

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

EPIISODE  SEVEN

MAKE NO MISTAKE, BY NOW IT SHOULD BE CLEAR THAT THIS LITTLE DALLIANCE WITH EGO HAS METASTASIZED INTO FULL-BLOWN NARCISSISM AND THE ONLY POSSIBLE CURE IS AMPUTATION, ALTHOUGH THE LAWS IN MOST PROVINCES EXPRESSLY FORBID THIS SORT OF THING, REGARDLESS OF HOW NECESSARY IT MIGHT BE. WITH THAT BEING SAID, THERE'S NO REASON YOU CAN'T ADOPT A MORE, SHALL WE SAY, "OPEN SOURCE" APPROACH TO THE OPERATION. ALL YOU NEED IS A SMALL HAND SAW, A BUCKET OF GRAIN ALCOHOL, AND FOUR REASONABLY STRONG FRIENDS TO DO THE HONORS — YOU MIGHT AS WELL BRING ALONG A CAMERA TOO, JUST SO YOU CAN PUT THE WHOLE THING ON YOUTUBE. TRUTH BE TOLD, IT'LL BE FAR TOO LATE BY THAT TIME. THE DAMAGE DONE BY THIS DUSTY RELIC INCLUDES CHEAP JOKES AT THE EXPENSE OF THE OBESE, AS WELL AS A RATHER PREDICTABLE ENDING WHICH INVOLVES A SUCCUBUS GETTING SOME VAGUELY DEFINED NOOKIE. ✱

GAINES AND THE LEANAN-SIDHE

by T.M. Camp

Gaines was, in more ways than one, a stout man.

Firstly, of course, it was his drink. The old advertisements on the walls down at the Rose and Crown proclaimed that it was good for you, that it was rich in essential vitamins and minerals, that it was a meal in itself.

Gaines didn't believe a word of it. At all.

But that didn't matter, because he was a stout man.

He was a stout man — loyal, steadfast. He'd held the same position for years, since he'd left school. While others had risen in life and station, Gaines had maintained a steady and reliable hold on the status quo (or such as it was, circa 1986). It didn't bother him. There were plenty who were worse off, he knew. And his employers didn't seem to mind that much of his time in the office was spent doing things on computers for people who were just too lazy to do it themselves.

And now, finally, there's no way to be polite or delicate about the fact that Gaines was stout in a more literal, perhaps even concrete, sense.

That is to say, Gaines was heavy set (as his father had put it, so often and so many years before his own heavy heart failed him one day).

Although, according to his mother, Gaines suffered from a glandular condition, which was her way of putting on airs when everyone else knew that Gaines was just, simply fat.

He was. Really fat.

He knew it. He'd known it all his life. And the worst part was, it wasn't so bad.

He hardly minded at all. Being fat gave him the freedom to be whatever he wanted to be. He didn't have to apologize for how he lived, for how much he drank or ate, or what he did to pass the time.

He was fat. Everything else lived in the shadow of that. And, in a way, Gaines lived there as well. People didn't see him, not really — not that he was difficult to miss in a crowd, quite the opposite. But he might as well have lived on the other side of the moon. That he was fat eclipsed anything else people might have ordinarily noticed about him.

And, really, it was easier for them to just not even notice him at all.

And, for Gaines, life went along just fine.

He got up each morning and went to work where he said things like “Now click there...” to someone over and over again all day long.

After work, he'd stop off for a pint or two at the Rose and Crown. No one was waiting for him at home, of course, so he was free to have four or five if the mood struck him.

And then home to his little flat to make dinner — or, rather, to unwrap something frozen and heat it up in the toaster oven until it became a reasonable facsimile of something he could recognize as somewhat dinner shaped.

Then, telly until Ten. And then to bed.

All in all, not too bad a way to spend a life — especially if it was all you had to work with.

Not that Gaines didn't want more. He genuinely longed for the personal, the shared. He wanted nothing more than to feel the gravitational tug of someone else in his orbit, to strike up a conversation and let the momentum of it carry them along together.

Why else stop in at the pub each night? He could always have done his drinking at home where it was more comfortable, less crowded, and less expensive.

No. Each night he would park himself on the corner stool at the Rose and Crown, an expectant half-smile on his face.

The other patrons — most were slim, vaguely rodent-like — they barely took any notice of him at all. They were too focused on buying each other drinks that were almost as fizzy and colorful as Gaines imagined their lives to be.

So it went, night after night. And this too wasn't so bad. At the very least, he had his stout. And there was always the possibility that one night...

One night...

One night, Gaines was in his usual spot, smiling his usual smile, and holding onto his usual pint for dear usual life. All around him, the happy little rodents licked up their drinks and eyed each other with a hungerlust that bordered on starvation.

Gaines wanted to believe that they were, all of them, subsisting on appetizers because they had nothing else to choose from. He knew in his heart that, if given the chance, a wonderful, stout fellow such as himself would be a full course meal, if only someone took the time to meet his gaze — to look over the menu, as it were. His love and devotion could feed someone for a very, very long time.

Fortunately for him — and, as it turns out, unfortunately for him — all of this was true.

Gaines sighed and set a fiver on the bar. Soon enough he had a fresh pint in front of him along with a pile of change that the bartender had considerately plunked down in a sour puddle of old ale. Gaines picked the coins out one by one, drying them with a napkin, thoughtfully.

He considered the handful of change, still slightly sticky. After a long moment, he left his usual spot and went over to the jukebox. He fed them in, one by one. A few of the smaller coins slipped through to the return, but he left them there. Call it an offering to the gods, if that's not gilding the lilly too much.

He considered his options. Impulse wasn't his strong suit, but he finally jabbed one stout finger against the key marked "carousel" and turned without waiting to see what music the machine selected for him.

That first song, it was . . . unfamiliar. A woman stretched out a simple, plaintive note ever so thin in the air, slicing through the chatter and the noise around him.

He sat down again, closed his eyes, and let the song flow over him.

It was, not surprisingly, quite lovely.

And then the spell was broken, a heavy tap against his shoulder. He opened his eyes to see the bartender before him.

“S’broken,” the man grumbled, pointing his thick thumb back to the jukebox. “No refunds.” And with that, he turned away before Gaines could answer.

Gaines looked back at the little paper sign stuck to one side of the jukebox which proclaimed that it was indeed broken.

And yet the song went on, that single voice rising and falling. It reminded him somehow of his mother, the old songs she used to sing in the kitchen in the early morning. He’d lie in bed upstairs and listen to her while the window brightened with the dawn.

He hadn’t thought of that in years.

Someone was singing, somewhere in the pub — no, not someone.

She was singing.

Gaines turned on his stool and scanned the room. There was a time when he’d been grateful for the semi-dark in the pub, as it helped to hide the breadth and body of him. But not now.

He couldn’t see her, but still she sang.

There.

She was sitting at a table in the back corner. He thought for a moment she might have been looking his way. He quickly turned to the bar, to the safety of his pint — hopefully before she’d noticed him staring,

He raised his glass, watching her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. She was just barely visible, her pale and lovely face peeping out from between a bottle of ouzo and Midori.

Her eyes were closed, he saw. And she was still singing.

Gaines half-turned on his perch, feigning interest in a game of darts on the other side of the bar. From time to time, he glanced over to where she sat, building a picture of her in his mind from little slices and stolen snapshots of time.

Dark hair. Lovely, pale skin. A perfect chin that led casually to a strong throat. High, broad shoulders. The open neck of her sweater, the dark curve of her pale...

He turned back to the bar and downed his pint in one go, signaling the barman for another. He was suddenly very warm.

While there were a variety of ways in which Gaines was stout . . . bravery, however, was not one of them. For all of his good qualities, he was not particularly bold.

He was not, for instance, the sort of person who would single out a pretty young woman in a pub, make his way through a crowd of people to her table, and sit down across from her without so much as an invitation.

That, quite simply, was not something he was capable of — except, apparently, tonight.

He'd been bewitched, some force possessed — no propelled — him up off his stool and over to where she sat, softly singing. Her eyes were still closed and her head gently tilted this way and that while she sang.

She was even lovelier up close.

She was perfect.

She was, Gaines realized, no longer singing. Now she was just looking at him.

His heart hammered in his chest. Had he been standing, his legs would have buckled. He took a breath, his mouth suddenly parched to Sahara proportions.

“Hello.”

He blinked. There was a faint ghost of an accent in that single word — Scottish? Irish? — and even when she wasn’t singing, he heard the music of it in her voice.

There was a glass of wine at her elbow and she took a careful, hummingbird sip — her eyes still on his.

Then she smiled.

And, in that moment, Gaines was lost. Forever.

No one could guess at what they spoke of that first night, or how it was that a man like Gaines managed to capture the attention of a woman — let alone a woman like her.

It was a mystery even to him. But the truth of it was right there before his eyes, sitting across the table as clear as a moonbeam at midnight. And she did not seem to fear nor pity him. She smiled, she listened, and she laughed.

“Cait,” she told him, once he’d remembered to ask. “You can call me Cait.”

He woke the next morning with her name on his lips, the heat of her hand still burning at the center of his chest.

She'd laid her fingertips there the night before as they'd made their farewells, standing out on the sidewalk in front of the pub.

As she agreed to meet him the next night, Cait touched him lightly on the chest and then left him there on the sidewalk while the heat of her spread through him.

All day long it burned and all day long he found her name in his mouth — an incantation, a summons. Like a child silently chanting a birthday wish before the candles are blown out, he whispered her name — willing her to meet him again, needing her to be real.

In his cubicle at work, he muttered and whispered. He wanted to stand and shout her name, let that heat she'd awakened within roar out of him like wildfire to consume everyone around him. Those fools staring at their computers, clutching their phones and coffee mugs, avoiding the gaze of their significant (and not so significant) others staring vacantly back at them from the framed desktop snapshots and computer screensavers . . . he wanted them to know. He wanted them all to burn.

When he could stand it no longer, he gathered up his things and left. If anyone ran into a problem that day — if a printer jammed, if a computer crashed — they were just going to have to fix it themselves.

He spent a little more time than usual on his wardrobe that evening. He was surprised to find his slacks were just that, a bit loose around the middle.

But no matter. Without giving it another thought, he pulled his belt a few notches tighter and set to work on his shoes, polishing them until they shone.

Although it wasn't even near time to go, Gaines found himself standing in the front hallway. He paced back and forth, checking himself in the hall mirror every few seconds — moving his bulk from side to side, as he could not see himself all at once in the glass.

He stood for a long moment, jingling his keys and listening to the slow drift of a thought taking shape in his head.

Then, he smiled.

A little while later, he was surprised to find himself sitting at the kitchen table with a junk mail envelope in hand, reading over what he had just written on the back.

Gaines had never fancied himself much of a writer, let alone a poet. Yet here it was in his hands, a set of hastily scribbled lines that had come to him, unbidden and insistent, demanding to be written down.

A little embarrassed, he laid it aside. It was one thing for a man like him to fall into the good fortune of meeting a woman like Cait. It was another thing to assume she'd have any interest at all in these pretentious, adolescent scribblings. He was too old, too big, to play the role of the schoolboy poet.

And yet . . . it felt good, this little thing he had made by himself. It made him feel less nervous, somehow.

Then he remembered the time. He swore at himself and at the clock, now confirming he was likely to be

very late indeed. In his mad dash out the door, the only clear thought in his head was “Please God, don’t let her leave.”

He needn’t have worried. She was there, of course, back at the little table in the corner. And she smiled when she saw him come in. No one had ever done that before and, for a second time, he fell in love with her.

She rose and met him halfway, touching his hand with hers. If she noticed the nervous sheen of his palm, she didn’t show it. If anything, the heat of her own hand steamed it all away — the nervousness and fear rising out of him, distilling everything within down to the simplest of elements: Just the two of them, spending that evening together.

And soon enough — too soon for Gaines — they found themselves on the sidewalk, making their goodbyes once again.

This time, though, her head lay on his shoulder, her cheek hot against his chest. She turned her face to his and smiled. He felt her breath on his throat, felt something hot within him awaken, something that echoed the heat she had shared with him.

“Goodnight,” she said, leaving him with the warm smell of her skin wafting around him in gently dissipating waves.

He stood there and watched her go, this man Gaines, never once remembering that fat, unhappy men are usually supposed to live and die alone.

The next day, Gaines called in sick to work. They’d arranged to meet again that night, he and Cait, and he couldn’t honestly imagine sitting in a cramped cubicle

pretending to care about other people's problems all day long while this mad, hot thing fluttered in his chest.

Instead, he paced around his apartment, once again chanting her name under his breath. When he could stand it no longer, he scribbled his fever out at the kitchen table, slowly adding to the little pile of poems there.

He didn't bother pretending to wait until it was time to meet her. He was at the pub a full hour early, tugging at his necktie, barely noticing that his shirt collar was a little loose at the throat. His belt had gained another notch as well. But he was too happy to pay all that any mind.

More than anything, he wanted to stand up on the table, fill his not inconsiderable chest with all the breath in the room, and shout to all those lovely little rodents, blow their ears back with how happy he was.

But he was still Gaines, still an eclipse — silent and unobserved. And, truth be told, there was no reason. They would never understand, not in a million years when evolution finally caught up with them and they knew love on their own. And maybe not even then.

They weren't capable of understanding.

So he sat calmly and waited, his pint of stout untouched on the table in front of him. From time to time he would swipe his fingers across the condensation on the glass, tracing patterns with his damp fingertips on the varnished wood, watching as they slowly dried and faded away.

Then she was there, there in the doorway. She moved through the crowd to meet him, untouched by the sweat and cologne and cigarette smoke.

Her pale, sweet face was a pearl set in the deep dark mane of hair that, yes, Gaines had longed to see spread out across a pillow in the moonlight.

She touched his hand. She smiled.

And everything from there on out was wonderful.

They stayed late together, long past last call, long past when everyone else had gone and the barman was clearing his throat in a pointedly grumpy manner.

When they absolutely had to leave, they moved together through the chairs resting upside down atop the tables — hand in hand like two children wandering through a fairytale.

As they had on their previous nights, they stood together on the sidewalk outside the pub. Cait's face was turned up into the light, her lips parted. Gaines could feel a faint trickle of breath from between them, warm and inviting, as he bent to her.

Back at his flat, she waited patiently while he fumbled for his keys. Once they were inside, she drew him close. And, soon enough, she led him by the hand to his own bed.

And then, for the third and final time, he fell in love with her.

At the end...

Her skin was perfect, her eyes blazing down at him in the darkness. In the shifting shadows they made

together, he said her name over and over again — calling up to her as she moved over him, across him.

And it was something a little like a song, something like a prayer.

Then her eyes shifted, changed, and he felt her clench like a fist around him — holding him fast.

The heat began then, slow and warm and delicious and she was drawing him in and he was collapsing, closing in on himself like a glove turned inside out and still he sang her name and she was singing as well now and there was a rush of heat, a flash of fire, boiling the flesh off of his bones as, with one quick and final breath, she finished.

Afterwards...

He lay on the bed, watching as she gathered up her clothes. Without any shame, any hint of shyness, she dressed and left without bothering to look back.

On her way to the front door of his flat, Cait took up a sheaf of handwritten pages she'd found on the kitchen table and considered them for a moment.

With a wry smile, she tucked them away into the pocket of her coat.

After all, worship was hard to come by these days. One shouldn't ignore offerings, however feeble.

And finally...

Somebody found him, in the end — his landlord, the postman, someone from the office checking up on him. It doesn't matter who it was.

Gaines lay there on the scorched mattress, still half-wrapped in the sheets, his skin stretched tight over the bones, nothing more than a husk now.

His cheeks pulled back from his teeth in a dry smile, not entirely lacking of joy.

This is a work of fiction. All situations, events, and characters are nothing more or less than products of the author's imagination. So you're probably safe to chat up that nice lady down at the pub — but don't say I didn't warn you. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is unintentional, regardless of their weight.

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He's the one to blame.

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NEXT UP,
YOU CAN ALWAYS JUDGE A MAN BY HIS SHOES.



YOU MUST KEEP WATCH AGAINST THE WORLD.