

THE  
GOSPEL  
OF THOMAS

EPISODE



SIXTEEN

AS I WAS PREPARING THIS EPISODE

(ON AN APPLE COMPUTER,  
USING APPLE SOFTWARE,  
WHILE LISTENING TO MUSIC I BOUGHT  
FROM THE ITUNES STORE  
ON AN APPLE DEVICE)

WORD CAME THAT STEVE JOBS HAD PASSED AWAY.

MAY HIS GODS BLESS HIM.

# EXCERPT FROM 'THE CRADLE'

by T.M. Camp

Being an exile, Jee discovered, meant freedom.

She could go anywhere, do anything she liked. There was no one who would tell her different, boss her around, make sure she didn't get into trouble.

Unfortunately, this also meant being alone.

And, she soon discovered, it meant going hungry sometimes when there wasn't anything to eat. It meant sleeping on the hard ground, no matter what the weather was like.

It also meant rain, lots of it, for hours on end.

And so, she'd gotten very wet.

When the little patch of ground she'd been sleeping on began to change from slightly damp to slightly deep, Jee decided it was probably time to move on.

She'd been walking for a few days now, stopping to sleep when it grew too dark to see where she was going. But even during the day, there wasn't much to look at — just a flat, barren plain surrounding her, with nothing but a smudge of horizon to steer by.

It was familiar enough that she felt sure that sooner or later she'd find the Shaggy Man's house again — where, she hoped, some friendly conversation and dinner might be waiting for her. Her stomach rumbled hopefully, a sound she was going to become more and more accustomed to as the days wore on. So much so, in fact, that she did not even notice the storm until it was almost on top of her. She'd heard the thunder, of course. But she'd just assumed it was her stomach complaining.

The sky, already dim with the approach of evening — or what passed for it in this place — grew darker still as the clouds swept in.

Jee had just gotten comfortable — or, at least, as comfortable as could be expected on the hard packed earth. Lying there, she did her best to forget how far she'd walked over the past few days. Unfortunately, this wasn't enough to distract her from thinking about how much more she might have to walk in the days to come.

And then she felt the first drop of rain against the back of her hand. It took a moment to register before she realized what it was. But by then another drop had fallen, this time against her cheek. Soon enough, she was listening to the steady patter against the cracked ground all around her.

A little while after that, she gave up on sleep altogether and started walking once more.

She did her best to keep on in a straight-ish sort of direction, which was hard enough to do in the daytime with no landmarks to steer by. It was even more difficult at night, bone tired and in the rain.

Consoling herself that she couldn't possibly get more wet or more tired than she already was, Jee walked on through the night.

Morning eventually put in an appearance, although dimly. And Jee was glad to see the low slope of hills ahead, gathered together like the curves of a woman sleeping there on the horizon.

The clouds overhead broke apart, shredding away to reveal the pale sky beyond. Mercifully, the rain began to taper off just as she reached the slope of the hills.

With the storm clouds still blanketing the plains behind her, Jee ignored the complaints of her legs and slowly started her ascent. It was an easy climb. The slope was gradual and the thin pale grass felt good beneath her tired feet. At the crest of the hill, she found herself looking down into a narrow valley beyond. If the plain behind her was barren, then what lay on the other side more than made up for it.

Below her, down the far slope of the hill, a little valley opened up — green and gentle, the fields and meadows dotted here and there with trees.

Jee sat for a while at the crest of the hill. Behind her, thunder clouds rolled across the sky, drowning the plains in shadows and rain.

Down in the valley, she saw a curious sight: A white dome rising out of the trees. It looked like a government building in one of her school books, all white marble and pillars.

It occurred to her that she wouldn't have to go to school ever again. She was on a permanent holiday. Every day was a vacation day. She didn't think she was going to miss it all that much.

She wondered about the dome and what it was for. She did not think it was a house. From where she sat, she could see white columns supporting it.

She was curious, of course. But she knew well enough that being careful was much more important. She stood up, scanning the valley below for any sign of life. She told herself that she was being careful — although she was really just waiting for the breeze to dry her dress.

Eventually, she couldn't stand to wait any longer. So, with her dress still a little damp, she made her way down the slope into the valley below. She'd been walking all night and she was tired and hungry. But there were trees down there and some of them might bear fruit. She was willing to walk a bit further for that possibility.

When she came out of the trees, she found herself at the edge of a large, open field. On the far side, she saw an old farm house overgrown with briars and weeds. It was a decrepit, tumbledown place — every window broken, the splintered shingles of the roof caving in on themselves.

She went on across the field, doing her best to blend in with the tall weeds as she approached the house. She could feel the windows, like eyes, watching her.

She decided that it must be abandoned. But she couldn't be sure. A little voice in the back of her head nagged at her, reminded her that anyone who chose to live in such a place was almost certainly not the sort of person she wanted to run into.

But if someone was still living there, there was a chance they might be nice enough to offer her something to eat. If no one lived there anymore, it seemed possible that they might have left something behind.

She spent a lot of time weighing her options these days. Anything better than listening to her stomach growl for who knew how many more days.

So she made her way across the rutted field, braving the briars and bramble-choked front yard. She startled a small brown rabbit in the process, sending him off across the field with little explosions of dust in his wake.

She did not trust the rotting front porch to support her weight. She had no interest in crashing through the splintered boards. So she made her way along the side of the house, hugging close to the wall in order to avoid the overgrown yard as best she could.

She made her way along the side of the house, noting with distaste that the walls were encrusted with dark clots of dried mud, all the way up to the eaves. She tried to peer in through a few of the windows as she passed, but they were slightly too high.

It occurred to her that she would never be tall enough to look in those windows. She would never get older, never get taller than she was. She didn't quite know what to do with that thought, so she put it out of her mind and put her attention on avoiding the thorns and brambles crowding up close to the house. She moved gingerly in the little gap between the muddy walls and the weed-choked yard. She tried not to think about the weeds and how close they were, how sharp their thorns were . . . what she would do if they suddenly edged in closer, reaching for her.

She shook herself. She was going to have to stop the habit of creeping herself out. In this place, imagination could make things happen all on their own.

Rounding the back corner of the house, she discovered a small set of rickety steps leading up to where a battered back door tilted off its hinges. Blocking the doorway was an old kitchen stove toppled to one side, smeared with so much mud it was impossible to tell what color it might have once been.

Jee climbed the steps carefully, craning her neck over the bulky stove to peer into the gloom.

Eyes adjusting to the shadows, she saw a surprising jumble of debris scattered across the floor within:

Old kitchen chairs tangled together like tumbleweeds, sticks and branches clogging the corners, pots and pans filled with old mud and dried leaves. Even the plaster walls, Jee noted, were crumbling and caked with mud. A dark brown ring ran around the circumference of the room, just below the cracked ceiling.

It was, as her mother used to say (usually about Jee's closet), just a big old ugly mess in there.

But she saw a few cupboards in there as well. It wasn't too much to expect there might be, for instance, a few dusty cans in the back of one of them. She leaned forward and began to climb up over the stove. As she did, the stove shifted. The door tilted under her like a see-saw and it was all she could do to throw herself backwards to avoid rolling forward into the room. As she fell backwards, she had this momentary flash: The stove tilting forward and crushing her to the ground, holding her there for eternity.

Sprawled in a patch of scrub grass at the base of the steps, Jee heard a tremendous crash from inside the house. Stunned, she watched as the entire house shuddered as the door tore loose from its remaining hinge and the stove tipped over and inward, disappearing into the darkness within.

The noise inside the house went on for a while. It sounded like quite a lot was happening all at once in there. Once it had subsided, Jee gingerly made her way back up the steps to peer through the doorway once more.

Inside, everything had changed. It took her a few moments to make sense of what she was seeing. The kitchen had vanished. Where once there had been a floor was now a huge gaping hole. She realized she was looking down into the basement. Down below, Jee

could see the floorboards and furniture all tumbled together in a few feet of stagnant muddy water. She saw the stove down there, where it had dragged down the kitchen — and nearly the whole house — along with it.

“Yeah,” she told herself. “That’s not good.”

The cupboards still waited on the kitchen walls, only now she had no way to reach them. It was frustrating but she was very glad she had not gotten further over the stove before it fell through. She was very glad for that.

On her way back through the yard, she caught a brief glimpse of something familiar in the underbrush. She crept forward for a closer look.

Tangled up in the weeds and thorns, she saw a pair of old, threadbare overalls and a faded plaid work shirt. And along with the tattered garments, there were bones — very old by the looks of them — bleached white by the sun and scoured by the wind. She saw a few ribs poking through the shirt, some others scattered nearby. Whoever they were and however they died, it had been a long, long time ago.

She inched her way back out through the brambles and continued on, leaving the old house at her back and heading in the general direction of the white dome she’d seen from the top of the hill.

Over the next hour or so, she saw three more crumbling old houses. They stood there, rotting in their fields like shipwrecks abandoned at the bottom of the sea.

They gave her the shivers.



The air down in the valley was very still, hardly even the slightest hint of a breeze. Her thin dress, still damp, clung uncomfortably to her in the humid air and Jee was getting annoyed by the clammy feel of the fabric against her legs.

She was disappointed that there was no fruit to be found on the trees. But there were birds at least, the cheer of their song reminding her that she'd been walking all night. And that she was very tired. And that birds who'd gotten a good night's sleep didn't need to rub it in.

She needed to find a safe place, so she could rest. For some reason, she couldn't quite shake the feeling that the white dome might be a good place to try. All she had to do was try to find it.

She made her way through the fields, passing by the ruins of other farmhouses. One of these had almost completely collapsed in on itself. Even from a distance, Jee could smell the stagnant, vaguely septic reek of it. She plugged her nose and did her best not to inhale too deeply as she passed. There was a vague, gag-inducing taste on the air. She thought of those green plastic toilets at campgrounds . . . and walked faster.

Fortunately, the smell of it did not linger long nor cling to her clothing.

In time, she saw the dome once more through a break in the trees ahead. She threaded her way carefully through the trunks and undergrowth, choosing her path carefully and keeping her eyes open for any danger.

She'd learned a lot since she'd first come here. And she didn't make the same mistakes twice — at least, not any more.

Just inside the tree line, Jee positioned herself in the shadows between two trunks growing close together, branches intertwined above her.

She stood there for a very long time, watchful.

The dome appeared to be open on all sides, supported by thick white columns. The whole thing rested atop a large white slab with steps cut into the sides, leading up. Green grass spread out on all sides, with trees beyond on the far side of the dome.

It was larger than she expected. It reminded her a little of the bandstand in the park back home where they would do plays during the summer.

Home. She sometimes forgot, even still.

Then she saw movement on the lawn surrounding the dome. She got as low and flat as possible. She tried not to think about how good it felt to lie down, willed herself to stay awake and watchful.

There, to one side she saw a small cluster of brown and gray shapes move, break apart, and then rejoin to form a little constellation on the grass.

In the quiet, she could hear a clatter, a chorus of long, wavering voices.

They were goats, she realized. And it occurred to her after a moment that if there were goats, it was more than likely that there was also someone who took care of them — though she knew they might not be friendly towards strangers.

Apart from the goats, there was no sign of anyone else. But she'd learned a thing or two about patience, learned it the hard way. So she lay there and waited, watching for any sign of danger. Oblivious to her

presence, the goats roamed the lawn. A few lounged here and there in the morning light, calling to each other in their strange, almost human voices.

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A while later Jee woke to discover that one of the goats was nibbling on her hair. Another was doing a fairly good job of tearing away a long strip from the hem of her skirt.

She sat up with a cry, scattering the curious flock that had surrounded her while she slept. The goats wasted no time in scampering back over the lawn away from her. They gathered together back at the dome's marble steps, eyeing Jee suspiciously.

Blinking herself awake, willing herself to stay still, Jee watched to see if the commotion had gotten anyone's attention.

Then, in the silence, her stomach rumbled.

She remembered then that goats gave milk. Her stomach rumbled louder.

Jee waited a while longer, just to make sure there wasn't anyone else around. But her hunger got the best of her, so she finally crept out of the trees and walked across the grassy slope towards the dome.

The grass was pleasant against her tired feet and for a brief moment she felt like she was back home, enjoying summer vacation. Then she discovered an unpleasant by-product of the goats in the grass. Once she had managed to scrape her foot off, she continued on — perhaps a little more gingerly than before.

The goats huddled together, regarding her approach with no small amount of distrust.

While she was still a ways off, one of the goats trotted over to head her off. Gently, firmly, the animal butted her in the hip and complained at her trespass.

Jee laughed — the little nubbins of horn on the animal's head tickled her. They posed no danger at all, despite the goat's insistent efforts.

FIN ✨

Safe back at the steps, the other goats voiced their support for their comrade's bravery.

The goat complained, lowering its head and digging in its heels to shove harder against her. Jee held the animal off, her palms against the top of its head.

“Knock it off,” she told the animal.

The goat stood its ground, pushing harder.

Jee pushed back, digging her fingertips into the coarse hair and scratching deep into its hide and down the back of its neck.

The goat tossed its head, throwing her hands off. It regarded her seriously for a moment and then, gently, butted her outstretched hands once more.

Jee started scratching again. Soon the goat was shifting this way and that, giving off an appreciative rumble whenever she discovered a particularly sensitive spot with her fingertips.

Soon enough, jealousy overcame suspicion and the other goats crowded in for a turn as well.

“Jeez . . . hold your horses, guys.” Jee did her best to give at least one good long scratch to each of them.

“Okay,” she announced. “That’s enough for now. My fingers are about to fall off.” She shoved a few of the goats out of the way as gently as she could and made her way across the grass to the steps leading up into the shadows under the dome.

The goats did not follow.

Beneath the dome, growing up out of a large mound of earth in the center, was a huge tree. The trunk was massive, with roots curling down, clutching at the dirt. An enormous crown of boughs stretched up, spreading out across the underside of the dome above.

Jee stepped past the pillars and went under the dome. Every breath, every sound was reflected, magnified by the inverted bowl overhead.

She was an intruder here, an outsider. Jee couldn’t help but feel like she was trespassing. It was a feeling that she’d gotten used to recently.

She felt a little solemn, like she’d snuck into church.

The floor beneath the dome was a grid of pale marble tiles, very cool under her tired feet. Her footfalls echoed softly around the dome overhead.

Just in front of the tree at the center, there was a long wooden table. It was a rough, handmade thing. To one side was a cracked earthenware pitcher. Next to it sat a wooden bowl filled with purple grapes so dark they were nearly black. And next to the bowl was a cutting board with a loaf of bread on it.

Jee’s stomach rumbled.

The bread was still warm as though it had just come out of the oven. It smelled wonderful and tasted even

better. It wasn't until she'd broken off a second hunk that Jee thought to wonder who had baked it and where they'd gone. That she could see, there was no one underneath the dome with her.

Overhead, the tree swayed gently.

Still chewing, she walked across the floor and peered out between the pillars on the opposite side of the dome. The grass sloped sharply downward to a sandy bank, a wide river drifting past below. Jee wondered briefly if it was the river.

"All waters are one," she whispered. If she followed it, would it lead her back to the dock where Assam and her mother had left her?

Not that they had left her, not that they had left her behind — she knew that they hadn't, but sometimes . . . well, she still felt a little sorry for herself and a little lonesome.

Maybe she was further downstream. Maybe if she followed it long and far enough, it would loop back on itself. The Shaggy Man had hinted as much. Maybe it would take her past the Winter Palace, where she could see Winterly again.

But really, she had no idea. And she'd had her fill of following that river — or any other — for a long time to come.

Jee went back under the dome, back to the table beneath the tree. She touched the grapes lightly, wiping the dust from their glossy skins. She pulled off one of the grapes and polished it on the ragged hem of her skirt until it glimmered, a dark jewel heavy in her hand. She popped it into her mouth, the skin snapping between her teeth — a little sweet, a little sour.

She felt something grind between her molars and she spat it out. There in the palm of her hand she saw three large seeds in the pale pulp of the fruit. She went to the edge of the dome and threw the mess out into the grass.

Back at the table, the grape seeds had left a bitter taste on her tongue. The old earthenware pitcher was filled with milk but she didn't see any cups on the table.

And then she glanced around, making sure no one was watching. Raising the pitcher to her lips, she took a sip.

The milk tasted sour, spoiled. She felt her throat clench and her stomach roll. Gagging, she nearly spit it back out into the pitcher.

She ran over to the edge of the dome once more and spit the milk out over the side. She stood for a moment, hands on her knees, trying to decide if she was going to vomit.

Deciding she wasn't, she spit once more and headed back to the table for something to get the sour taste out of her mouth. She reached to tear off another chunk of bread.

She stopped, staring.

There was a new loaf there, unbroken and whole.

Jee looked around beneath the dome for a sign of who had been there.

Nothing. No one.

She circled around the tree, staring up at the boughs overhead. She wondered if anyone might be hiding up there. But the trunk was smooth and the branches were too high to reach — at least, for her.

“I see you up there,” she called. She didn’t really. But she figured that was the only place someone might be hiding. She might be able to bluff them down. “You might as well come down.”

Nothing. Either there was nobody up there or they weren’t falling for it. Perhaps they were shy. Either way, Jee was starting to feel a little self-conscious and silly.

She tore off a chunk of bread from the new loaf. There was something odd about the tree, though. She walked around the trunk a second time, not quite able to put her finger on what it was.

Then she saw it. It was so obvious that she couldn’t believe she hadn’t seen it right away.

It wasn’t a tree at all, she realized. It was two trees, growing so close together that she’d mistaken them for one.

She’d never seen anything like it before. She took a bite of the bread in her hand, thoughtfully chewing as she inspected the trees.

One of them was wider than the other at the trunk, at least twice as big around. The larger one had broader leaves, oddly shaped like antlers. And the other tree, the slender one, had smaller leaves, each one shaped almost like a heart — or a teardrop, depending on how you looked at it. Overhead, their branches intertwined together into a single crown. Above, the branches waved gently — although, if there was a breeze, she couldn’t feel it down below.

Only a couple of trees, after all. And she was still hungry. Back at the table, she reached for the bread once more and stopped.



The loaf was whole. Again.

“Um . . . okay...” This was a little more interesting than she’d thought. There’d been no time for someone to switch the loaf out while she’d been inspecting the trees. She would have seen, would have heard.

She peeked beneath the table, just in case there was some kind of trick switch or a trapdoor or something. Nothing.

Thoughtful, she took a few grapes and popped them into her mouth one by one. She was more careful of the seeds this time, hard as stones and bitter on her tongue.

Something was going on. Obviously.

Jee cupped the loaf of bread in her hands, feeling the lingering warmth of the oven still radiating outward from its core. She tore off a large chunk and hefted the loaf in one hand, the smaller piece in the other.

After a moment, she moved to set the loaf back down. She could not have said how it happened or when, but by the time the loaf was back on the table . . . well, it was whole and unbroken once more.

“Huh.” She chewed her lip and stepped back to think for a long, long time while the trees whispered overhead. Slowly, she ate the piece of bread in her hand.

She reached for the loaf on the table but stopped. She’d been thinking that she would break it exactly in half, just to see what would happen.

But it didn’t seem right somehow.

Jee didn't know the word "sacrilege" but, in that moment, she understood that whatever kindness had been set into motion in this place, she knew it would be wrong somehow to waste it or test its limits.

To her credit, as hungry as she was, it never once occurred to her that she could take the loaf with her and never go hungry again.

Jee tore off another chunk from the loaf and snagged a handful of grapes, watching as they appeared one by one before her eyes. Once more the bowl was full and the loaf whole.

Impressed, she took her bounty over to the base of the trees and sat down with her back against where the two trunks met. The soil beneath the trees was dark and rich as coffee grounds. Jee thought for a moment to mud was pretty much the only thing holding it together anymore.

She ate her bread and grapes. When she was finished, she took her seeds over and threw them out into the grass outside.

Back beneath the trees once more, she lay down and stared up into the boughs overhead. It was impossible to tell them apart, the trees in their embrace.

She yawned suddenly, explosively. The sound echoed around the dome overhead. Above her, the boughs creaked as though chuckling. She watched the branches move back and forth. Outside, she could hear the goats muttering.

And, soon enough, Jee was asleep. She lay peacefully beneath the trees with a crust of bread still clutched in her hand.

And if the loaf and grapes on the table were replenished while she slept, she did not notice.

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Someone was singing. A woman's voice drifted faintly in the dark. It was a good sound, warm and welcoming. And beneath it, Jee could hear the sound of rain.

She woke with a start, sitting up and casting her eyes about the semidarkness around her. Vague shapes of furniture huddled in the gloom and in the confusion of waking, she thought for a moment she was home.

Her mind cleared as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. She was in someone's house, lying on a couch in the living room. Three tall windows stretched up one high wall, the sky outside heavy with leaden clouds.

She could not tell in this gray light if it was morning or evening. She was just going to have to wait and see which way the light went.

Someone had covered her with a quilt, she realized — a geometric pattern of red and white triangles, joined point to point. She thought vaguely of hourglasses and then black widow spiders. You could never tell in this place, what things were signs of danger and what weren't. Then again, sometimes it all just turned out to be an old blanket.

She threw off the quilt and swung her legs over the side, banging them sharply on a little coffee table next to the sofa. She listened to a candy dish on top of the table rattle while she rubbed her shins.

Opposite the windows, the room opened up into what felt like a much larger space — going further

back to where the light couldn't reach. She could see a doorway, an oblong of light in the darkness. A woman's voice, singing softly — and, underneath, the familiar sound of someone working in the kitchen. The warm smell of food drifted in, as faint as the voice but more lovely.

They'd put a quilt over her. They were making breakfast (or was it dinner?) and they were singing while they worked. They probably wouldn't go to all that trouble if they planned to hurt her.

But still, you could never be too sure.

Jee got up slowly, her eyes on the doorway. She glanced around the room, looking for another way out. A set of stairs climbed one wall, heading up to a second floor. But she guessed that this led nowhere outside.

A large dark block of shadow set against the wall below the bannister revealed itself as an old upright piano. She thought of her brother, wondered if he was still taking lessons.

She crossed the room, ignoring the dim pictures hanging on the wall — someone else's family photos didn't interest her at all. An odd shape in one corner turned out to be an old battered guitar.

There. To one side of the windows she found a door leading outside. She had her hand on the knob when she heard a man's voice in the room behind her. She turned.

"Come along and rest a bit. Supper'll be ready soon." Two figures entered from the other room, moving slowly toward her. In the dim light, Jee could just make out a man helping along a smaller figure — an old woman maybe, she moved so slow.

Jee froze there in the darkness. They might not see her. They might not have a chance to stop her before she was out the door.

They might not be bad people, she knew — but Jee'd been on her own for a while now. She was not in the habit of being around other people, let alone trusting them.

The man finally got his charge across the floor and into one of the overstuffed armchairs. "There you are," he said, helping her sit down. "Now, let me just get the light."

A match flared in the darkness, an oil lamp on a side table glowed to life, its warm light pushing back the shadows in the room.

He was young, maybe in his twenties. As he adjusted the lamp, Jee felt a flash of recognition, something about his strong features and his jet black hair reminded her . . . of someone. But she couldn't quite place who.

His companion in the chair was an old woman — impossibly old, older than anyone Jee had ever seen before in her life — or, rather, her afterlife.

The woman's mouth worked soundlessly, like an infant's. She had the bluest eyes Jee had ever seen . . . and they were staring directly at her, there in the shadows.

Jee was caught.

The man hadn't noticed her yet, though. He slipped a box of matches into his breast pocket — a blue shirt so pale and worn it was almost white.

“Now you settle in here for a while and I’ll go see if I can lend a hand in the kitchen.” He had a deep voice, resonant but rough like two stones rubbing against one another under water.

The old woman, her eyes still fixed on Jee, lifted one fragile hand as though she might point to where the girl was hiding in the shadows.

The man settled his hand on top of the old woman’s and pressed it gently back down to the armrest of the chair. “Easy there,” he patted her hand. “No need to get worked up. You’re safe from the storm now.”

He straightened up, “You’re lucky. It’s just the two of you tonight.” He pitched his voice low and glanced to the sofa where Jee had been sleeping, frowning at the sight of the abandoned quilt.

“Oho...” His eyes quickly found Jee there by the door. “Well then...” he smiled at her. “Look who woke up.”

The old woman murmured something Jee did not quite understand. Neither did the man, apparently.

“I let you sleep, you looked like you needed it. But you’re just in time,” he told Jee. “It’s almost time for supper. You’re welcome to join us, if you like.”

FIN ✨

This is a work of fiction. All situations, events, and characters are nothing more or less than products of the author's imagination — although, that's all it takes to change reality. Just ask Steve Jobs.

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He's the one to blame.

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NEXT UP...

ALL THE LIES THAT ARE MY LIFE



SHOW ME THE STONE THAT THE BUILDERS REJECTED. THAT IS THE CORNERSTONE.