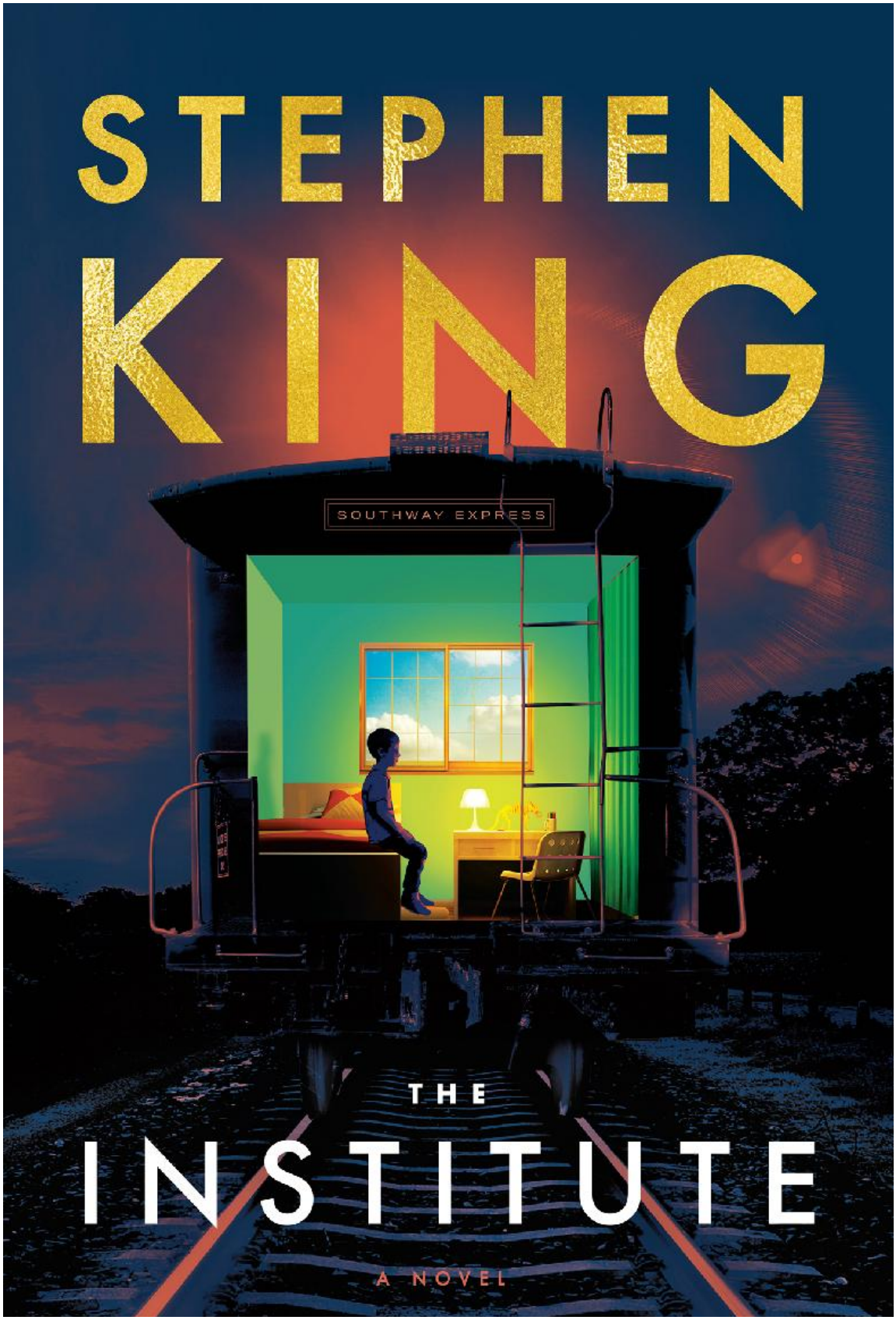
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For my grandsons: Ethan, Aidan, and

Ryan

And Samson cal ed 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 pil ars 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

al his might; and the house fel upon the lords, and upon al 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 shal o end one of these little ones . . . it were better for him that a

mil stone 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 NIGHT KNOCKER

1

Half an hour after Tim Jamieson's Delta ight was scheduled to leave Tampa for

the bright lights and tal buildings of New York, it was stil 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 cal ed.

"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 al that your ight wil arrive approximately on time. We have a federal o cer who needs to board, however, so we'l need someone to give up his or her seat."

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

"Delta Air Lines is authorized to o er a free ticket to New York on the next outbound ight, which wil be tomorrow morning at 6:45 AM—"

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

The functionary continued, undeterred. "You'l be given a hotel voucher for tonight, plus four hundred dol ars. 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 al -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 stil no takers.

“Fourteen hundred?”

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

Someone far in the back cal ed, “Throw in a Mustang convertible and a trip to Aruba for two, and you can have both our seats!” This sal y 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 o 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 bil board advertising some slip-and-fal 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 eventual y 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 smel s of

perfume, sweat, and hair spray.

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

He stood up to his perfectly normal height (ve-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 fel 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 bu et. 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 windfal 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 fties and twenties, folded it into his left front pocket, reclaimed his du el bag from the bank’s security guard, and cal ed an Uber to take him to El enton.

There he paid the driver, strol ed 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.

“Wel ,” Tim said, “New York, eventual y. 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’l like that better.”

“Now you’re talking,” the old guy said. “Georgia ain’t bad, special y if you

like peaches. They gi’ me the backdoor trots. You don’t mind some music, do

you?”

“Not at al .”

“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 fol owed by Shooter Jennings and Marty Stuart. The two men

in the mud-streaked Dodge Ram listened and watched the highway rol . Seventy

miles up the line, the old guy pul ed 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 sel ing orange juice—but he got there the fol owing 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 ight

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 al ey 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 windfal , Tim was

standing on the Brunswick ramp of I-95 North and feeling pretty wel -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 pul ed over. The back was l ed 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 wel -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 du el 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 xed on Tim.

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

“I’l take you to South Carolina—not far into that benighted state, but a little way—if you’l 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 wil be no scratching of any kind, but you may get in.”

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

Sixty- ve miles north, stil in Georgia, she stopped at a pokey little library in the town of Pooler. Tim unloaded the cartons of books and dol ied them inside.

He dol ied another dozen or so cartons out to the Volvo. These, Marjorie Kel erman 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 Hardeevil e, their progress came to a stop. Cars and trucks were stacked up in both lanes, and more quickly l ed 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’l 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 Hardeevil e exit, and try your luck

on Highway 17.”

“What about al those cartons of books?”

“Oh, I’l nd another strong back to help me unload,” she said, and smiled at

him. “To tel you the truth, I saw you standing there in the hot sun and just

decided to live a little dangerously.”

“Wel , if you’re sure.” The tra c clog was making him feel claustrophobic.

The way he’d felt stuck halfway back in economy class of the Delta ight, in fact.

“If you’re not, I’l 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. Kel erman.”

“Do you need monetary assistance? I can spare ten dol ars, if you do.”

He was touched and surprised—not for the rst time—by the ordinary

kindness and generosity of ordinary folks, especial y those without much to spare. America was stil a good place, no matter how much some (including himself, from time to time) might disagree. “No, I’m ne. Thank you for the o er.”

He shook her hand, got out, and walked back along the I-95 breakdown lane to the Hardeevil e exit. When a ride was not immediately forthcoming on US 17,

he strol ed 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 nd 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 smal 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, atcars, and gondolas loaded with

God knew what evil substances that might, in the event of a derailment, catch

the piney woods a re or a ict the DuPray populace with noxious or even fatal

fumes. At last came an orange caboose where a man in bib overal s 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 cal ed 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 sel 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 cal ed Bev's Eatery. There were three

churches, one Methodist, two o -brand, al 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. Al in al , it looked to Tim like

a town out of a country bal ad, 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 O ce, 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 Sheri '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 anking 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 dwel ed for a moment on the du el 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 smel s of bleach and ammonia cakes wafted into the o ce from the four-cel 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 identi cation. 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 al . 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. Sheri Ashworth hires and res.”

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 smal out t here, Mr. Jamieson,

crew of seven and two of them part-time. Al the taxpayers can a ord. Sheri

John's currently out on patrol. If he's not in by ve, ve-thirty at the latest, he's

gone home to supper and won't be in until tomorrow."

"I'l 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'l discuss with your chief, assuming he grants me an

interview."

The two o cers 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'l get along ne." 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 rol o down DuPray's

short main street.

The form was on a clipboard. Tim sat down in one of the three chairs against

the lefthand wal , placed his du el between his feet, and began l ing it out.

Night knocker, he thought. I wil be goddamned.

6

Sheri Ashworth—Sheri John to most of the townsfolk as wel as to his

deputies, Tim discovered—was a big-bel ied 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 certi cate of graduation from the FBI's National

Academy in Quantico hung on the wal next to the o cial portrait of President

Trump. That was not the sort of thing you got by mailing in cereal boxtops.

"Al right, then," Sheri John said, rocking back in his o ce chair. "I haven't

got long. Marcel a 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 West eld Mal and whatever

might happen next. Al that aside, honesty was the best policy, if only because

lies—especial y in an age when almost al information was available to anyone

with a keyboard and a Wi-Fi connection—usual y 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 al 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

ful 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 stil hot."

"This won't take long. At the end of my shift one day last November, I

swung into the West eld Mal to buy a pair of shoes. Had to go to a wedding. I

was stil 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 pel et 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."

Sheri John Ashworth seemed to have forgotten about dinner. "Because your

subject was pointing it at the kid he had on the oor. 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 yel ed 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 di erence, these kids were white."

"Not to me, it doesn't. Kids were ghting. One was down and getting hurt.

The other had what might or might not have been a real gun. So did you shoot

him? Tel me it didn't come to that."

"No one got shot. But . . . you know how people wil gather around to watch

a st ght, but tend to scatter once a weapon comes out?"

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

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

"The ones lming it with their phones."

Tim nodded. "Four or ve wannabe Spielbergs. Anyway, I pointed my gun at

the ceiling and red 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 mal . The bul et 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 oor, 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 oor 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'l go on for awhile, but he'l end up getting something."

Sheri John considered. "If he hung around to lm the altercation, he may

not get al 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. Sheri 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 stil 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 o cers who took the kid into custody smel ed

it on my breath and gave me the test. I blew oh-six, under the legal limit but not

good considering I had just red 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 sheri stuck up a fat

index nger. "You were o duty, which means if you'd been out of uniform, that

woman never would have run up to you in the rst place."

"Probably not, but I would have heard the commotion and gone to the scene

anyway. A cop is never real y o 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 nger 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 nger 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 cal an asshole lming with a cel phone an innocent bystander."

Tim nodded.

Up popped the sheri '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 cal it . . . *optic*, but I'd stil

have to say you had one insane run of bad luck." Sheri John drummed his

ngers on the edge of his desk. The ruby pinkie ring punctuated each rol with a

smal click. "I think your story is too outrageous not to be true, but I believe I'l

cal 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 sheri 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 nd out."

“Don’t believe I wil . Don’t believe I need to.” He leaned back; his o ce chair

uttered another longsu ering squal . “Why would you want the job of night

knocker in a pissant little burg like this? It only pays a hundred dol ars 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 ginmil s 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, mental y speaking, at least, in sort of

a hard place.

“Fol owing in your grandpop’s footsteps, uh-huh.” Sheri John clasped his

hands over his considerable bel y 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 real y 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.”

Sheri John looked down at Tim’s application. “It says here you’re forty-two.

In most cases—probably not al —if you’re not ready by then . . .”

He trailed o , waiting in best cop fashion for Tim to l the silence. Tim

didn’t.

“You may be headed to New York eventual y, 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’l stick around. Always assuming you feel like I’m doing the job, that is. If

you decide I’m not, you’l can me. If I should decide to move on, I’l give you

plenty of notice. That’s a promise.”

“Job’s not enough to live on.”

Tim shrugged. “I’l nd something else if I need to. You want to tel 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.”

Sheri 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’l see what we’re gonna do about this.

Around ten would be about right."

Which wil 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. Sheri John's grip was a good strong one. "Where wil you be staying tonight, Mr. Jamieson?"

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

"Oh, Norbert'l have plenty of vacant rooms," the sheri said, "and I doubt if he'l try to sel you any of the herb. You've stil 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 al . Interesting conversation. And when you check in at the DuPray, tel Norbert Sheri John said to give you one of the good rooms."

"I'l do that."

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

Tim smiled. "I already got that advice."

Dinner at Bev's Eatery was chicken-fried steak, green beans, and peach cobbler

to fol ow. Not bad. The room he was assigned at the DuPray Motel was a

di erent 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 o much. The rusty shower head dripped, and there seemed to be no

way to stop it. (He nal y put a towel under it to mu e 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 fel 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,

rol ing 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 ne establishment. He was rail thin. A paisley vest hung o 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 tel ,” 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 ngers to demonstrate. “The one line goes to Atlanta,

Birmin’am, Huntsvil e, places like ’at. T’other comes up from Jacksonvil e and

goes on to Charleston, Wilmington, Newport News, places like ’at. It’s the day

freights that mostly stop. Y’al thinkin about warehouse work? They usual y a

man or two short over there. Got to have a strong back, though. Not for me.”

Tim looked at him. Norbert shu ed 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 eventual y 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 eventual y be shipped on to Atlanta or

Marietta? To store boxes of computer supplies shipped from Atlanta so they

could eventual y be loaded up again and shipped to Wilmington or Norfolk or

Jacksonvil e? 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 imsy 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 hel you cal ed a ship like that. Where were

they going? Were they pirates? They looked like pirates to him. Whatever they

were, it would eventual y come to loading and unloading at the next port of cal .

Maybe everything did. And everyone. Not long ago he had unloaded himself

from a Delta ight 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 fel 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 wal .

Damn thing gave him the wil ies.

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 Sheri 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 O cer 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."

"Tel me about the al igator. 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."

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

eleven, twelve, something like that, and yel ing his head o . The gator was down

below."

"Sounds like Little Black Sambo," Sheri John said. "Only as I recol ect,

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 ve-

footer. Six at most. I borrowed a ve-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 o . Golf humor,

you know."

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

"Wel ," Tim said, "I always showed up on time, never cal ed in sick, and they

had to give it to somebody."

There was silence for several moments on the other end of the line. Then

Sheri John said, “I don’t know if you cal 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 ction movie. It was going to be another hot day, he judged. He

judged something else, as wel . He could have this job or lose it right here and

now. It al depended on what he said next. The question was, did he real y want

it, or had it just been a whim born of a family story about Grandpa Tom?

“Mr. Jamieson? Are you stil there?”

“I earned that award. There were other cops it could have gone to, I worked

with some ne o cers, 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 du el. I’l show you, if you

want.”

“I do,” Sheri John said, “but not because I don’t believe you. I’d just like to

see it. You’re ridiculously overquali ed for the job of night knocker, but if you

real y want it, you start at eleven tonight. Eleven to six, that’s the deal.”

“I want it,” Tim said.

“Al 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. O cer Gul ickson wil 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.”

“Al right. And thank you.”

“Let’s see how thankful you are after your rst weekend. One more thing.

You are not a sheri ’s deputy, and you are not authorized to carry a rearm. 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 nd out you’re packing a gun, you’l 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 Gul ickson, one of the Sheri ’s Department part-timers, was ten years younger than Ronnie Gibson and a knockout, even with her blond hair pul ed 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 ful y powered. He wondered brie y 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 Gul ickson 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 actual y sort of cool. Retro.”

She didn’t smile. “You punch your clock at Fromie’s Smal 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.”

Stil no smile. “Ronnie Gibson and I wil work out a schedule. You’l have two nights a week o , 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 Gul ickson? If you do, speak up now or hold your peace.”

Her complexion was Nordic fair, and there was no hiding the ush 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 wil tel . We’re a good crew. Smal but

good. We al pul together. You’re just some guy who walked in o the street and

landed a job. People in town joke about the night knocker, and Ed was a real

good sport about al the ribbing, but it’s important, especial y in a town with a

policing force as smal 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, O cer Gul ickson. 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. Al 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 basical y 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 smal er 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 smal er ones, he shook doorknobs

and doorhandles, peered through the glass, and gave the traditional triple knock.

Occasional y this brought a response—a wave or a few words—but mostly it

didn't, which was ne. He made a chalk mark and moved on. He fol owed 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 al 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 smal 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 re. They used to argue about it something awful."

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

O cer Burkett—mid-twenties, goodhearted and cheerful, not overburdened

with native intel igence—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 real y 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 al 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 Hol ister, the rat-faced motel owner, had been right about DuPray

Storage & Warehousing; they were chronical y short-sta ed and always hiring.

Tim guessed that in places where the work was manual labor recompensed by

the smal est per-hour wage al owed 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 wil ing 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 nished 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 fel into a soothing

routine. He had no intention of staying in DuPray for the rest of his life, but he

could see himself stil hanging around at Christmas (perhaps putting up a tiny

arti cial 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 o , he sometimes slept for twelve

hours at a stretch. He read legal thril ers 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 al the dragons he needed.

As a cop, he had become familiar with Sarasota's night side, as di erent from

that vacation town's surf-and-sun days as Mr. Hyde was from Dr. Jekyl . 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 wil ing 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 o to the idea of having a kid. There was too

much bad stu out there. Too many things that could go wrong. An al igator 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 fty-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 actual y the best part of the job.

There was Mrs. Goolsby, with whom he exchanged waves and quiet hel os on

most nights as he started his rst 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 stil 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.

Wendel Goolsby's big rig had slid o the side of a Wisconsin highway during a

blizzard.

"She ain't fty 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 hook-up usual y 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 al ey running between the sheri ’s

o ce and the DuPray Mercantile. She also had a little tent in a eld behind the

rail depot, and when it rained, she slept there.

“Annie Ledoux is her real name,” Bil Wicklow said when Tim asked. Bil was

the oldest of the DuPray deputies, a part-timer who seemed to know everyone in

town. “She’s been sleepin back in that al ey 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 ful of crazy people. I

tel her look who’s talkin, girlfriend.”

Tim checked her al ey 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 ags on bamboo poles: a stars and stripes, a stars and bars, and

one Tim didn’t recognize.

“That’s the ag of Guiana,” she said when he asked. “Found it in the trash