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### The Sale

A woman with a green carpetbag came to my house to sell me the Turin Shroud. Apart from her face, she was an attractive woman. Maybe forty or so.

“It’s in the bag?” I asked.

“Where else?” she said.

“Looks kind of small.”

“It’s rolled up,” she said, looking me up and down. She didn’t seem too offended that I was still in my pajamas. “Do you want it or not?” she pressed.

“Maybe,” I said. “I need to see it laid out.”

She nodded, and I let her past into the house.

I wanted to see how she would sell it to me. I could tell she took me for a dupe. She was dressed in one of those power suits, colored a sharp red with big shoulder pads and military-style buttons. She clutched the bag to her chest, like she really had the burial cloth of Jesus in there.

She surveyed the living room, grimacing at the beat-up couch and the pictures of German Shepherds on the walls—ones my ex-wife had left behind. She put her bag on the coffee table and sat down.

“I don’t take checks,” she said. “Only cash.”

“No problem,” I said.

She smiled for the first time, but it was an ugly smile. Her lips didn't match up quite right.

"Coffee," I said.

"No thanks," she said. "But you go ahead."

I fixed myself a cup and took two aspirin. I watched her from the kitchen doorway, pushing her blond hair behind her ears and checking her makeup with a small vanity mirror. She must have thought I'd do anything for woman like her.

When I came back through, she handed me a thin brochure.

"Read this," she said. "You can't buy history until you've learned it."

I examined the cover. There was a photograph of the Pope viewing the Shroud. He seemed to be pointing to the marks around Jesus' temples. Beneath the picture were the words FAITH CONQUERS ALL.

I glanced up to see the woman eagerly watching me. She gestured for me to keep reading. Inside the brochure were several articles detailing the Shroud's authenticity. One in particular criticized some Italian scientist's carbon dating system as "flawed" and "strewn with error" and then went on to categorically claim the cloth to be "two thousand years old."

"Seems genuine," I said.

"Yes, well," she replied.

She stood and looked around the room. Her eyes scanned the empty bookshelf against the far wall and then the stack of nudie magazines on top of the TV. "Do you have a Bible?"

"I think so," I said. "One moment." I went to my bedroom and pretended to search the nightstand. "Somewhere in here," I called out. I laughed to myself. The longer the charade went

on, the more I enjoyed the situation. I sat on the bed for a minute and thought maybe she would want to join me.

“Can you hurry?” she said. “I have other appointments.”

“All right, I’ve found it.” I took my ex-wife’s old Bible from the drawer and ran back to the living room.

For a few minutes she flicked through the pages, attempting to find a particular passage. She ran her finger over several lines, mumbling words I couldn’t understand. Then she gave up and handed the Bible back.

“Not the right edition,” she said.

“I might have another.”

“No matter,” she said, smiling. “What’s important is that you recognize Jesus as our Lord and Savior.”

“My ex-wife used to say that.”

She seemed to take my statement as a compliment and she stepped toward her bag. She reached into it, but widened her shoulders to prevent me from seeing what else she had in there. When she faced me, she kept something tight in her hand. She told me to open mine. As I did, she palmed me something soft and small. It was a swatch of beige cloth that looked perfectly symmetrical.

“Where’s the rest of it?” I said.

“I’m authorized to sell the Shroud in pieces, to spread the word of God to as many people as possible.”

I pointed to the dark blot in one corner of the swatch. “There’s a stain.”

“It’s blood, of course.”

“Do I get a discount?”

She considered my question for a moment. “How much cash do you have?” she said at last.

“Listen, you’ve seen my place. You know I have no money.”

She clamped her hand on mine, enveloping the Shroud. “You will be infinitely richer once you buy this.”

“It’s more a matter of priorities. My ex-wife already takes half my paycheck.”

She took the Shroud back and carefully placed it on the coffee table. We both stared at it for a minute. It reminded me of a coaster.

“Will you pray with me?” she said.

“Sure,” I said. “No problem.”

I figured this was part of her scheme. That she made all tough sales this way. We both knelt on the carpet. When she clasped her hands together and closed her eyes, I did the same. We remained there, praying hard. Neither of us knew who would stop first.