

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

EPISODE



TEN

RELYING YET AGAIN ON A THOROUGHLY SELF-DELUDED NARCISSISM AND THE MOMENTUM OF MEDIOCRITY, OUR BLIGHTED HOST ASSEMBLES A PATCHWORK OF PSEUDO SELF CONFESSIONS, MISREMEMBERED EVENTS, ANACHRONISTIC ANECDOTES, AND STOLEN EXPERIENCES ALL IN THE SERVICE OF PROVIDING HIS DWINDLING YET REMARKABLY PATIENT AND INDULGENT AUDIENCE WITH A REGRETTABLY LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT WHICH, UNSURPRISINGLY, TURNS OUT TO BE NOT LONG ENOUGH TO BE FULFILLING, NOR GOOD ENOUGH TO WARRANT A SECOND LISTEN, IF EVEN THE FIRST GO AROUND CAN BE ENDURED THROUGH UNTIL THE VERY END WHEN EVERYONE CAN FINALLY SIGH AND FREE THEMSELVES FROM THE STRING OF AWKWARD ADVERBS, ALLITERATION, AND HAM-FISTED IMAGERY STOLEN FROM TALES THAT YOU'VE HEARD SO MANY TIMES, SO MUCH BETTER TOLD BY OTHERS WHO HAVE COME BEFORE. ✱

THE PINK LADY

by T.M. Camp

You've heard this one before. I know you have. It's one of those friend-of-a-friend things that gets passed around at slumber parties or forwarded over e-mail. Everyone's heard a version of it from someone. Maybe it happened to a friend of your older brother, or to one of your college roommates, or maybe even your dad or your grandfather told it to you.

It's one of those things you believe at first. But after you've heard it five or six times from different people, you start to catch on. The story changes. People hear it and they pass it along like the flu. And, like a virus, it mutates to fit the host and their own retelling of it.

Stories are living things. They grow, they change in the telling and retelling. But the core of this story stays the same, no matter how many generations it endures.

First off, it's a story about boys. No matter who tells it, there's always two young men coming home late after a dance. Fifty years ago, it was cotillion. A hundred years ago, they'd been to a barn dance.

Lately, it seems like the story always takes place on prom night.

In some versions, they've gone stag. In others, they've dropped off their dates already. I heard it told once where they were brothers, coming back from a wedding reception in their rumpled tuxedos.

But there are never more than two of them and they are always on their way home.

I've never heard it told when they were anything but sober.

And there's always a woman. Sometimes she's wearing a party dress, sometimes it's just a nightgown. The boys see her standing alone by the side of the road. And they stop to offer her a ride.

They always stop.

Listen...

It was prom night. We were in Robert's car. He was my best friend back in high school but don't ask me where he is now. I haven't heard from him in years.

We didn't go stag but neither of us had gotten much out of the evening or our dates.

My girlfriend spent the whole evening flirting with another guy. A few days later I found out she'd been seeing him for like two months behind my back. I don't know why she didn't just go with him in the first place. But I broke up with her when I found out. Not that she cared.

Rob's date — I can't remember her name and it doesn't really matter anymore — was hopelessly devoted to him. She was already planning their wedding even though they'd only been going out for three months. It was obvious and Robert knew it. He was a week or two overdue for a breakup of his own.

So, not the best night for either of us. We didn't have a lot to say after we dropped the girls off. The plan was to crash at Rob's place. He lived up in Yorba Linda, just off the 91. Neither one of us had planned on coming back before midnight, but here it was only eleven-fifteen and we were already on our way home.

There was a lot of traffic heading the other way into Orange County, typical for a Saturday night. No one was even beginning to think of heading for home. Except for me and Rob.

We pulled off at a gas station and Rob ran in for cigarettes while I put a few bucks in the tank, grinding my teeth with disappointment. The night was warm. I took off my tux jacket and threw it in the backseat.

Rob returned fortified with his smokes and we headed off towards home. Neither of us were in any hurry to get there.

He took surface streets, tracing a crooked path through the neighborhoods between Anaheim and Yorba Linda. Once, this had all been orange and avocado groves. Now it was just tract homes and strip malls bleached a sickly yellow by the sodium streetlights.

There was a woman standing by the side of the road. We were driving through a broad barren area stretching between two identical housing developments. She had her head turned away from us, looking back into the scrubby weeds and the darkness beyond the road. She didn't look over when the car stopped.

I'd like to say that we were Samaritans, that we stopped in the spirit of goodwill and helpfulness. But it wasn't like she had her thumb out. The truth is that a pretty girl can have a powerful effect on two aching teenage hearts heading home early on prom night.

I rolled my window down and called over to her. "Excuse me? Are you okay?"

She turned. She was maybe four or five years older than the two of us but her eyes flickered with worry. Two guys in a car on a lonely road? Who could blame her?

I smiled, as friendly as I could. “Do you need a ride or something?”

The woman frowned and shook her head.

Robert, a little quicker on the uptake, leaned across the seats and called out something in Spanish. He’s from Mexico — well, his parents were. He’s second generation and he always said afterwards that he recognized something in her, something about her silence that only immigrants can see or share.

Whatever it was, whatever he saw, she relaxed a little at his question and answered slowly in Spanish.

Rob said something else. She smiled, nodding.

I sat and listened to them talk back and forth for a minute or two, no idea what they were saying.

I was perfectly content to watch the gentle interplay of her eyes and mouth as she spoke, the movement of her hair over her shoulders.

She was wearing a simple cotton dress, a pale pink fabric with flowers stitched around the collar.

Eventually they reached an understanding and Robert said “Jump in back, we’re going to give her a ride home.”

I got out, holding the door open for her. But she shook her head and spoke rapidly, first to me and then to him.

Rob called to me. “She doesn’t want you to ride in the back.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I don’t mind. There’s plenty of leg room.”

He sighed, loudly. “She’s worried about having you behind her, dumbass.”

I gave her an apologetic look and held open the back door for her.

She smiled shyly at me as she got in. Once I was back up front, we were driving again.

From time to time Rob spoke to her in Spanish, glancing in the rearview mirror, following the directions she provided. Her voice was low, hard to hear over the sound of the car. I shifted around in my seat to look at her. She was shivering.

I said “If you’re cold, you can wear my jacket.” It was lying on the seat next to her and, after Robert translated what I’d said, she nodded gratefully and slung it over her shoulders.

Her dress was pink, the roses at her throat a slightly darker shade. She pulled her long dark hair free of the tux jacket, drew it back away from her face and smiled at me, breaking my heart forever.

She saw it in my face. She knew.

Taking a breath, she leaned forward and put her hand out to lay her fingertips against my cheek.

She whispered something to me. I saw Robert glance into the rearview mirror.

The moment passed. She leaned back.

Rob shot me a look, smirking.

I looked at him. “What?”

He shook his head, began to answer but the woman in the backseat interrupted him. He asked her a question in response and she pointed to an intersection a few blocks ahead.

Rob drove up and pulled over. I got out to hold the door open for her.

On the sidewalk, she leaned down to the car to thank Robert. He said something in reply.

And then she turned to me. Despite three years of Spanish class, I had nothing to say to her. And it was killing me. I struggled my way through a passable “Como se yama?”

She smiled and pulled me close, whispering what sounded like “Alvina” against my lips before she kissed me.

Then she was running lightly up the street towards an old house where a bare bulb was still burning over the door.

I got back into the car. Rob called me a son of a bitch and we drove to his house where I lay awake on his couch, replaying those last few moments in my mind for the rest of the night.

Her hand on my arm, the taste of her breath.

It wasn't until the next morning when we were getting ready to return our tuxes that I realized that she'd forgotten to give my jacket back.

Robert wasn't happy to have to retrace our path from the night before, but we found the house again. And I, still a little heartsore, was glad for the chance to see her again.

You can probably guess the rest or you've heard it before. The story is always the same from this point on.

Always the same, the two guys go back to the house the next morning and knock. Someone answers — usually it's an old woman, the girl's mother — and she tells the two visitors that her daughter's dead and gone, has been for years.

The woman begins to weep then, the old heartache as strong as ever. Her daughter died, she tells them, died on the road walking home one night after a party long ago.

Some stories say it was an accident, hit and run. In other versions, someone left the girl there in the weeds with her dress and her throat open to the night sky.

But, the mother tells them, every year on the anniversary of her daughter's death two strangers knock on her door asking after a girl they drove home the night before.

They've come for a jacket, or a coat, or a scarf that they lent her the night before and forgot to get back. Like I said, you've probably heard all of this before.

It wasn't until I went to college that I heard other versions of the story. Sitting in my Anthropology class one afternoon, I went cold when the professor read it to us from a book. I checked it out of the library afterwards. It was written by this guy who goes around the country collecting the different variations on all those friend-of-a-friend stories. He's made his career out of it.

You can look it up. It's out there on the internet too. It's all there. She's buried in Yorba Linda Cemetery. Her name is Alvina de los Reyes and she died in 1910.

I know, I've been to the gravesite. I saw her name when I found my tux jacket where she'd left it, neatly folded over her gravestone.

I've thought from time to time that I should write down my story, send it off to that guy for one of his books. But I haven't. I don't know why. It's true. It really happened to me. I can still hear her voice, still taste her warm breath.

And it hurt me more than I can say to find out I wasn't the only one.

FIN ✧

This is a work of fiction. All situations, events, and characters are nothing more or less than products of the author's imagination — except for poor Alvina, of course. And her mother.

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He's the one to blame.

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