

# *The Watchman*

*by*

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## Chapter One

Across his history as a writer, he had told hundreds of made up stories. Writers are consummate liars. They may live honest lives, day-to-day, in the real world. But give them a piece of paper and a pen, and Jekyll becomes Hyde. He laughed to himself as he thought about that and turned the starter key before take-off. He wasn't sure how he would tell this story. He wasn't at all sure.



As he flew his light airplane west, at his high cruising altitude, he recognized the familiar landmarks. To his left, far-a-way to the south, just visible through the reflection cast on the window's surface by the red glow of cockpit instrument lights, a thin thread of light stretched for miles across the horizon on the shores of Lake Ponchartrain, and it was New Orleans. Straight ahead, distant in the night sky, beyond the airplane's nose, its polished cowling reflecting the faint glow of the brilliant stars above on this clear-as-crystal, cold winter's eve, was Baton Rouge, also marked by a narrow line of oft twinkling light that lay along the top edge of the forward horizon. He looked at his watch. It was nearing 11 p.m.

After switching his radio to the local airport frequency, all that was needed now to find his destination were five rapid clicks of his microphone button that would activate a sensor on the ground which would illuminate Hammond's main runway's marker lights. Once lit, the lights - each regularly spaced along the sides of the north-south, 5,000 foot runway - would form a two line vanishing perspective - two rows of lights converging in the distance beyond - to guide a landing pilot to a landing.

With the five microphone clicks, the parallel rows of lights immediately sprang brilliantly to life glowing white in the darkness ahead, and they stitched the outline of the runway's nearly one mile length pinpointing the airport about two miles distant. Having that much runway to land on was, and had always been, a kind of luxury to him. Unlike the many, very small, grass and dirt airstrips he normally landed on that required much more concentration, he could relax here, and he pushed back in his seat, reduced the airplane's power to idle and began a long, lazy descent into the airport landing pattern.

He was coming back the old airport for the first time in over fifty years, hoping to find an answer to his ever-vexing, standing question. A short article he retrieved from the National War Archives had prompted him to return to this place thinking maybe he would find his answer.



Once on a final landing approach to the runway, he flipped a switch on his instrument panel activating a powerful landing light that was set in a recess of his left wing, and through its brilliant white beam, cast far down the runway's length ahead, he saw the familiar large white number "Thirty-Six" stenciled at the beginning of the runway. As he passed above the numbers, his wheels made gentle but firm contact with the concrete. With a muffled squelch of his airplane's tires on the runway's surface, he slowed and taxied to

the first turn-off and proceeded to roll toward the ramp, a football field-sized parking area.

He taxied slowly, cautiously, while looking as far around the dark airport as he could. It appeared abandoned and still. With the runway lights now automatically shut down behind him, the only lights ahead on the airfield were a bare fixture, a yellowish lamp which hung over a lone, red gas pump looking like a lantern suspended from a shepherd's crook at the far side of the ramp. And there was a single light bulb that hung just outside the terminal office door straight ahead at the far edge of the ramp. Each light illuminated a lonely island of pavement a short distance beyond them.

The light of a full moon overhead bathed the airport in a soft silver light. A few small private airplane hangars were silhouetted along the edges of the ramp. But the bright moon overhead cast enough light across the ramp that he could see the outlines of a smattering of small airplanes like his. A Piper Cub here, a single engine, high wing Cessna further down. At the far end of the ramp was parked a bi-wing crop duster, dull yellow in the silvery glow, sitting next to its flatbed loader truck.

In the partial darkness, it might have been easy to forget that this airfield is an enormous 650 acre plot of land on which three substantial runways are laid out across and intersecting one another forming a small triangle in the middle and joined at their ends by three miles of narrow taxiways. One of hundreds hastily constructed, it was built in early World War II.

When Mike was here last, the airfield, which had been leased at the end of the war to the small city of Hammond by the federal government in perpetuity for the sum of one dollar a year, was just a deteriorating and ill-kept airport used by skydivers and the few local residents who had the means to own and operate a private airplane.

In reality, the government had shed its responsibility to care for the land and whatever would happen to it. He was thankful that it seemed that the old wartime airfield had remained very much the same as it had when he left it all those years ago.

As he shut down his airplane's engine and set the parking brake, he opened the door of the cabin, and he stepped to the ground. As he stood there, rising up and down on the balls of his feet to relieve the cramps in his hips, he peered into the darkness looking for a specific thing. The thing was a simple, old pine bench, battleship grey in color with just enough room on its two plank seat to accommodate three people sitting side-by-side. It normally sat beneath the ramp-facing, picture window of the airport office just outside the door to the lobby. And there it was! It was like seeing an old friend! He found it hard to believe that it even still existed! With this many years past, how had it survived? He pondered that a moment, but no matter, there it was!

Mike walked directly to it, and he bent to touch it, as if it weren't real. He imagined for the briefest second that his fingers might just pass through it like touching the veil of a ghost. They didn't. Laughing at himself, Mike turned and slowly sat on the bench and placed both hands on the seat, and then he leaned back against the concrete block wall behind him. *"It started here."* he thought.

And he sat there staring into the darkness of the airfield beyond while watching the green-white-green sweeps of the rotating beacon, a high-powered revolving light that could be seen many miles away at night. It sat atop the green house-like box that was the old control tower. The long abandoned control tower, now surrounded by a tall, chain link fence adorned with warning signs to keep trespassers from climbing its 30 foot high, metal skeleton, was behind the building that Mike now rested against. The green-white-green alternating pattern of the light indicated that this was

now a civilian airfield.

The beacon was originally part of the old Transcontinental Airway System, a system of lights and symbols - large white arrows - usually indicating north painted on the roofs of houses and buildings in the Twenties, all designed to assist pilots to navigate their way point-to-point across the country. Later, that same light would add to the war effort in the Forties. And here it was 75 years after the war still shining, still turning.

If he watched the light sweeps carefully, he thought he might see a night bird, maybe a sandpiper, rise into the sky through a shaft of passing light. But all he saw were the vaporized clouds of his own breath floating out into the chilly air.



The intriguing article Mike had discovered in the war archives had told a brief story about the men who were trained to fly the airplanes of war here. The taxiways and the runways that crisscrossed the airfield launched the fighters and the bombers of the Second World War into the skies of the surrounding countryside where fledgling pilots would practice skip bombing, strafing runs and instrument flying from the beginning of and for the duration of the war. The article was very brief but it was history he had never heard in his four years working on the airport as a new pilot.

Mike had long been dogged by one question about his time as a pilot. Somehow he sensed that he would find the answer if he returned here. Slowly, he began to realize that he was shivering, and he went to his airplane to get his flight jacket and gloves. He also reached behind the front seat into his kit bag and retrieved a small thermos of hot coffee, and then he returned to the bench - to wait. He did not know for what. But a small voice within told him: "*Be patient. Wait.*" And he did.

To be continued...