

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

EPIISODE



EIGHT

IN A SURPRISING SHOW OF RESILIENCE, OUR DELIGHTFUL HOST LABORS ON IN HIS EFFORTS TO INFLECT THE DETRITUS OF HIS CREATIVE CAREER ON AN OTHERWISE ENTHUSIASTIC AND DEVOTED FOLLOWING, CLINGING TO THE FLOTSAM AND JETSAM OF HIS LABORS AS THE RISING TIDE THREATENS TO SWAMP HIM UTTERLY BENEATH THE COLD DARK WINE OF UNPRODUCTIVITY AND MADNESS. IN THIS, HIS NINTH OUTING, IT IS NO COINCIDENCE THAT HIS THOUGHTS TURN TO THE DARKER SHELLS OF EXISTENCE, TO THAT FALLEN LORD OF TRAITORS AND LIES. NOT EVEN ABOVE ABUSING THAT TIRED TROPE OF LITERATURE, WE SEE THE AUTHOR'S MALIGNANCY SPREAD INTO ORGANS OF CREATIVE LIFE THAT HAVE FLOURISHED UNDER THE GENTLE NURTURING OF THE LIKES OF DANTE AND MILTON, AMONG OTHERS. SHAMEFULLY OBTUSE, OUR SODDEN HOST WASTES NO TIME IN SUBJUGATING ONE OF THE MOST FRUITFUL AND INTERESTING LITERARY SUBJECTS. YES, ONCE AGAIN. ✱

HOOVES

by T.M. Camp

She didn't know he was The Devil when she met him. That came much later.

But he was polite and bought her a drink — which she sipped, glancing down occasionally at his shoes. She believed that you could tell everything you needed to know about a man by his shoes.

The Devil's shoes were sleek and dark and his lap bulged when he shifted on the barstool next to her. When she saw what he had there, she let him take her home.

He even paid for her drink. Surprise, surprise.

Outside, one palm raised for a taxi, she felt him place his other hand gently at the base of her spine. For one wild moment she thought he was going to push her forward into traffic.

In the cab, he was the perfect gentlemen. Men usually aren't. But The Devil only sat and smiled faintly at the world sliding past his window.

As a rule, she never took men back to her apartment. It was more dangerous, sure, to go back to their place. But she was careful about the company she kept. Shoes never lie.

She was a little nervous in the elevator. When The Devil touched the number for his floor, she felt certain he would punch the STOP button and turn on her like an animal. Next to taxi cabs, an elevator is a man's favorite fantasy.

But while the numbers counted higher and higher, The Devil whistled a piping little tune, seemingly oblivious to her concern and, yes, her disappointment as well.

When they reached his floor, he held the door open for her just like a gentleman should.

His apartment was what she expected. Cleaner than most, the decor just a touch behind the times. From the look of the place, she guessed he must have someone in to do the cleaning. Every surface was dust-free, the air faintly sharp with the scent of cleanser. The carpet showed the fresh tracks of a vacuum cleaner.

A memory came to her. As a child, she used to rub her socks on the rugs to build up static electricity, sneak up on her older brother and pass the shock to his ear.

But she wasn't wearing socks and the man closing the door behind her was The Devil.

He took her coat and poured the wine, heavy and dark in the glass. She took a seat on the white leather couch, sipping The Devil's Merlot.

He did not sit down next to her as she expected — and, yes, as she had hoped — but rather he sat across from her, his shoes dark against the rug.

They spoke of small things over their wine. He smiled softly, listening with his eyes half-closed.

When he took her glass to refill it, she began to wonder just how long it would take for him to get around to making his move. Conversation and wine are all very well and good, but she hadn't gone home with The Devil for nothing.

As he was pouring, she complimented him on the apartment and asked could she maybe get a tour?

“Sure,” The Devil said.

Eventually they reached the bedroom. But only after he had dutifully shown her the kitchen and a handful of other tidy, nondescript rooms. No evidence of a girlfriend or a wife anywhere.

Peeking through a doorway, she noted a smudge against the bathroom mirror and imagined him wiping the steam away before he shaved.

Sipping her wine, she turned and followed at his heels down the hallway towards what turned out to be the bedroom. It was there that The Devil surprised her. When she stepped past him and through the doorway, she discovered something. Something was revealed, but she could not have said what it was.

In the bedroom, there were books. Scores, perhaps hundreds of them — sitting open on the floor, strewn in haphazard piles, a few tall stacks rising almost to the ceiling. More books were spread across the bed, entangled in the sheets and blankets.

Whatever this was, whatever it revealed, she sighed in relief and moved into the room.

Setting her wineglass down on the cluttered floor, she turned to face The Devil as she sat down on the bed.

Once she'd finished undressing, she ran her hands up over her body, across her breasts and through her hair.

He stood in the doorway watching her, the light in the hallway eclipsing his features.

Although she couldn't see his face, she could feel his smile, his dark eyes on her.

She took up her wineglass again, raised it high as though offering a toast. Then she tipped it backward, spilling the warm dark red down her body like a negligee.

The sharp smell of wine rose from her and she asked if he was ready now?

The Devil stepped forward, letting the door close softly behind him.

FIN ✨

THE PIPER'S SON

by T.M. Camp

No one was watching.

The boy sat on the lawn, the sun beating down hard against the back of his head. Various little metal trucks and cars were strewn here and there about him, ignored. He sat, with his legs crossed, chin in his hands, sulking. His knees were very red, and his legs itched from the grass.

Every so often he would swat half-heartedly at a small insect.

His eyes were fixed on the sidewalk — that no man's land, that magical barrier between his freshly mown grass prison and freedom. He could not cross it, he was not allowed. He had to remain in his little patch of itchy crabgrass and watch while the world passed him by.

No one was watching.

The man circled the block twice, his anticipation growing. He gripped the wheel tightly in his shaking hands.

Mothers and fathers often told their children about monsters. As a child, he himself had heard bedtime stories and tales that left him shivering and cold underneath the covers. Often, he would be too afraid to rise in the night for a drink of water or to urinate, for fear that when he hung his tender little ankles

down to the floor scaly hands would dart out from under the bed and drag him down.

Now he was that monster, unspoken of save in parental whispers.

The man thought of himself as a hunter, a predator in a world of soft-bellied, foolish prey.

He sometimes saw himself as a venus fly trap, exuding sticky sweet bait, waiting for the unwary little insect to slip into his jaws and struggle itself to death.

Occasionally he thought of himself as a jolly Santa with his arms full of presents, passing out joy to children. In fact, he had been St. Nick once, so many years ago — that is, until he had to leave quietly and quickly in the night.

Despite the unfortunate ending, he treasured that sweet season in his memories.

Over the years he had been a clown, a policeman, driven an ice cream truck . . . so many masks and names.

He was that particular monster known only to children as a vague, schoolyard caricature: The dirty old man in a stained black raincoat, his sweaty hands in his pockets, promising candy and treats to stupid kids.

Hardly accurate — except for the sweaty hands, of course. He wore cardigans, mostly. And round bifocals. He often had lost a puppy and was grateful when some nice little girl or boy would offer to help search for it. Sometimes he knew their parents. Once, in an airport washroom, he had been a long lost uncle.

It was all far easier than you could imagine.

He turned the block again, a map in his hand, pretending to search the street for a particular address. In fact, he was checking for signs of any witnesses — any other children or mothers who might see him and give the police a fragment of his license plate number or his face.

His palms were slick against the wheel as he turned the corner again.

You can't be too careful, he told himself.

This was very true.

The boy kicked listlessly at his toys. There was no question in his mind of disobedience. He had been punished before for trying to escape, and he had learned his lesson. No, he was meant to play in plain sight of the house and could not venture off of the lawn without permission.

And so, the boy spent much of his time thinking of what he would do, had he the chance. Climbing trees ranked very high on his list, perhaps just beneath building a fort in a vacant lot. Riding a bike held a prominent place in his heart. He wondered if it was hard to do a wheelie. He longed to find out.

He had once asked (even begged, desperate with boredom and loneliness) for a dog. He argued quite articulately — well, articulately for an eight year old — that a dog would provide both companionship and protection.

He was refused, on the grounds that dogs were too much responsibility for one so young. He was not able to convince them otherwise.

He thought often of the other neighborhood children who ran by the yard, laughing and screaming. Sometimes they would stop and say hello, or ask him to play.

Once (and he treasured this bitter little pleasure often), once a stray baseball had fallen into his yard. The two boys who had been playing catch in the street came over to ask for it back.

He picked it up, but stopped a moment. Standing there with the ball cupped in his hands, he held the world.

He may have closed his eyes even, briefly caressing the rough stitching between his fingertips, savoring the rough hide and the smell of freedom that clung to it.

And then he tossed the ball back, without a word.

The stranger, the predator, the hunter — the molester, the pervert — passed by once more.

No one was watching.

Next time around, he promised himself.

He took off his spectacles, noting with an unconscious pride that his palms were now dry.

The boy stood there, facing the street, nudging a toy car with one toe . . . his eyes looking to far away.

He started, seeing the car pulled up at the curb and the friendly face peering out at him through the window.

“Hello there,” the smiling man called.

The boy said hello.

“Could you help me?” The stranger waved a crumpled mess of roadmap at him. “I’m a little bit lost.” He shrugged at the boy, grinning at his own foolishness.

The boy did not return the smile, did not answer at all. He merely stood looking at the man’s clownish face bobbing there in the car window.

“See,” the stranger chuckled warmly, “I’ve been trying to find this street here and I’m afraid I may have gotten a bit turned around. I want to get here…” He held up the map, tracing one finger along a red line.

Although the map was a fascinating, blurry mass of scrambled lines and numbers, the boy did not move forward to see.

The man in the car was not discouraged. He shifted tactics easily — after all, each child was very different from another. One needed to adapt where it was necessary.

It had been his experience that often made all the difference in the world.

The boy stood, toys scattered about him in the sun, as the car door opened and the stranger got out.

A look of pain spread across the man’s face. “I’ve lost my dog see. Today I got a phone call that someone had found him. I’m supposed to go pick him up, but I can’t find their house.” The stranger stepped closer, “Do you

know where the” — here he made up a name — “family lives?”

The boy, holding his ground, shook his head.

The man frowned again. “I really need some help.”

Two down, the stranger thought.

He was taking too long. The hardest part of all of this was relying on luck. In the past, he had abandoned many opportunities simply because of bad timing and bad luck.

He’d give it one more try and then be off — one way or another.

There was always next time.

The boy watched as the stranger stepped closer to the edge of the sidewalk now and reached into his pocket.

“See, this is my dog here. I sure hope I can get him back again.” He drew out a photo, glancing down at it. He looked back up at the boy with sad eyes. He held the photo out. “Isn’t he cute?” he asked.

With the windows of the house behind him gazing down on them, the boy took a step forward.

That’s all he wanted, the stranger. That’s all he had hoped for . . . that single step.

He dove forward, his shadow swallowing the boy up. There was no time for thought. He scooped the boy up and turned back to his car. Flight was the only thing on his mind, and he stopped with a shock to see another man standing there blocking his way.

He froze, the boy limp in his arms. Often they wouldn't struggle, the sweet children.

In all of his years, he had never been seen — most certainly he had never been caught in the act.

He had made plans, however, just in case.

"I'll kill him. Let me go." With the boy held tight under one arm, he drew out a knife — the blade flashed in the sunlight. He held it close to the child's face, near the eyes.

The man before him did not smile, did not laugh, but something in his manner bubbled with a vague amusement, a taint of perverse, deadly joy.

"If you let me go," the stranger said, "I'll let him go."

The man took one step forward.

With a sharp breath, the stranger jabbed the knife out. "Don't move." He saw the blade jiggle and knew that his hand was shaking. "I mean it."

The man facing him took another step closer.

With a snarl, the stranger pulled the knife in to the boy's face again. "Don't move." He heard the whine rising in his voice, hated himself and the weakness.

The man looked at him for a moment, the sun beating between them.

He reached out his hand and took the stranger's knife.

The boy quietly slipped out from under the stranger's sweaty armpit.

The stranger watched this, watched it all happen, frozen and unable to resist. He feet were lead; he could not run, he could not escape, he could not flee.

And the man, his face changing, his back splitting open with shadowy wings, drew the stranger close. And with a high piping laugh, carried him off into frigid darkness.

The boy sat on the lawn, the sun beating down hard against the back of his head. Various little metal trucks and cars were strewn here and there about him, ignored. He sat, with his legs crossed, chin in his hands, sulking. His head felt dull and heavy from the heat, and his palms were very sweaty.

Cars drove by, children passed.

So young now, he had only the vaguest idea of what had happened to him.

He remembered once hearing in school of how big game hunters would stake out a goat in a clearing so as to catch a tiger. The teacher had said “a kid” — the hunters would tie a kid to a stake and then lie back and wait for a predator to come along.

So, he understood a little of what he was.

He sat on the grass, forbidden to leave . . . waiting.

No one was watching.

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, let's hope that's the case. Any other alternative is too horrible to consider.

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He's the one to blame.

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NEXT UP,
INSERT "THINKING OUT OF THE BOX" JOKE HERE.



IF YOU DO NOT BRING FORTH WHAT IS WITHIN YOU,
WHAT IS WITHIN YOU WILL DESTROY YOU.