

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

EPIISODE



ONE

CONFORMING TO AN ILL CONCEIVED NUMERICAL SYSTEM, THIS IS THE SECOND IN WHAT COULD VERY WELL BE A TEDIOUS SERIES OF DUBIOUS QUALITY, THUMBING ITS NOSE AND OTHER APPENDAGES AT CONVENTIONAL SYSTEMS OF PUNCTUATION, STRUCTURE, AND THEMATIC NARRATIVE FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE BEFORE OUR AUTHOR'S MEAGER TALENT HAS BEEN DEPLETED AND ONLY A DRIED HUSK REMAINS WHERE THAT UNREALISTIC ENTHUSIASM ONCE FLOURISHED. BUT, YOU KNOW, THERE'S ALWAYS THE POSSIBILITY THAT SOME MINOR REDEEMING QUALITY MIGHT PRESENT ITSELF SOONER OR LATER IN ONE OF THESE PRODUCTIONS, OUTSHINING THE COMPONENTS OF ITS ORIGIN TO OFFER A BRIEF MOMENT OF, AT THE VERY LEAST, TITILLATION — FOR THOSE UNFORTUNATE FEW WHO HAVE LET THEIR ILL ADVISED AND POSSIBLY PATHOLOGICAL NEED FOR COMPLETION TO BIND THEM TO A HOLLOW AND ULTIMATELY FRUITLESS PURSUIT OF INSPIRATION IN (AND DISTRACTION FROM) THEIR WRETCHED DAILY ROUTINE THROUGH SPECIOUS TALES OF A NUMINOUS CHARACTER.*

TWO GHOSTS

by T.M. Camp

There's the little girl, the shy one
hiding behind the banister,
peeking around corners.

The one who waved to me from the dining room
that first night while I unpacked dishes
in the kitchen.

It was late. I looked up as I passed the door.

She was waving.

Then she was gone.

She comes out when there are guests,
curious and hovering at the edges of conversation.

Sometimes they see her too.

And then there's the dark one,
the one that looks like nothing so much
as a tall shadow.

The one that feels to me like an old woman,
draped in shawls and disapproval.

Waiting at the bottom of the stairs,
watching from the end of the upstairs hallway,
and leaning over my shoulder to see
what I am writing here tonight.

SUMMER SALT

by T.M. Camp

The aged oak trees line each side of the narrow dirt lane. The twisted boughs above me clutch at the flat, pale sky beyond.

I walk beneath them without knowing where I came from nor where I am going.

All I know is the heat and the slow, dark stain spreading across the right side of my uniform. Flies crawl across the rough wool tacky with blood.

Soon the trees clear. I walk on through the dry fields buzzing faintly in the heat towards distant low hills, brown as bread.

I do not remember how long I walked.

I remember stumbling, clutching at the dull ache between my ribs blooming bright. My cracked boots season the afternoon light with dust, the spice of summer.

I did not recognize the faded name stenciled on the battered knapsack I carried, so I left it behind when I rose up from the ground.

I did not know my name. I do not remember thinking that this was strange.

Later, the slanting light of the setting sun, the rough wood of the gate under my hand.

Beyond the gate, a barren yard strewn with rusted farm equipment flaking away, scoured by time and misuse.

I remember the house, the woman standing on the sagging porch, shading her eyes.

Her voice, from very far away.

I remember the sudden shock of fresh blood soaking through my fingers, a taste of iron and dust.

A shout, the bang of a door. A man running towards me, his overalls stained with sweat wrung from him by summer and honest labor.

I do not remember if he reached me before I fell.

I wake in near darkness. A lantern flickers beside me, throwing shadows across the broad beamed roof over my head.

A man kneels at my side, older than me and dead of expression. He does not look at my face.

Three others stand behind him, watchful — a woman, two men.

They all have the same flat eyes, the same bony chin.

The kneeling man draws his hand up into the air and then down again. As it dips and rises, there's a flare of agony at my side. The dull gleam of metal between his fingertips, a thin shadow trailing from his hand.

I shift away from the brittle pain. The mattress rustles beneath me.

The woman and her brothers move forward.

On my brow she lays her hand, very dry and cool.

The brothers hold me down, hands heavier than stones. I feel the press of corncobs in my back, the blaze of agony in my side.

The kneeling man raises his hand and lets it fall, again and again.

Someone groans. Someone screams.

Dust motes drifting in the light streaming through an open window. Morning or afternoon, I cannot tell.

The older man is there, sucking his teeth over the wound in my side. He helps me rise. The movement is stiff, painful.

I run my fingertips lightly over the wound, tracing the thick dark yarn he used for sutures.

He hands me a threadbare shirt to cover myself and leads me out of the room.

The walls of the house are unadorned, save for a few faded photographs pinned haphazardly down a long length of hallway.

In the kitchen, he leads me to sit at the head of a long wooden table.

The woman rattles pots and plates behind me.

The man, the eldest of the family, takes a seat to my right.

Three brothers and their sister, he tells me. Their shared birthright amounts to no more than the drab clothing on their backs, their dust colored hair, and this farm. Like their parents, they scrape what they can from the dead earth and hope that the world and our wars pass them by.

The other brothers file in from outside and take their seats.

The sister sets a steaming plate before me, then for her brothers.

I cannot remember the last time I have eaten.

Ravenous, I take up my knife and fork.

The elder brother politely clears his throat. We bow our heads.

I do not remember his prayer, only the food in front of me. A simple meal of meat and boiled vegetables. My mouth is watering and, when the amens are said, I spare no time in digging in.

The first bite is oddly tasteless, bland. I ask my host to pass the salt.

No one speaks.

The air in the room goes dead.

I realize that there is no salt here. It is too precious, too rare, like life during wartime.

To barter with, perhaps, to preserve the dead. But not to season food at this meager table.

The family sits with their eyes down, staring at their empty plates.

I see for the first time that only I have been served.

Shame fills my mouth, thick as dust.

I do not remember what I said, but I did try to apologize.

The elder brother raises his head to look at me.

His face, expressionless.

The others sit stiffly in their chairs, still as the dead.

One by one they look at me, their eyes dull and flat as coins.

I shout. I leap to my feet. My hands pressing flat on the edge of the table, sending it flipping up and over through the air.

Empty plates scatter. Of course they are empty, even mine is empty. There is no food in this house, there is nothing wholesome in this dead place.

The table tumbles end over end in a somersault to land flat on the dusty floor with a hollow slap, like the lid of a coffin falling into place.

I stand, staring at the empty room: The stone cold stove, the rusting pots, the warped shelves — all covered with a thick layer of dust.

I am alone.

A single pair of footprints lead across the grimy floorboards. I follow them back down the hallway to the room. Next to the rotting corncob mattress, there is a dark sock, partially unravelled, matted with dust.

I stagger from the room, from the house.

The yard is choked with tall weeds. The rotting gate falls apart under my hand.

I walk up the dirt lane into the heat, towards the gathering darkness.

I awake in a military hospital.

They'd found me wandering the countryside, delirious with fever and weak from the loss of blood. They cared for me awhile until the wound in my side was clean and free of infection.

Even now, writing this with the war and that dead house many years behind me, I trace my fingers along the jagged scar that runs up my side from my hipbone, along my ribs, to end in a puckered depression to the left of my nipple. I rest my finger there. My heart beats beneath its tip.

I told them that I did not remember who had sewn it closed. I lied.

My time at the hospital was uneventful. The days a blur of clean starched sheets, bitter medicines, and bland food. The nights were mercifully quiet, broken only by the whimpers of the sleeping soldiers around me and the soft sounds the nurses made as they moved from bed to bed like pale, comforting ghosts.

— *for Ambrose Bierce*

This is a work of fiction. All situations, events, and characters are nothing more or less than products of the author's imagination — and, for all you know, you might be too. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is most likely unintentional or, at the very least, inadvertent. Unless, of course, there's more money in it on purpose. Then? By all means. Wait, what was I saying again? Crap. I'm going to have to start getting more sleep. I'm way too old to keep track of all this.

Copyright © 2009 T.M. Camp

The Gospel of Thomas is produced and distributed by Aurohn Press.

Despite this, please submit all inquiries (professional or otherwise) to the author via tmc@tmcamp.com.

He's got a lot of free time on his hands. Apparently.

The Gospel of Thomas is released under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives License.

All other rights reserved.

Visit us online at

www.thegospelofthomasonline.com

COMING SOON,
THE FACE GAME AND OTHER DIVERSIONS.



WHAT YOU DON'T BRING FORTH WILL DESTROY YOU.