

Author's Note:

My fascination with the Nag Hammadi gospels was sparked when I read an account of the accidental discovery in 1945 of more than fifty ancient papyrus texts. The Second World War had just ended, and the evidence of a Christian God was thin. How miraculous that in December of that year the lost words of several overlooked apostles were unearthed by a Bedouin in the silence of the Egyptian desert.

The reappearance of gospels as authentic as those of the New Testament should have been a momentous event, with much fanfare and attention. Instead, only a few people took note. The texts themselves slipped into obscurity, languishing for years unopened and untranslated. Decades passed before they became available to academics, and still more time before they entered mainstream theological discussion. As I write this in 2005, the public remains largely unaware of their existence and the light they shed on the little-known story of Christianity.

Resurrection is a novel based loosely on real events. Gemma Bastian and the Lazar family are my own creations, but many of the ancillary characters actually existed. The portraits I draw of them, however, are fictional. The historical, archaeological, and biblical material is real, as are the gospel quotations and fragments.

As the words of these lost gospels make their way to you across oceans, deserts, and even time itself, you may find in them the resurrection of a story that has long been buried—the story of a great faith.

If you bring forth what is within you,
What is within you will save you.
If you do not bring forth what is within you,
What is within you will destroy you.
—*The lost gospel of the apostle Thomas*

Chapter One

London, 1947

As Gemma Bastian left the hospital reluctantly for two days' leave, a flurry of sparrows wrested her eyes from the pavement. Her eyes followed the birds across the sky, lingering on the weak and setting sun. Though she was cold, she made her way slowly through the East End, taking an unfamiliar route that might prolong her return to a flat empty of people but filled with possessions that were not hers, the wardrobes of ghosts she could neither inhabit nor dispense with. One did not throw such things away. One gave them to the needy, or traded them at secondhand stores. But she could not bear the possibility of their reincarnation, that someone else wearing her mother's yellow dress might one day pass her on the street.

She glanced briefly at a crumbling brick house, its bomb-struck side newly hung with scaffolding. She had staunchly ignored the city's meager attempts to rebuild itself. Here, in the East End, it could never be enough. It was one of the war's many cruelties that the bombs of

the Luftwaffe had done their worst in the poorest part of London. Now, as dusk grew close, working people were arriving home to their demolished neighborhoods and switching on their lights. It could still surprise her. During the blackouts, an amber glow had meant fire, not the warmth of a lamp-lit home. Gemma's eyes moved from one window to the next. Life, for some, had moved on.

She let herself into her flat and wandered in the half-light to the spare room. Clutching her jacket around her, she stood in front of the closet that held her mother's clothes. On the floor was a box with her stockings, some packages still unopened. Wear them, her father had urged. Stop drawing stocking seams on your legs. It's too cold for that. But Gemma had forgotten the feeling of a stocking. Like most women in London, she had learned to draw quite a straight line down the back of her calf. She knelt on the floor and with a finger tipped the lid off the box. Three unopened packages. She took one to the bed and tore the cellophane. For a long time she sat with the stockings unrolled across her lap, her hands resting lightly on the translucent fabric. Without thinking about what it meant, she pulled them on, allowing herself to remember the luxury of their soft, gloved protection.

It was only six o'clock. She lay back on the bed, her arms rigid at her sides. She had lost a patient that day. Death, too, was changing, resuming a normal proportion that, strangely, hurt more. It carried her back to the beginning, when the death had just started, when it was still possible to feel something. She sensed the same shift in others at the hospital. They were emerging from a kind of collective shock, like survivors of a shipwreck bobbing up in a calmer sea, and looking at one another perhaps for the first time beyond the gasping emergency of near drowning, past the mere physical survival that had become their single reduced goal. Now, in the halls of the ward, she felt glances that flashed with a query: Who were you before? Who were we all? Where do we go now?

Gemma raised her arms and pressed her clenched, overwashed hands into the air, spreading her fingers. We go forward, she thought. Taking one stroke and then another, away from the scene of devastation. Toward dry land, toward something that did not give way. She both wanted and feared it. She thought that once she finally reached stable ground, she would inhabit her exhaustion completely. She would not be able to remain standing. And beneath that fear, another one. The houses were being bricked back together, but it did not seem possible that the scorched place inside her would heal.

She thought again about the letters she had received a week ago, the two envelopes she now carried with her, both sent to her by her father from Egypt. She had long held the bright word inside her, using it like a weapon against the inviolate gray of London. The first letter had made her laugh out loud. She could almost feel her father's excitement. He wrote that he had made an unexpected find, a find her rebellious spirit would appreciate. It would also leave him with quite a bit of money. Enough money for him to buy a house and bring Gemma to Egypt to live in decent style.

Don't worry, he wrote, it's all aboveboard. The reason there's money involved is that no one likes change, particularly venerable old religious institutions. People will give, pay, sacrifice almost anything to prevent it. But this is change that will benefit us all, a change I have been hoping for all my life. I think I have rediscovered a God that even you will believe in.

Maybe it was possible, she thought. If anyone could resurrect a God that had died a hundred times, her father could.

The other envelope had contained a strange, thick paper covered in letters she didn't recognize, letters that looked ancient. The envelope had borne another name before hers but it had been scratched out. She could just make out "Anthony Lazar." David Lazar was the name of her father's closest friend in Egypt. She didn't know an Anthony. She only half cared that she didn't understand what this piece of paper meant. Her father would explain it to her later. She dared to hope that he would do so in Egypt.

She had fallen asleep when the doorbell rang.

A tall man stood on the other side of the peephole. Through the magnified circle, she could see only his clean-shaven jaw. His voice was strong and deep through the door.

"My name is Bernard Westerly," he said. "I'm here about your father, Charles Bastian." Gemma unlatched the door but not the chain. "I know him through the museum," he added.

"You know him from Egypt?" She closed the door and unhooked the chain.

He looked down at her as he passed her into the tiny hall, where in his bulky winter coat he was altogether too big. "I know his work."

Bernard Westerly was taking off his gloves and surveying the flat as if it were a newly conquered territory. He made no attempt to put her at ease. Gemma maneuvered around him, deciding not to offer him tea.

"I came to ask if you had heard anything from him."

"Like what?"

"Anything."

Gemma turned and walked into the sitting room. She stood at the window. Above the chimneys and charcoal rooftops she found the silver curve of the new moon. "What might I have heard?" she asked.

"Are you familiar with his recent project?" Westerly asked.

She shook her head slightly. "I'm a nurse," she said evenly, "not an archaeologist."

He began looking around the flat. Gemma turned to watch him, keeping her hand from pressing against the letters in her pocket. "Are you looking for something?"

Westerly had paused at the bookshelf. "Are these books yours?"

"Yes."

"Then you are a nurse who speaks many languages," he said. "Like your father."

Gemma was silent.

"So he hasn't sent you anything out of the ordinary? Something to do with his current work?"

"Why would he do that?"

The man smiled and shrugged. "For safekeeping, maybe."

"Safe from whom?"

He looked at her with what might have been amusement but did not answer.

"No," she said, moving to the door. "I've received nothing out of the ordinary."

He looked at her closely and then smiled with sudden ease. "It's just museum business, you understand. Nothing to worry about. I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

It was later that the peculiar detail registered. He had taken off his hat but had not unbuttoned his coat. But he had bent his tall frame to look at her books. She remembered now, something that had briefly struck her as odd. Beneath the buttoned collar of his coat, she thought she had seen the stiff white band of a priest's collar. In the night she woke twice, feeling herself begin the familiar and numbing work of imagining the worst.

It was not the next morning but the morning after that the telex came. When she opened it, Gemma fell against the wall, unable to breathe.

There were a few short incontrovertible sentences in brutally broken English. She stumbled to the bathroom and fell to her knees to retch. Afterward, she pressed her cheek to the cold tiles. When she finally opened her eyes, she stared up at a painted tile of roses until they blurred into a bloodstain. She stayed there until night fell, until everything fine and fragile inside of her had been crushed.

When it was over, she stood and stared at her gray reflection in the mirror. Her father was dead. He had been found in his office. The words said his heart had failed him. Money would be wired to her bank account. She was to use it to make her way to the house of David Lazar in Cairo.

Professor Anthony Lazar had climbed up to Gabal Al Tayr late in the day. Too late, his assistant Zira warned. But he had wanted to see something before the sun set. Sometimes it

could be urgent with the professor. Zira could see it in his face, feel it in the tension of his silence. He watched now as his employer tucked a flashlight in his belt and bounded up the mountainside like a goat.

Professor Anthony had not been settled since they arrived, since the sudden departure of his elderly friend Charles Bastian from their last site in Upper Egypt. It was an unusual friendship. Zira had never seen Anthony so impassioned by conversation, had never witnessed the miracle of his speaking uninterrupted for nearly an hour. They might have been father and son. Then Bastian had left, it seemed, in the middle of the conversation. Anthony was not satisfied with the way his friend had broken off, or with the hastily written note he had found pinned to his tent.

Restocking in Cairo, they thought they might see him. But Bastian had not been in Cairo. Because something about his friend's disappearance disturbed Anthony, they had waited as long as they could. Finally, there had been nothing to do but return to their base in Kharga. Soon he and Zira were days away, folded back into the silence of the Western Desert.

Zira squatted and waited for Anthony to return. It was getting dark in the sudden way of the desert, and though his employer had grown up on the edge of the Sahara, navigating the loose rocks and pitch of Gabal Al Tayr in the darkness was perilous, even for a nimble man.

The day had begun as it was ending, with a restless roaming of ruins they both knew well. That morning they had visited the Temple of Hibis, a pagan temple that had been built over by Christians in the fourth century. Then they had gone to the Necropolis, another site of pagan abandonment. Sand and wind had uncovered an almost equal number of pagan and Christian temples, chapels, and burials. "The desert does not discriminate, thank heaven," Anthony had said. "It preserves all gods."

Last Anthony wanted to see the Cave of Mary at the top of Gabal Al Tayr, the mountain of birds. Its walls were covered in ancient etchings, one of the Madonna and Child. The lore was that the infant Jesus and his mother had stopped here after fleeing the Massacre of the Innocents.

Zira stared up at Gabal Al Tayr and lit a cigarette for the illusion of warmth. He hadn't eaten that day and his hunger made him cold. He thought about other things. He thought about his family in Cairo and money and what to cook for dinner. Above him, on the ridge of the hillside, the outline of a man had appeared. Zira did not know how long he had been there. He was standing stock still. Zira rose and ground out his cigarette. His employer could move as quickly and as quietly as a cat. It was unusual for the son of an Englishman. Anthony was at home in the desert, unlike the other Europeans who clustered in Cairo like a maladapted flock of birds. Why all these people had decided to live in the desert in the first place was a mystery to Zira.

Maybe, like Professor Anthony, he was becoming a little strange. There were moments in the violet silence of the desert evening when Zira was aware of a deepening of his spirit. It was an obscure life he was leading out here on the edge of nothingness, but he was satisfied with it. Perhaps it was at the edge of nothingness that true meaning began. Everything once known had been forgotten, Anthony said. It had only to be rediscovered. Unearthed.

Zira had forgotten his hunger. He lit his lantern to show his location in the darkness and resumed his squatting position. Anthony would come when he was ready.

It was later, while he and Anthony were sitting by the fire, that a bare-chested boy on a horse quietly entered the pool of light. In his hand was a letter. Anthony reached for the folded and stained envelope and motioned the boy to sit. He slid off the bare back of his horse, and Zira gave him some bread and *fuul*. His eyes were huge and luminous. Anthony noticed he was missing a thumb. He poured him a cup of tea, stirring in two spoons of honey.

Anthony read the letter, tilting it toward the firelight. Then he folded it and continued to sit without speaking. The boy drank his tea in silence. When he set down his empty cup, Anthony dug into his pocket for a coin and watched as the boy and his horse slipped back into the night. With his eyes on the darkness where the boy had been, he said quietly, "Zira, we have lost a friend."

Zira's eyes locked on Anthony's face.

"Charles Bastian is dead."

Zira crossed himself quickly. He waited until the fire dimmed into ember, then leaned forward and agitated the logs. In the brighter light, he studied Anthony's face, reading it like an oracle. He pulled his burnoose tightly around him and waited.

"We will return to Cairo," Anthony said. "The khamseen is coming anyway. Maybe this year we will avoid being buried in sand."