

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

EPIISODE



THREE

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NEEDLE EXCHANGE

by T.M. Camp

I used to know this guy who did magic. Not real magic. He couldn't turn water into wine or make the dead walk. None of that miraculous shit. But give him a deck of cards or a few coins or even a couple of scraps of fucking pocket lint? He'd blow your fucking mind. He could make things move or change, right there in your hands. Really wild shit that didn't always feel right. It freaked people out sometimes. We'd all sit around whatever shithole we were squatting in at the time, strung out and bored. And sometimes he'd do a few tricks. He didn't call them tricks, though. He said tricks were for hookers. He called them *slights*.

I looked that up one time, banging around in the public library killing time, looking to score, some fucking thing. Flipping through one of those big ass dictionaries they got, so strung out that the little type felt like sandpaper under my fingers. My eyes snagged on the word, said it meant an insult, a little one, just enough to sting. *Slights*.

That was the kind of shit he'd say, shuffling his cards with those fucking hands of his, man. They were perfectly smooth, never worked a fucking day. And they never shook, not like mine. Not like mine used to.

I'd been shooting up since I was fifteen. The kid next door stole from his brother's stash all the time. Pot mostly, sometimes pills from his mom's medicine cabinet. Fucking kids. We tried everything we could get our fucking hands on. Eventually, junk. That first fix. The hot smell of the lighter under the spoon. I thought the metal was going to fucking melt. My belt cinched around my arm, that fucking pinch. Tight. Passing the needle back and forth like fucking blood brothers.

Man. You don't fucking do that anymore, not these days. Who the fuck knows where someone's been, who else they've been sharing with? It's fucking scary. I've got friends who're dead because they didn't get fucking scared enough. Everyone used to share needles. Not anymore. Places'll trade them out for you now, old needles for new ones.

He said he used to be a real magician, like in nightclubs and, I don't know, sawing a lady in half or pulling a fucking rabbit out of a hat. You never know where people come from. He might've been full of shit like every other fucking junky. Everyone had their little stories they told. What they used to be. How rich their daddy was. How they were going to get cleaned up. All full of shit.

He told me a story once. He'd been working down in Texas or some fucking place, doing card tricks in a titty bar while the strippers switched between sets. One night the owner'd asked him to stick around and help drag some old boxes and shit from under the stage and lug them out to the dumpster. When they pulled them out, they were falling to pieces. The wood was old, rotten and crumbling to fucking dust. He said there was all kinds of crazy shit in them. Old photos and books and little bundles of feathers and bones melted together with candle wax, fucking old peanut butter jars full of dirt with people's fucking names written on the lids. He said there were bones and an old skull with crazy symbols and shit scratched into it.

All that voodoo shit scares the shit out of me. I don't need any more crazy in my life. Living here's bad enough already but you put enough junkies and hippies in one place, everyone waiting for the Age of fucking Aquarius or whatever the fuck they're doing, you're going to have a few freaks show up eventually. We got the Church of fucking Satan right over on

California Street. Who the fuck knows what they're doing in fucking Texas?

But everybody's got a fucking story, every junky's gotta make their miserable fucking life more interesting than it is. Even if he was full of shit too, he was definitely good enough. He could've been on TV, the shit he could do. I mean, it was nothing special. A lot of "pick a card" and shit like that. But it'd give you the creeps, kinda. One time I remember, the card I picked wound up in the bottle of beer I had in my hand. He'd never fucking touched it, swear to God. He just shuffled the deck after I'd put my card back and then I took a swig and there it was. Right in my fucking hand.

One time this girl was crashing with us, she fucking freaked out over one of his little magic tricks. She was from someplace down south and I guess she grew up real religious. You wouldn't think she'd hung on to too much of that fucking heritage, what with selling all those blowjobs on Market Street. But she flipped her shit after he did a coin trick one night. It was nothing, something I'd seen him do a hundred fucking times. But she went fucking nuts, talking real fast and half of what came out of her mouth didn't even sound like fucking English. And then her eyes rolled back in her head and just she fucking fell over.

We laid her down in the corner and covered her up with an old blanket, waiting to see if she'd OD'd. A little while later she woke up, good as new. And you know that prick was right fucking there, apologizing and touching her arm with those smooth hands of his. I think he ended up fucking her for a few weeks. Eventually she stopped coming around. No idea what happened to her. There were people always coming and going in those days. Not all of them were friendly little junky girls either.

There was this big fucking nigger who called himself Saturday. And with him, he always had this white chick with her hair cut in a platinum bob like she was fucking Debbie Harry for something. Saturday smiled all the time. But that cunt looked like she'd never smiled once in her whole fucking life.

They came around sometimes, looking for the magician. He was never around, like he fucking knew they were coming. He never told us where he was going, never told us shit. He'd just vanish and then fucking Saturday and his bitch would show up.

They scared the shit out of me.

"Where's your friend?" They never wasted a lot of time asking questions. We were all junkies. They fucking expected us to lie to them anyways. They didn't fucking understand anything else. Anything else scared them and scary people don't like to be fucking scared. They're not used to it like the rest of us.

So I ain't a good liar. I don't have the fucking face for it. Best I could do, safest thing was make my lies as ridiculous as possible. I'd tell them shit like he had a job over in Chinatown writing fortune cookie messages. Or he'd moved down to Santa Barbara to shack up with some has-been pop star. Shit like that.

They never believed me. But they didn't hurt me either. That bitch would just stare at me, snapping her gum. And Saturday'd just smile and nod while I spun my shit. He wore a necklace made out of old chicken bones or some fucking thing, all strung together over his bare chest. You could hear them rattle when he walked.

You ever want to get something out of a junky, just threaten to break a few of his fingers, he'll tell you fucking anything you want to know. It isn't just the

pain, either. It's tough, shooting up without any fucking fingers.

No one ever knew where he was, but a few fingers always got broken here and there anyways. I think Saturday just did it out of fucking habit, like it was his fucking calling card. Eventually they'd give up and leave us alone. And then, like fucking clockwork, the magician'd be back the next day. He was an asshole, leaving us like that when he knew Saturday was coming. But I think he trusted me more than the others. I never had any broken fingers and I didn't bother asking where he'd been. And everything'd go back to normal for a while.

He was a prick and he could be a prick if you asked to see a magic trick and he wasn't in the fucking mood or it wasn't the right phase of the moon or whatever. He'd go all quiet and just fold those goddamn perfect hands of his over the cards. Maybe it's wrong to ask for magic. Maybe he shouldn't have brought out the cards out if he didn't want to do a fucking trick for us. Maybe he shouldn't have let the rest of us deal with those evil fuckers when they came looking for him.

I saw them once, Saturday and that icy bitch. I didn't go fucking looking for them or anything. Believe me. It was an accident.

One night I was strung out and wandering around the city, looking to hook up. I'd been drinking fucking cold medicine just to keep it together long enough to score. I ended up passing out on BART. When I woke up it was the middle of the fucking night and a transit cop was kicking my feet. He threw me off. No shit, it ain't a fucking shelter. Asshole

Outside, I had no fucking clue where I was. Nothing looked like fucking anywhere. I started walking. I figured I'd hit a familiar fucking landmark sooner or

later. It was cold and a damp, greasy fog laid on top of everything. Once I knew where I was, I'd know how to get home. But the longer I walked, the worse it fucking got. I didn't recognize any of the fucking street signs and everything felt flat and sharp against my eyes. Fucking cold medicine. Fuck you up, make the world out of construction paper.

I started to freak out a little. But all I could do was keep walking and smoke my way through a pack of cigarettes. It takes about seven minutes to smoke a cigarette. By the time I'd burned through them all, I was ready to fucking lose it completely. Somehow I got it into my head that I'd ended up in another city in another fucking country. Fucking cold medicine.

And then, coming around a corner, I came up short at the sight of Saturday and his ladyfriend, fucking against a car. He had her bent over the hood, her skirt pulled up around her waist, going at her from behind. Fucking romantic, huh? The car was running, the engine idling up and down while Saturday pumped at her from behind, rocking the car on its wheels while his breath plumed out across the night air in big feathery bursts. I could hear the frame creaking, the slap of his thighs against her ass. But apart from all that, they were completely silent, practically fucking solemn while they went at it. It was creepy as shit. Normal people don't fuck that quiet.

I stood there frozen, afraid they'd see me. Afraid to run. Afraid to move. Afraid to stay.

Then, as if on cue, they stopped in mid-fucking-thrust, slowly turned their heads to look at me.

That bitch's eyes were dead and cold, hooked into mine.

I couldn't breathe.

Then Saturday's face split open in a huge fucking grin. He started pumping again, driving into her so hard that the car rocked on its springs. She turned away from me, moaning. Her white hair swinging back and forth, her hands spread out across the hood, fingernails squealing against the paint.

I don't know what scared me more, his smile or her eyes. I don't know that it matters. All I know is I was running, everything going past in a big fucking blur.

Eventually I found my way back to familiar ground and, soon enough, I was home. I sat there on the floor, ignoring the snores and farts of everyone else crashed out. I just sat and waited for my hands to stop shaking while the sun came up.

I never told the magician what I'd seen. He took off again a few weeks later, just vanished one day. As fucking usual. And, of course, they came looking for him.

I was laying out on a scrubby patch of grass in the park by Union Square. I had my shirt off and the sun felt so fucking good against my skin. I never felt so fucking good.

Then a shadow fell across me and I opened my eyes.

She looked down at me and winked. "Good to see you again."

Saturday squatted down next to me and leaned in. He smelled hot, like cigarettes and meat. "Where's your friend?"

I almost fucking made it across the street. For a few seconds I thought I was actually going to fucking get away. But then he had his big hand on the back of my

neck. He didn't hurt me all that much. Just a few quick slaps across the face to remind me not to run again. She came over to us and handed me my shirt. The sun had gone behind the clouds and it was suddenly very cold.

They didn't bother asking me any fucking questions and I didn't fucking bother trying to lie.

They walked me down to their car and put me in the back seat. They got in the front. She called him papa, winking at me over her shoulder as she laid her hand on the back of his neck and digging her nails in a little bit. And then we went for a drive, like a nice happy fucking family on a Saturday afternoon. Momma and papa in front with the radio on. I remember her laughing at something he said, leaning forward to turn the music up. I looked out the window, tapping my fingers on the rough edge of the sawed-off door handle, letting the breeze blow my hair back.

They didn't leave me very many of my fingers. You would've thought she might've stopped with just breaking them, but I guess I made her angry by trying to run. She spent a long time on them, grinding them into paste with the heel of her boot while fucking Saturday held me down. It got to the point when it wasn't even worth fucking screaming over. There wasn't enough left of my fingers to bother, wasn't enough left in me for that.

After she'd finished with my hands, she leaned down close to kiss me goodbye. And that's when I started talking. I hadn't said shit up until then but I couldn't fucking handle the thought of that red, overripe mouth on mine. What her rotten breath would taste like, what her fucking teeth and tongue would feel like. I fucking told them everything. The magician was holed up in a little clinic, I said, trying to get clean so he could put

his magic act together again. He let it slip once. He thought he could trust me. He was wrong.

I wasn't lying and they knew it.

Once I spilled my guts, she licked her fucking lips and leaned in. Her mouth tasted just like spoiled apples, all sweet and soft and crumbling around the edges.

When she straightened up, her purse fell open and something fell out. It was a fucking rag doll, bristling all over with rusty needles like a fucking porcupine. It lay there, black button eyes staring into mine but there was nothing we could do for each other. Then she scooped it up, shoving it back into her bag as they walked away.

It wasn't long after that I heard the cops had found the magician in an back alley up off of Masonic. Overdose, they said. I heard that his body was full of pock marks all over. His feet, his legs, his balls, his face, and even up into his fucking scalp. They said, and maybe the junky who told me all this was fucking lying, but they said he looked like a golf ball when they found him. The cops called his death an accidental suicide by drug overdose. Which was, of course, the stupidest fucking thing I ever heard in my life. Nobody can shoot up that much and live. Of course, he's dead now, isn't he?

This was all a long time ago. I'm clean now. I had to get clean. No one would help me shoot up and I couldn't fucking do it myself, not with these fucking hands.

I've got a job in a fried chicken place. It's okay. I can't do much except wipe down the tables, but they have a very open policy about hiring the disabled. It's an alright job, not too bad. I get my meals for free, or practically. And they don't care about my hands. Or at least they fucking pretend like they don't. It's not too bad.

One time, not too long after I started here, I was wiping down some tables when I saw Saturday walk by outside with that white-haired bitch on his arm. His mouth was open and even through the chatter in the restaurant I could hear him fucking laughing. I stood there frozen like an animal, holding the rag between the fucking useless hands they'd made for me.

As they passed, that white haired bitch dragged one long fingertip across the window, making the glass squeal.

And then they were gone.

Sometimes when I dream, I dream of brass needles and button eyes. In the morning, I wake with the taste of spoiled apples in my mouth.

FIN ✱

This is a work of fiction. All situations, events, and characters are nothing more or less than products of the author's imagination — at least, as far as you know. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is unintentional and you shouldn't bother going to look for them. Seriously. That cat Saturday's bad news and even if he is just a fictional character, he'll still fuck your shit up if you're not careful.

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He's the one to blame.

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NEXT EPISODE:

THE OTHER GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST.



THERE IS NOTHING HIDDEN THAT WILL NOT BE DISCLOSED.