

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

EPISODE



FOUR

LIKE THE LONG SLOW TRUDGE OF TIME, THE LATEST OF OUR CONTRIVANCES SEEKS TO DISTRACT US FROM THE OVERSIGNIFICANCE OF OUR OWN LIVES BY INDULGING IN THE TYPICALLY MAUDLIN PSEUDOMEMORIA OF HOLIDAYS LONG PAST, WITH PARTICULAR EMPHASIS ON THE ARGUABLY SPECIOUS INNOCENCE OF CHILDHOOD, BENEVOLENCE OF THE ELDERLY, AND CURIOSITY OF THE SPECTRAL IN THE TRADITION OF A SUBSTANTIAL LITERARY RECORD OF PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION BY THE MISERLY, SELFLESS SACRIFICE OF JOINT MARITAL PROPERTY (E.G. FOLLICLES AND FOBS), AND VARIOUS ARCHIPELAGO SOCIETIES DEVOTED TO PRESERVING THE SHORTCOMINGS OF DEFECTIVE PLAYTHINGS DESPITE THEIR UTTER LACK OF VALUE FOR THE GIVER OR RECEIVER ON THAT BLESSED MORN WHEN OVERSTIMULATED, OVERINDULGED GENETIC INFERIORS SCRABBLE GREEDILY AT THE TRUNKS OF TRANSPLANTED CONIFEROUS UNDERGROWTH UNTIL NOTHING IS LEFT OF THEIR GOODWILL OR SELF-AWARENESS BUT SHREDS OF DAMP PAPER AND SCRAPS OF TINSEL. HAPPY HOLIDAYS. ✱

THE WHISPERING BOY

by T.M. Camp

Once, long ago, there must have been a fire. There's a long brick wall that still bears faint streaks of shadow where flames once flickered. Here and there, the faded scorch marks from a long-quenched fire remain. A photograph, a negative of that time superimposed over our own.

Familiar feeling. Moving forward, looking back. The decaying remains of countless moments in time: A small indentation in the door, a long scratch across the floor, the faint shadows of old smoke along a brick wall. Slices of time layered in small moments, one on top of the other. Like a deck of cards, like photographs, or bricks. Walling us in.

We arrived earlier that day, the day before Christmas. As he parks the car, my father-in-law remarks that brick is the warmest building material there is. "That's why all the old buildings and houses were made from brick," he tells us. "Brick walls trap the air, the warmth, inside. Better than anything else. That's why the whole building is brick. For warmth. For the horses."

Looking back, I am certain that this is the first time that the horses are mentioned. At any rate, we both nod in reply, my husband and I. Like so much of what my father-in-law says, it sounds both plausible and fictitious. And I've been fooled by him before.

His gift, telling stories.

True or not, it is warm inside when we arrive. A heavy snow is piling up on the window ledges outside. My

mother-in-law welcomes us with hugs and laughter. We brush the snow from our coats, stamp our feet on the mat. My son has never seen snow and he's wound himself up with excitement and anticipation. His grandparents shower him with attention while my husband and I smile at each other over their heads.

That afternoon, three or four times, my son stops what he is doing — whatever game he's playing, whatever trouble he's getting into — and he comes to me, quiet and solemn. "Horses coming," he tells me. "Horses coming, Mommy."

Little pitchers, as my mother used to say.

His grandmother picks him up and promises him carriage rides in the snow on Christmas morning. "They do it downtown every year," she tells me over his shoulder, hugging him tight. "Oh, we're going to have so much fun!" She swings him back and forth and my son is laughing as she dances him away.

Her gift, joy.

Later, after dinner, we sit on the sofa, talking and drinking wine. Warm currents of air move gently among us, teasing the candles my mother-in-law set about the room, making the flames dance. Watching them flicker, I hear — or I think I hear — the crack of antique flames.

The boy sprawls on the patterned rug, scraping away with his crayons. I watch him trace convoluted loops and swirls across the paper, whispering to himself as he works. Although he already knows his alphabet, he's only recently begun to try writing the letters himself.

He lies there, ignoring the grown-up chatter going on over his head.

And as he works, he whispers.

Once or twice during our conversation I hear — or I think I hear — the sound of horses clip-clopping along in the street below. But when I go to the window, the street is empty and quiet, the snow below unmarked. Standing at the windows, the air outside full of snow, I am pleased and surprised to find that, for the first time since my childhood, I feel the anticipation of Christmas morning. Torn paper, scattered ribbons. Hugs and thank you's all morning long.

My breath blooms with warmth against the chilled glass. In the cold place clouded over, I write my son's name with a fingertip, whispering "Esss Aaayyy Emmmm..."

When I sit back down on the sofa again, I see that my letters have melted away in the time it took me to cross the room.

My in-laws live in a loft in a converted building downtown. It's a landmark, apparently, their building. Colossal and ugly and utterly charming. When we arrive for the holidays, they give us the grand tour. Once, long ago, the horses that pulled the city streetcars were stabled there. Long ago, back when there were still streetcars in the city. And horses to pull them.

It's a massive brick building, layered with anachronisms. New time and old time jumbled together, stacked unevenly, threatening to tip over at any moment. Weathered wood beams support polished hardwood floors. Crumbling, brick-lined hallways lead to elevators with stainless steel doors and marbled

floors. The ceilings are very high, twenty feet at least. The star on my mother-in-law's massive Christmas tree just barely brushes the beams above.

Since we arrived this morning, my husband has spent the time distracting, bribing, and threatening our son whenever he strays too near the fragile ornaments dangling from the tree.

Christmas is for children. And it's too much to ask of a child, I think, to resist the lure of the season. The ornaments, the lights, the presents. Children know when something special is happening and when it's being kept from them. The secret arguments, the words we spell out, our curses we whisper through clenched teeth — they draw it all out of the air over their heads. And they know, far more than we give them credit for.

He couldn't help himself, my son. Despite our warnings, he hovered around the tree for most of the day, finally sprawling on the floor after dinner with his crayons and his paper while the rest of us sat and talked.

I ask my father-in-law about the wall, about the dark, smoky marks that stretch along the length of it.

He turns, craning his neck. "Where?"

I almost rise to show him, but sink back into my seat. "I guess it was just a shadow." I gesture, "From here, it looked like there were burn marks on the bricks."

My husband leans over in front of me and stares at the wall for a moment of two, from my perspective. He leans back, smirking. "More wine, honey?"

His parents laugh. Funny man, my husband and their son.

His gift, comedy.

My father-in-law half-rises on the couch, pointing to the bricks in the wall. “Can you see this here, where the size of the bricks shift? This was the window of another building, long before ours was built.” He passes his hand over the bricks. “This whole wall was once the outside wall of another building. When they built our building, they just butted it up against the other, connecting them. You see it here?”

I shake my head. But when he traces his fingertip across the wall . . . there in the pattern, a shape suddenly rises in front of my eyes, out of the bricks — a square place in the wall where they shift, slightly offset.

It’s a window, looking out. A window, looking in.

He traces it again. “See here, they closed it up with a slightly different size brick? A different shape? Right here. You see? This was the window of the other building.”

“Really?” My husband rises, laying his hand over one of the bricks at the edge of the old window.

I look to my son. He is watching us, listening, looking up at the wall. Selecting a black crayon from his box, he returns to his coloring.

I tilt my head and look at his picture. The page is a riot of jagged lines. Red streaks. Orange and yellow smears across the page. The colors dense, layered over one another.

At the wall, my husband is laying his hand over the bricks in the window, one by one, counting. And from somewhere, outside, somewhere far off, I hear the faint

sound of hooves. I don't bother getting up. I know the street outside is clear and there are no prints in the fresh snow. Not tonight.

Turning back to my son, I see that he has drawn a thick black square in the center of his page, whispering to himself as he runs the crayon over the lines again and again.

Hours later I wake suddenly from a dream, a nightmare that twists away from my mind and sinks back into forgetfulness. Whatever it was, I cannot remember. Must have been bad, though. There's sweat cooling on my body but I'm shivering under the heavy blanket. In the cold place at the back of my mind, there's a diminishing echo . . . a scream.

Light from the street outside filters in through the frosted windows, caught by the ornaments on the darkened Christmas tree. Cold light, winter light. Long before dawn.

Before I can wonder why I am awake, wonder what woke me, there's a small sound from the foot of the sofa. A whisper, a voice. I raise up on one elbow and look.

Standing up in his crib, my son is awake. He holds onto the side with one hand and waves to me.

No. Not to me, no. He is waving, but not to me. His eyes are fixed on the brick wall behind me, above my head.

Suddenly very cold, I turn around to look, putting my hand out to the bricks, tracing the faint marks there — shadows that my husband and his parents couldn't see a few hours earlier. Shadows that I had spent the rest of the evening ignoring, pretending they weren't there.

Knowing that they were. Knowing that whatever I was seeing there on the wall, my family could not.

But now, sitting up in bed at three in the morning, I can see that it's true. They're burned, the bricks. Smoke marks run all up and down the height of the wall. Once, there must have been a fire. From the signs of it — signs that, apparently, yes, I admit, only I can see — it must have been terrible.

I throw back the covers and rise, the metal frame of the sofa bed creaks under my weight. My husband does not move. His breathing, soft and measured, reminds me to take a breath.

Bare feet and cold floors, bringing back memories of other late nights. Childhood insomnia and night terrors, adolescent slumber parties, and furtive college lovemaking. I have always loved being awake in a sleeping house. The secrecy of it. That stillness, the privacy. The selfish solitude of bare feet and cold floors.

But I am not alone. Not tonight. I lay my son back down in his crib and, giving him a smile, I whisper "Why aren't you asleep? It's almost Christmas!"

Smiling up at me, he rolls over into his blankets and stuffed animals. For a quick moment, I miss my family halfway across the country. They'll be celebrating Christmas tomorrow morning in a warm place. And, for a second, despite the falling snow outside, it doesn't feel like Christmas anymore. Not really, not without my own family to share it with.

I get back into bed and lie there, staring up at the ceiling. I close my eyes and feel my mind gently unhook and drift away. Slowly, my thoughts unravel, and I fall.

I'm nearly gone when a wave of cold washes over me,
shocking me awake.

My son is whispering again, in his crib. I sit up and go
to him. He's standing up, hanging on the side, waving
and whispering at the wall. I lay him back down and
he sits up again. He pushes my hands away and stands
up, holding onto the rail, whispering.

I rub his back to calm him down. "It's very late, honey.
Why aren't you asleep?"

"I'm waving to the little boy." He pushes my hand away
from his back. After only three years, he knows all my
little tricks. I follow his gaze back to the wall and I see
— or I think I see — a shadow on the bricks, something
that shifts and moves.

Something's there on the wall, moving against — no,
moving inside — the bricked window. There is a
shadow on the wall, a shadow leaning out from the old
bricked window. And it is waving. Waving to my son.
Waving to me.

I can see the pale hand, the faint smile in a dim face,
the shadowed eyes looking out at us across the years.

My son, waving back, whispers. "See the boy, Mommy?"

And then my dream, my nightmare, is there again in
my mind. Full and complete. A collection of images,
impressions layered one atop the other until they
dissolve into one single moment as the boy falls.

The boy is falling, in my dream.

An abandoned warehouse. Weeds growing up the walls. Crumbling brick and mortar. Splintered floors. Broken bottles, twisted wire. Faded paint peeling from the doors. Empty window panes. The wind, the snow freezing on the rough brick sill.

A moment's gasp, a twist, and then the boy is falling. Falling into one of the cold places. The dim and hollow places where the unfortunate sometimes come to rest.

Maybe he'd been playing a game, hide and seek with neighborhood friends. Maybe he'd been alone, exploring the old buildings. Maybe it was a long time before they found the body.

Pale figure, form insubstantial. A child, a shadow of a boy broken and sprawled in the weeds.

Lonely, afraid, and cold, the boy rises, moving through the dim light. Never straying far from the window ledge, never moving further than the small depression in the grass he made when he fell to earth. And around him, the world shifts and changes, the city grows up and moves on. Buildings fall into the sky, crowding together, one on top of the other.

He wanders, the boy, never straying too far from the high window or the low place, always moving between the two. Always climbing, always falling.

And after a time, he finds the low place has been buried beneath time and bricks, a foundation of cold concrete. He discovers that his high window has been sealed, bricked up. And still the boy wanders in the cold places, more lost than ever.

He wanders among the workhorses, running his insubstantial hands over their shivering flanks, passing between them, unseen but not entirely outside their skittish senses.

He sees the dim flickers in the mist and, full of terror and grief, makes his way back to his high window where he watches as the flames, hungry and insatiable, consume carriage, horse, man, and building.

And, in my dream, the boy is falling.

My husband wakes me the next morning. “What are you doing?”

I am cold and stiff. I passed the night on the floor by my son’s crib, watching the pale form move here and there.

It came out, finally, from the window, from the bricks, and wandered through the room. Sometimes it came very close, radiant with cold, to peer at me and at my son. When it did, when it came too close, I would wave it back. It always obeyed, respectful, never pressing closer. And although I could not see his face, I knew my fear saddened him.

But I have a child of my own, warm and bright, to think of and I do not know to what cold places this boy might lead him. So I spent the night waving the pale roamer away and slept on the floor, keeping watch over my son until Christmas morning, until presents and music and laughter warmed the room once more.

I watch my son, dancing around the tree impatiently while the rest of us prolong the moment with coffee and conversation. The room is warm, save for that cold place to one side. In the corner of my eye, a dim form drifts — lonely and envious. We are all happy this morning, except for one.

And so it is without regret, without fear, that I finally beckon to the cold form hovering nearby, turning to open our warm circle, our family, to him.

And at my gesture, almost immediately I feel — or I think I feel — a rush, a cold breeze passing me. There's momentary chill, a flicker of a kiss against my cheek.

Then, the shadow drifts closer to my son and I see my boy's eyes light up.

"Merry Christmas," he whispers. "Merry Christmas."

And no one hears him, but me. No one sees the dim hand that rests lightly for a moment on his shoulder. No one sees, no one but me.

My gift, sight.

Christmas is for children. We watch my son tear into his presents and I realize for the first time that he has begun collecting memories for the future, layering them one atop the other. A foundation, built moment to moment, to support him throughout his life. In thirty years time, who knows what he might remember of this day?

Will he recall a bright morning with windows full of snow? Will he remember the faces of his grandparents? The bright paper and the presents? Being allowed to eat cookies before breakfast?

Or will he puzzle over a vague memory? Will he perhaps ask me someday, years from now, about a half-remembered episode, an unexpected guest, a lonely boy that visited with us one Christmas morning when my son was very young?

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 . . . well, not really. There's a lot of true things in this episode, lots of characters based on real people. But don't bother trying to sue for your share of the profits. No one's making a penny on it, especially me. And if I'm not getting any cash out of it, neither do you.

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He's the one to blame.

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NEXT UP,
SONGS OF BEETLES, SONGS OF WHEELS.



TELL US HOW OUR END WILL COME.