

THE WATCHMAN

The Watchman

A Story

H U M B E R T O B O C A N E G R A

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IF you are fortunate enough to live a good long life, there is a good chance you will meet lots and lots of people who will pass through your life and leave some memorable imprint that will stay with you for as long as you live. Some imprints will be minor such as a teacher you had in 5th, 6th, or 7th grade and others will be major imprints forever etched deep within your psyche. Some of these most memorable characters will be people whom you will have known all your life. And then there are those whom you meet so briefly and yet make such an indelible footprint in your soul that you can't help but wonder whether you will ever see them again either in this life or the afterlife. Such is my memory of the watchman. It was he who left me with one of my life's most cherished memories.

I am an elderly man now and yet I recall my meeting with the watchman fondly and very vividly almost as if our meeting happened yesterday. And it all came about simply because I decided to attend an art convention that was held near my old hometown in Glenville, Ohio way back when I was an adventurous 20-year-old.

The town of Glenville was in its death throes as I left my teenage years behind. Most folks had begun an exodus from Glenville years before and had begun to move to Cleveland and/or Cincinnati in search of better work and better pay. My dad owned an auto repair shop that did okay for a little business in a little town. Even though he made enough money to pay the bills and put enough food on the table, my father wanted something bigger and better for me. Besides the fact that Glenville was shrinking, I guess he could see that mechanical work just didn't interest me and perhaps he thought that my future lay elsewhere. He was right on both counts.

It was 1950 and I was looking through some newspaper ads just killing time at my father's auto repair shop when I noticed that an art show was coming to town.

"Get Your Tickets Now!" read the headlines. I scoured the ad thoroughly and found out that the art show was a traveling kind of show. By this I mean that the art show was fashioned much like a traveling circus. The organizers would set up a big tent somewhere outside of town and display all sorts of paintings, sculptures, and other interesting curios within this giant tent. Visitors would be treated to a vast array of paintings and strange artifacts that were dreamed up by artists from around the country and the world.

Upon further scrutiny I found that the art show was leaving after Saturday's event. I was reading the ad on a Friday. I felt a strong urge to attend the art show that had set up shop south of Glenville in an open pasture in the middle of nowhere. The admission price was fifty cents and that was something I could easily afford since I had been saving up my allowance for weeks for just such an unforeseen event or maybe even a visit to Cleveland or whatever.

Both my parents agreed that if I attended the art show I might be inspired to try my hand at some different field within the art realm. In all honesty, I just wanted to get out of the house for a change and go see what an art show was all about. So, the following morning, with my parent's blessing, I headed out in the direction of the art show. The open pasture where the show was set up was ten miles from my house and to give myself ample time to see all the items within the tent, I started walking as soon as dawn broke.

My father could have given me a ride to the tent site, but I hated to bother him since he always ran a tight schedule and often had numerous chores to do around the house as well as his shop. I felt bad about asking him for a ride knowing he had a heavy workload lined up for both of us every weekend. He would have to do his own work, as well as mine. I was just grateful to be allowed to attend the show, so I walked on. If things went smoothly, I could make it to the show within three hours. All I had to do was to stay on course and not deviate from the old dirt road that ran straight from Glenville to the familiar pasture grounds.

The morning was incredibly beautiful on that mid-October day so many years ago and I still can recall how good it felt just to be alive. The sky was blue, the birds sang and a light breeze rocked the branches of the trees back and forth in a playful way that I had never noticed before.

About five miles from home, I passed an old graveyard where many of the people from the surrounding area had been buried during the previous two hundred years. That's how old Glenville was and this was the town's old cemetery. However, Glenville had established a new cemetery site just one mile north of town and most of the town's people had begun to use that new burial ground instead of this now mostly abandoned cemetery. For an old place it sure had many tombstones still standing. Some grave markers were made of stone, but most were simple wooden crosses with a name written across the marker to identify the person long buried there. I estimate that the old graveyard covered about five acres and except for the space taken up by a few large elm trees not a grave site seemed to be available for anyone else to be buried there. I guess that's why a new cemetery was established closer to town. The old cemetery had simply run out of plots.

As I was taking in the cemetery scenery, I was startled back to reality by the loud honk of a passing truck that was being driven by Mr. Evans, a regular customer at my father's shop and one of his oldest friends. After a brief chat, he offered me a ride in back of his truck to the art show fairgrounds. I immediately accepted and before long I was dropped off near the entrance of the big tent. I thanked Mr. Evans before he continued his journey and proceeded to paying my admission fee before entering the big tent.

The tent covered an area the size of an acre or so and it was jam packed with so many interesting items from African elephant tusks to huge carpets from Persia. There were many merchants offering a vast array of beautiful artwork, the likes of which I had never seen before or have seen since. The day went by so fast I just had enough time to see all the booths before the sun began to set. Fortunately, I was able to buy a couple of things before leaving.

I bought two items that proved invaluable for my trip back home. Since it was soon to turn dark, I purchased a handheld light generating gadget that the salesman called a flashlight. It cost me two whole dollars, but I knew my dad would love it. It was a recent invention I had never owned before and I also knew we could sure use it around the auto shop for those hard to see places under the car's hood near the motor. The other item I bought was a quart of orange paint similar to one some artist had used to paint a setting sun. I had never seen orange paint before, and I just had to have this color in my possession.

I tossed both purchased items in my tote bag, flung it over my shoulder, and started walking home just as the sun set in the burnt orange horizon. As I walked down the road home, I took the time to observe the wildlife that inhabited this isolated part of Ohio. There were some geese that flew overhead as well as a flock of ducks who quacked all the way as they flew a hundred feet above me. As I looked in the direction of the setting sun, I noticed a doe and her fawn grazing far off in the distance atop one of the many rolling hills - oblivious to me watching them eat. What a beautiful sight.

As funny as it might sound, the best thing I saw that day was a large oak tree standing alone on a hill about a mile away from the road. It looked so large and majestic that I estimated it must have been close to a thousand years old. I felt a sudden urge to run and climb that gorgeous tree and if it hadn't been for the onset of dusk I probably would have done just that. But it was not meant to be because I never did return to that site. That giant oak tree probably still stands somewhere out there in the southeast corner of Ohio.

When the sun finally did set and the darkness was about to envelop everything around me a full moon appeared on that clear autumn evening and lit the way for me to continue confidently on my way home. My walking pace

was slow and deliberate because I was in no rush to get home and about two hours after leaving the art show grounds I made it to the halfway point. I made it to where the cemetery site was.

I thought about jogging past the site just so I wouldn't have to listen to any strange noises that might come from the graveyard. I guess I must have thought about it too much because before long I was near the entrance of the yard and was just about to start jogging when I saw him. He was a man sitting on a chair and holding a walking cane in one hand as he waved at me. His friendly gesture made me change my mind about any jogging and instinctively I waved back. I could mostly make out a silhouette of a figure, but he stood up and I stood my ground and watched him as he didn't move anywhere. I took this as an invitation to approach him and so I did. I walked into the graveyard premises and walked near the man and found him to be an elderly man somewhere near the age of 80 or maybe even older. On that bright moon-lit night we began our friendship.

"Hello, sir. How are you?" I asked as bravely and confidently as a twenty-year-old can be.

"I'm fine, young man, just fine. Come on into my humble abode and make yourself comfortable," he responded in a hoarse voice that many elderly men are prone to have. He removed his hat in a gesture of respect.

Upon closer observation I noticed he had a full head of white hair which he kept short. He put his hat back on and motioned for me to follow him as he walked toward the graveyard's interior.

"We have a well where you can have some water. It's on the other side of the cemetery, though."

I was not really thirsty, but I did not want to make this elderly gentleman's kind gesture seem unappreciated and so I followed him as he walked across the burial grounds. As we walked, we talked. The moonlight shone so brightly that walking down the trail past the many graves was easy to do.

"So, what are you doing here all alone in the graveyard at this hour of the night?" I asked. "Are you some kind of watchman here?"

"I have been this cemetery's night watchman for many, many years," he responded. "I spent most of life being a watchman here. I started being a watchman here when I was about your age. How old are you, about twenty?"

"Yes, sir, I am exactly twenty years of age."

"Well, that's how old I was when I started being a watchman here."

This information surprised me because I had never even heard the old graveyard much less a watchman that had worked there for so long. I thought that my own father would have at least mentioned the old cemetery and the

old watchman once or twice in our occasional conversations about the olden days of Glenville.

"How did that happen?"

"How did what happen?"

"How did you happen to start working as a watchman at such a young age and then stay here for such a long time?"

"Well, when I was twenty years of age me and a couple of friends came here to this cemetery and drank a bottle of strong whiskey. Before we knew it we had toppled over close to twenty grave markers and we would have gotten away with our misdeed if we hadn't been discovered drunk and asleep the following day by a group of townspeople who happened to be bringing somebody for burial here. My father was so incensed that he volunteered me to watch over the graveyard every night for an entire year. So, he and I built a tiny shack where I could sleep and I spent the entire year here – rain, shine, and snow. My father died before the year was up and I had no one else to go home to, so I stayed here and have remained here ever since."

He pointed to a corner of the graveyard to show me where his tiny shack stood. In the dim lit night, I could see a small shack where he was indicating.

"So, what happened to the other boys that were with you that night? Were they punished as well?"

"Their parents had the money to pay the fifty-dollar fine. My father did not. So, I guess you can say I have been working it off ever since."

We stopped at a well along the back boundary of the cemetery and he lowered a bucket and retrieved it full of water. He then took a little dipper that hung from a string on one side of the well and he offered me some water. I took the dipper and drank. The water was cool and delicious. Even though I was not thirsty I was surprised to enjoy the drink so much.

I didn't know what else to ask him or whether he even wanted me to hang around anymore, so I just asked whatever came to mind. I figured if he needed me to leave, he would give me a hint and I could continue on my way home. I also figured if he didn't want to be alone, he'd tell me a story or two just to converse a while.

"Do you have name, sir?"

"Ebenezer, my name is Ebenezer."

"As in Ebenezer Scrooge?"

"Yep, as in Ebenezer Scrooge."

"You must get that a lot."

"Yes, I get it almost every time."

"Tell me, sir, did you know many of the people buried here? I mean, did you ever see yourself watching over them as you are doing so now?"

"You're not going to believe this, but I happen to know almost everyone resting here. When you get to be my age you get to know lots of people."

"But weren't many of these people buried here before you became a watchman?"

"That's correct, but you find out things about people just by hanging around them. And I've been hanging around these fine souls for many years."

"Really? Can you tell me about some of the people who are buried here?"

"My sight is not so good but if you could read some of these grave markers for me I could probably share some of their stories with you."

I took out the brand-new flashlight I had bought at the art show and turned it on. Its sudden burst of light surprised the watchman, and he sputtered in his initial reaction to the suddenly bright ground.

"Wow, that is an awfully bright light. How do you do it? How do you make the light?"

"It's a new invention, sir. It's called a flashlight and it works with a portable power source called a battery."

"Well, do me a favor and keep the light away from me because its brightness hurts my eyes. It will blind me for sure."

I promised to keep the light away from Mr. Ebenezer and without even giving it a thought I just started walking down a row of wooden crosses and stopped in front of a tiny wooden cross with the name of Sara Wilkens. Ebenezer was walking with his cane a few steps behind me, and he noticed where I had stopped and shone the light upon.

"I see you have stopped on Sara Wilkens resting place. She was an extraordinary woman. Sara grew to a height exceeding seven feet tall. She was not very pretty – downright homely to be honest. But she had the heart of an angel. She fell in love with a hardened Union soldier who married her and then berated her to no end. He called her all kinds of terrible names, and it didn't matter whether they were in private or in public he seemed to elicit great joy in putting down this towering example of human kindness. One day she caught him with a barmaid at the local saloon and in a fit of jealousy she punched him so hard she killed him with that one punch. The sheriff didn't prosecute. He didn't have to; Sara died of a broken heart just one month after his death."

I was surprised by this story and commented, "You would think that she would have a large grave marker, I mean, given her size."

"No, no, Sara insisted that if she ever died, she wanted a small grave marker and that's what she got."

I then cut haphazardly across the cemetery and shone the flashlight upon a grave marker that read, "Willie Petrocelli". Ebenezer soon caught up with me and read the marker.

"Silly Willie Petrocelli! Yes, he was quite a character. He appeared in Glenville around 1922. He was a handsome young man, probably around thirty, who rented a hotel room for an entire year. Some say he ran with Capone and that he had fallen out of favor with Scarface. He was probably trying to hide in Glenville, but his good looks did him in when all kinds of women visited him on a semi regular basis. One of them must have been a snitch because one quiet Sunday morning the calm ambiance was shattered by incessant machine gun fire. When the smoke cleared and the culprits got away, the authorities found his body slumped against the wall in his room. They said he had more than a hundred bullet wounds."

I stopped shining the flashlight on the marker and moved on again without any sense of direction. I stopped about fifty yards away in front of a stone marker that read Marilyn Hargrove. It appeared to be an innocent enough grave and so I waited patiently while Ebenezer arrived at my side and read the name.

"Miss Marilyn Hargrove - probably the most tragic person in this entire graveyard. She was the most beautiful woman to ever grace the town of Glenville. Like Mr. Petrocelli, she was cursed by her beauty. She was a mere twenty-five-year-old lady when a mob of jealous wives dragged her out of her bed in the middle of the night and tied her to a porch post and burned her and her house down to the ground. It all came about because one drunken husband told his wife he was going to leave her for Marilyn. He also claimed that several married men were wooing her and trying to convince her to marry them as soon as they rid themselves of their current spouse. It was a race to marry Miss Hargrove. Unfortunately, this beautiful woman was totally innocent and never knew why she was targeted for retribution by so many angry wives. Again, no one was charged with a crime."

The stories Ebenezer told about each grave site seemed to grow more and more interesting with each story topping the previous one. I lost all track of time and was totally immersed in everything Mr. Ebenezer had to say, it wasn't long before I heard the distant crowing of a rooster. I had enjoyed listening to his stories so much that the entire night had passed us by and the break of dawn was near. Mr. Ebenezer knew it was getting time for me to leave.

"I am so sorry I took up so much of your time and I hope I did not delay your arrival to anywhere important. But I hardly ever get any visitors that I tend to get carried away with excitement whenever anyone takes the time to

acknowledge me. Most of the time I do my best to scare any troublemakers away. I don't want anybody to make a mess of things like I did many years ago."

"There is no need to apologize. I had a great time listening to all these great stories about the people of Glenville. Thank you for being an incredibly gracious host."

He walked me to the entrance of the cemetery, and I promised him I would visit again. We shook hands and I continued homeward. When I arrived home it was late morning and I went straight to bed. When I woke up again it was late in the day and I sat down to have dinner with my parents. I told them all about Mr. Ebenezer and they listened to everything I had to say. When I was done telling them about my night my father told me that his father had known Ebenezer many years before and that he was an old man way back when. In other words, there was no way I had met Mr. Ebenezer but perhaps I had met someone who claimed to be Ebenezer himself. Not wanting to argue with my father I dropped the matter, but I did not forget it.

The following weekend I asked to borrow my father's truck and returned to the cemetery after quitting time. It was late in the day, and I wanted to make it to the cemetery before darkness fell. I exited the truck and walked toward the back of the cemetery where the water well was, and I did find it there. However, the well I found was in ruins and it was dry. I peered into the well and found it was filled with dirt and debris almost all the way to the top. The little shack that had stood in the corner of the graveyard was not even there. I was shocked a little but mostly saddened by what I was seeing. Perhaps I had just imagined seeing Mr. Ebenezer. Perhaps it had all been a dream.

I decided to walk back to the truck that was parked near the entrance. I got in and turned it on. As I was leaving, I looked across the cemetery toward the fading light of the setting sun and saw the silhouette of an elderly man walking with a cane toward the graveyard. I stared closely and he disappeared and then reappeared. Within the light evening mist, I thought I saw the outline of a little shack at the far corner of the graveyard. It appeared and then disappeared before reappearing one more time. I was right after all. It was Mr. Ebenezer reporting for duty as the watchman. I wanted to turn back and visit again but I didn't want to interrupt him anymore. He was a proud watchman, and he did his job better than anyone could ever imagine.

— the end —