

## NIGHT SOLDIER

Jim Wisneski

It was a large thump that made George Pederson wake from his cat nap. He quickly grabbed the arms of his chair and pushed his aged body up. The noise sounded like a boulder hit the side of the cottage. He could hear the sound of car tires kicking stones out of the way. Shaking his head, he realized it was his wife, Wilma, leaving to go grocery shopping. It was their normal Sunday routine; she went shopping, he napped on the porch. Pushing seventy years old, George stretched his back and took a deep breath to calm himself.

Refreshed, George slowly sat back down to continue his nap. He felt something underneath him. Standing back up, he turned and saw a black hat. This wasn't just any hat; it was a hat that brought back the most horrific memory of George's life. Touching the soft rim, which resembled a mix between a cowboy and top hat, George remembered back thirty years, when he was in the army. There was one soldier who just didn't fit in. He always seemed to be thinking, plotting something. Nobody could ever figure it out, or at least not until the night of October 23. After everyone was asleep, George awakened with a bad feeling. Contemplating calling Wilma to make sure she was all right with the children, George heard hell come alive. The mysterious soldier had gotten his hands on high powered rifles, machine guns, grenades, and many other heavy duty weapons, and in a one-man mutiny against the world, the soldier attacked. By the time the smoke cleared, over a dozen soldiers were dead, and George ended up having the horrifying task of killing the crazed soldier. As the soldier was being rolled away, George swore he saw the dead man come back to life for a brief moment to proclaim he would find George someday when he least expected it.

Shaking, George didn't understand why the soldier had waited thirty years. He stared

forward for a second, trying to remember the soldier's name.

"David Walker," George said aloud.

"Beautiful day isn't it?" a voice said from behind George.

Listening to sound of footsteps coming up the porch, George closed his eyes and started to pray he was only dreaming. When George opened his eyes and turned around, there was David Walker, wearing a long black trench coat with the black hat on his head.

"Thanks for my hat back," David said in a calm voice as he took a seat in the chair next to George's. George looked down from his chair and saw that the hat was gone. Frightened and confused, George sat down; avoiding looking at what must be the ghost of David Walker.

Extending a pack of Marlboros, David offered one to George.

"I don't smoke," George said in a shaky voice.

"Suit yourself," David said as he placed a cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

George could not believe this was happening. He'd experienced countless nightmares involving David Walker over the years, with David telling George his was coming once his punishment was up. But this? Now? George imagined a ghost like ones on television; floating across the ground, moaning, and transparent. David looked completely real.

"Thirty years, George, that's how long I've been waiting. Stuck between heaven and hell. Just waiting."

Looking at his watch, George realized it was October 23. It has been . . .

"Thirty years to the day," David said, finishing George's thought. "You see, George, I was sent to that Army to wait for that night. I was supposed to clear everyone out. That would have given me my soul back. That was the deal."

David paused for a moment to take a deep puff of his cigarette. Ghost or not, George could smell the tang odor from the smoke.

“You ruined it for me, George. You stepped in. And you killed me. I was, in that second, cursed. Cursed to walk the earth as a faceless soul; I couldn’t talk to anyone, nor could anyone speak to me. Not until my punishment was up. Thirty years, George. Thirty years.”

George knew he couldn’t be dreaming. This was too real. He could smell the mix of dead leaves and mud from the showers that had passed through earlier that morning. He could hear the rustling of leaves as the wind blew by. Was David Walker back from the dead?

“Now, down to business, George.” David threw his cigarette into the yard and placed his hand inside his pocket. Slowly, he slid out a gun. “Remember this?”

George felt small beads of sweat creep out of his pores from his forehead as he stared at the gun. It was the gun that he had used to kill David Walker. The gun, last time George checked, was locked away in a secret chest in the basement.

“It only seems fair that I kill you the way you killed me,” David said. He cocked the gun and slowly pointed it at George.

George could almost see David pulling the trigger; as if it were in slow motion. In a snap decision, George jumped out his chair and ran down the steps on his left. The sound of the gunshot and wood splintering echoed. George didn’t have much speed, which meant he didn’t have time. Halfway down the side of the cottage was another entrance into the kitchen. He quickly got inside and locked the door. Breathing heavily, George debated his next move. Calling the police would be useless since David Walker had been dead for thirty years. Before getting to his next idea, George heard the faint sound of someone chuckling. George turned around to find David Walker sitting at the kitchen table.

“Almost made it, George, didn’t ya?” David asked.

“How did you get in here so fast?” George imagined a ghost from a movie just floating through walls with ease.

“The front door was open,” David said laughing while taking off his hat. He placed it on the table along with the gun. “This isn’t over yet, George. You will die today.”

George didn’t waste much time getting out of the kitchen. He darted toward the living room and slammed the door shut. Pressing his ear against the door, George listened. It was eerily quiet. He slowly pushed the door open and looked into the kitchen. Again, everything was still. David was gone. Then, the screen door slammed, which caused George to jump. He could see the silhouette of the hat moving away from the house. George noticed that David had left the gun on the kitchen table. Quickly, he grabbed it and moved towards the kitchen door. Looking through the small set of curtains, George watched for a few moments to see if David was coming back. He heard the swoosh of the door leading into the living room behind him. He quickly turned and shot. The bullet ripped through the door, but nobody was there.

George turned around and saw the shadow of David’s hat again. It was coming back. Raising the gun, George closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. The ringing of the gunshot filled the house for a brief moment. Dropping the gun, George opened the door only to find Wilma.

“Wilma?” he asked aloud. Then he saw her. “No,” he said, the word coming like a moan.

A bag of groceries lay next to her lifeless body. Her arms were sprawled out, and a small pool of blood began to form behind of what was left of her head.

“No.” George then heard the sound of footsteps behind him. Turning around, he was face to face with David Walker.

“Night solider,” David said as he pulled the trigger.

This time George didn't hear a noise. He just fell. He could feel the hot pain ripping through his chest as the bullet began to cease his life. That didn't matter. George lay staring at Wilma. He heard the sound of glass crunching and saw David Walker slowly walk away. A soft breeze picked up the back of his jacket and he just disappeared, like a leaf floating with the wind. George took a breath in, but nothing came out.

An autopsy report showed that George suffered a massive heart attack and died on the kitchen floor. Wilma sold the cottage and everything inside it except one item: George's favorite black hat, which was neatly placed on the table next to George's body the day George died.