

Acts 16 - Claudia

Claudia. My name is Claudia. I imagine you didn't know that. The truth is, no one ever asked. Do you like my shawl? It's the one thing I saved from...from before. See here, where it's been mended – isn't it the most beautiful thing you've ever seen? You know me as the slave girl. The girl with the "spirit of divination" – you just read about. Do you know what a "spirit of divination" is? Have you asked? No, I thought not. Nor did the man who owned me when I was younger. Nor Paul, nor Silas. Nor, come to think of it, Luke, who wrote my story.

See, it's about this birth-mark on my face. It's alright to stare; everyone does. More than the mark, it has to do with the superstitions of our people concerning those who bear them. It is believed we possess special powers; fearful and mysterious. "The blood-red mark of the realm of darkness." That's how my owners advertised my services to those with a taste for the dangerous. There's good money to be made, dealing in weakness and fear. . "Special powers" is what they said I had. Well, perhaps I do.

You know of course that what Luke wrote is not the whole story. It isn't even *my* story. It's Paul's, and more than that, it's Luke's. He has every right to tell it, no question about that. But it's important to remember that it is *his*; from *his* heart; his hand, and sometimes Luke doesn't make that clear enough. One thing I have learned in my life is that everyone has a story to tell. Each life *is* a story; and we are called by the Author of life to be the tellers. What you have just read is not me; is not mine. Luke used me for his purposes, just as surely as my former owners used me for theirs.

. My own story is...how can I tell you...it dances more. It can't sit still. And it has more colour. YES! That's it – it has more colour. Like the colours in this shawl; see how the purple bleeds into the crimson, the edges indistinct? I marvel at the new shades that emerge when that happens. Too many clear edges are hard on the eyes, I have discovered. My story's edges are fuzzy, and they move.

Don't you find that real stories, all true and honest ones, dance a bit? Call out to you, sometimes when it's inconvenient and bothersome? They wiggle and squirm and squirt their way into the heart of you, and afterwards, the stains of their presence remain? Yes, I knew you'd understand.

Before I go on, let me wipe my hands. They're stained too, see? Purple. A combination of dye and grape juice – colours of my new life. Today, the others are away, and I've been left in charge of the business, but I think I can take a bit of time for you. I've learned the trade well...But I'm getting ahead of myself...There. That's the best I can do. I've been here so long, the stains on my hands are almost permanent now. You know, every time I look down at my purple hands these days, I laugh. And I thank the God of colours! I couldn't always say that, I can tell you well. There was a time when I cursed the colours of my life and the God who painted them there.

So...do you have time to hear my story? Good. Let's sit for a while and talk. We'll watch and wait; the owner may return, or there may be customers, and I'll have to leave you then. Here's a chair, and please, let me offer you some wine.

It's good to be still for a while, isn't it? So...where to begin? I'll put down the shawl and pull back my hair. See my face? It all would have turned out so differently if it hadn't been for this face. You see how the mark goes; it covers here, and up to here...over my left eye, and under my hair...this stained face has tinted the course of my

life from the very beginning. Bled into my meaning, my living shaped by fear that oozed and crusted; the scab of superstition thick and unpickable. It kept me tender underneath, vulnerable to infectious greed. Theirs, not mine. Me? I was greedy too, but for something wholly other. It was almost too late before I knew what.

When I was born, the midwives saw the mark. They were terrified, and told my mother I had died at birth. They took me to the garbage heap outside the city and left me there. To give them credit, it was considered a merciful death. The animals that scavenged there would make a quick end to the child whose face was believed to bring curses on the family, and on the town. I don't blame them; they did what they believed best for all concerned. Some day I would like to meet them and tell them so. I wonder if they ever thought about me after that: the squirming, bloody bit of gristle and bone they left there, wailing in the night. Did they linger in the shadows of the trash fires, to see if I would stop crying? If the end would be as quick as they had hoped?

And my mother – some day I would like to meet her too. I suspect, though, that now, our reunion will be at the Table at the great banquet beyond this hungry life. Ah well, I am content to wait. I will raise a glass to her at that Table, and she to me. The wine will be purple and sweet and will make our heads dance. And then she will hold me in her arms; arms that have ached for the loss of a dead baby all these years. I will bury my head in her bosom and she will stroke my hair, and lift my face to hers. Slowly she will trace this mark with the tips of her fingers, and kiss me there, and call me by the name that she has had carved on the palm of her heart since my birth.

Ah well. Until then, there is work to do. Where were we? Oh yes, my ignoble beginnings. This first part of my life is unclear, because I have only been told what people wanted me to know; but I do know that I was found among the garbage. My rescuers sold me to a group of travelling merchants, who specialized in the unusual, the freakish, and the dangerous. Like me. In me they saw money; the chance to turn a tidy profit.

What I remember most from my childhood is the caravan, as we would move from place to place. I was kept with the animals, and even now I love the heat and the smell of beasts in close quarters. I was safe there. Straw and fur and good clean dung, fleas and rashes and running sores, these things I shared with my animal companions. All of them are vastly preferable to what I experienced at the hands of humans.

There was money to be made, trading in fear and freaks. My owners made a good living. As a business woman myself now, I see how it works; and in truth, the customers received good value for their hard earned coins. We travelled with our show; following the religious festivals. We weren't particular; whatever religion had a festival, we were there, on it edge. You know, people who travel far to worship their gods are in a frame of mind and heart easily manipulated. Hungry for the Holy; normal defences disabled, the pilgrim can be bought with the currency of anything masquerading as hope; however outrageous.

And so my owner followed the seekers, seeking something of his own. He'd find a festival, and move to its edge with the caravans, just close enough. Once set up, our musician and a side show of cheap, transparent "magic" would draw the crowd. When a substantial number of the unsuspecting had gathered, the real performance began.

“Gentlemen – if you daaaaare” the words were the same every time and even yet coat my skin with maggots. “Let your eyes behold what few have had the courage to endure....” My master, the showman, would then turn and scan the audience, a look of deep concern for their welfare in his rodent eyes. “A warning my friends” his words like pomegranate syrup: thick, too sweet. “This is not for the faint of heart; but only for those who are unafraid to encounter the realm of darkness”

From inside the tent, the musician (a vile little man with no teeth and horrid body odour) would rattle the shells, building up the volume in a pathetic attempt to create suspense. The most pathetic part is...it did.

I would be led from the tent then, the beads on my gown rattling out a warning as I moved. My face was veiled beneath a piece of gauze that looked mysterious from a distance, but up close was cheap goods, and stank of sour wine and fish. An exhibit. The eyes of the audience would follow me, and from beneath the veil I could see them all. In those moments, I learned to read faces, especially the eyes. I confess that have used the knowledge to my own advantage many times. A woman such as I should profit at least a bit from it all, don't you think? Yes, I would watch them; look beneath. It didn't take a lot of thinking; the faces, the needs, were disappointingly predictable and banal. Fleecing the gullible; it's a game as old as wine, and as addictive.

Some of them were wealthy men, drawn to the outskirts of the city and to a dirty side show by the need to experience a world not under their own control. They were the ones most likely to respond with lust. There were many peasants too, whose overt need was for distraction; any small relief from the drone of their own poverty. Others yet, on a religious pilgrimage, and prey to rumours of powers that until now they only encountered in nightmares. All of them, like children. Wide-eyed, wanting to believe it was true. Wanting to believe it was not. Afraid and fascinated and viscerally aroused by something too deep to understand or name. Ah yes, there is money to be made.

This was my stock and trade. These eyes, these needs, these discoloured hopes of heaven.

“This is your last chance to turn away” the voice of my master would taunt, dare them to remain. They did. The musician beat the large drum in a rhythm that echoed the thunder. As the noise built to its highest, I would remove my veil in one smooth motion, sweeping it backwards to reveal my face; this blotchy mess of features that you see before you now. Gasps. Hands to faces, covering on themselves the places they saw the mark of evil splashed over me. Some called out to their gods for protection. None left.

I would remain perfectly still; staring at each of them in turn. Without fail they lowered their eyes, or turned away. Some snickered nervously, sandals scuffing the dust. When I had played that long enough, I would let my body begin to tremble, and roll my eyes back into my head. Sometimes I would flap my arms beneath my robes, or hop up and down like a tethered animal, which, in fact, I was. If they wanted a show, well then, I would give them one. Slowly, then, I would calm myself and approach them, pointing, shouting or whispering, whichever amused me at the time. A small collection of predictable phrases was enough to make the impression they longed for and feared. “You have a secret in your past” I would moan...or “you have many riches and yet I see great

unhappiness.” That one in particular makes me laugh. They always seemed shocked that I knew that.

If that had been the only thing my master required of me, to open the purse strings of the audience, I may have been there still. I will say simply that it was not. When I was very small, a certain few men, the same in each city, it seemed, would pay my master dearly to enter the tent with me. They were always disappointed if I cried, and so I learned to disguise my whimpering as the moaning of a seer. As I grew to womanhood, I no longer appealed to them, but there were others, Always there were others. Clots of them, congealing at the edges of the sideshow. With the practiced voice of a half-mad clairvoyant, I would tell them what they wanted to hear; do what they wanted done.

They were pitiful in some ways, I can see that now. Even then, there were times when I felt that; knew it deeply. As I approached them I could feel their fear; almost smell it; putrid and plum coloured, a bruise on their spirits; stinking with the anticipation of a dangerous thrill, when what they wanted most was a mother to hold them and tell them everything would be all right. Something primal and bruised in me knew that beneath the bravado was a frightened little boy. I’d try to catch their eyes as they left the caravan, after the grunting, sweating, after they did what men do. . “Look at me.” My eyes would say. “What do you truly see?” Every time, they lowered their gaze, a greasy smirk masking their shame.

I will never forget the day I saw Lydia. We were in Phillipi, at one of its outdoor markets. She had come with her wares; set up far away from our seedy part of the show, and came looking for someone who might tend her burrow, who had become ill. My master was gone to town for food, and had tied our own beasts and me behind the caravan while he was gone. I enjoyed the company of the animals and the heat of the sun on my face, which I left unveiled since no one who mattered ever ventured behind the tents. I remember that I was chewing on a piece of straw, rubbing the velvety ears of our donkey and swatting the insects that buzzed incessantly around both of us. I had an open sore on my hand. I don’t know why I remember that. How she got there I have no idea, but suddenly I looked up and she was there; staring at me and at the animals, as though she wasn’t sure what she was seeing. I drew in my breath, and after a fingernail of time during which I was frozen with fear, I grasped behind me for my veil and shawl, throwing them over my face. She put her basket on the ground, and tilted her head to one side, as though puzzled at my reaction.

She had caught me unawares; had seen my bare face; witnessed the way my features relaxed when no one was looking. She had looked squarely into my stained nakedness and had not screamed, nor turned away in disgust. She just... stared.

I had never seen such a woman up close. She was...a woman of consequence. I could tell by her jewellery, by her robes, and more than that, by the way she carried herself. As if she lived in her body. Her bearing held no apology. Do you know what I mean? She began to walk toward me. I whimpered, cowered under my shawl, anticipating a beating, or worse. Surely a woman of this class would want to be rid of the likes of me. She probably had a husband somewhere and was afraid of what my powers could do to him. I was terrified, and so I went into my act, the tremors, the vocalizations that signalled that demons were afoot. I moaned. I shook. And still she came toward me. When she was right beside me, she spoke.

“My name is Lydia, daughter. Who are you?” A thrilling, husky voice. I couldn’t speak. But I did stop my act, remaining still beneath my shame. I could have reached out and touched her, and my body felt alive with her presence. A wide face, smooth and wrinkled at once. Brown almond eyes, and a nose a bit too pointed to be called attractive by most. Her arms beneath the dusty violet robe were round, and strong; the colour of roasted figs. She smelled like wild flowers. As I got to know her, I understood that she acts like them too. Blooming... just because she can; colours vibrant and extravagant and for no one’s profit, except that my own world was immeasurably richer for her presence. You can see for yourself; she’ll be back soon; she hasn’t changed in all the years I’ve been with her.

But that day, behind the caravan, all I knew is that she was unlike anyone I had ever met. She looked at my sandals-off-self and didn’t flinch. She asked my name. She smiled.

“I saw you before you saw me, my daughter. I know you are as sane as I. Please stop this farce, and tell me who you are.” Her eyes drifted again to the strips of camel leather that tied me to the caravan; “...and who has done this to you”.

For the first time in my life, someone wanted to know about me. Me! It felt strange. It seemed wrong somehow; foreign and frightening. I shook my head beneath the shawl, and turned away, drawing my knees up to my chest, burying my face in the folds of my shawl. I remember feeling shame at the smell of my body and my robe. The sun, so warm and welcome just minutes ago, now beat harshly on my back. She stepped over the reeking debris at the side of the caravan and squatted beside me on the other side.

“Please”

That one word undid my resolve, and I raised my head to her. She reached out a tentative hand to my shawl, and when I didn’t recoil, she lifted it from my face. The light hurt my eyes, and I crumpled my face against the brightness. A finger of silence, then two, and I opened them again. She was still there.

“There. That’s better.” That voice again.

She sat down in the dirt beside me; leaning back against the wheels of the caravan.

“I see your burrow likes having his ears rubbed” She said, holding out her palm to him, letting him decide when to give in to his curiosity and come closer to her. It didn’t take long. He snuffled, all knobbly kneed and curious.

“What’s his name?”

“I call him Feathers” I spoke quietly, testing out a new voice. My throat was unaccustomed to anything but the moans and shrieks of my trade. I cleared my throat, tried again, a little louder. She waited.

“I call him Feathers. See right here? His coat has scraggly bits. They look like feathers.” The last phrase faded away. I heard my own voice as though from outside my body. It sounded silly to my ears. Why had I spoken at all? Feathers, what a name for a burrow, and not the kind of thing one would say to a lady. To someone like...like this.

“Yes, they do. Hello Feathers” she pulled some grass, held it out to him, flat palmed and gentle. No rings on her fingers; these were the hands of someone who was used to working. Her nose ring, though, and the fine strong leather of her sandals, told me again that she was wealthy.

“My own burrow has a sore foot. What do you think I should do? Do you know anyone here who can care for her?”

I said very little that day; trying to see beneath her. What spirit hovered here? I tried to enter her eyes, as I read the men who came to our caravan. There was no fear in her, no pathetic weakness, no gluttony for a bellyful of freak. Then why was she here? She confused me, and so I kept my peace. Sooner or later she would show her true colours.

After some conversation about animals and the best way to care for them, she left, with a promise to return. To my astonishment, she kept it, the next afternoon. And the next, and the next, always waiting until the brutal heat of the mid day sun drove my master into town. She would bring me food: dried fruit and nuts and bread without mould. More at one time than I'd ever had before. What I didn't eat, I hid in my shawl against the hunger of the night, and over the next few days I could feel my body becoming stronger.

My days took on a certain rhythm: mornings were the same: up at dawn to clean and feed the animals, and tend to each of my master's many whims. Washing our garments in the local river, under the watchful eyes of the musician, who knew what would happen if he let me escape. More often than not, though, he fell asleep as I laboured on my own; washing the blankets from the night before....fabric scraped on stone, seeking a cleanliness that no water could never achieve. Evenings and nights, of course, I plied my trade as usual, my shrill moans still thrilling the seekers of such things. Ah – but at mid-day – that's when everything changed. I had found my daytime voice. In the heat of the day he went to town, and tied me behind the caravan, as he always did. But my bondage was now my freedom in a way I had never imagined was possible. It was then that Lydia would come...every day without fail. It was as though she too was seeking something...

We ate together, Lydia and I. She talked about ordinary things; animals of course, and flowers. She loved wild flowers. So did I! I was surprised that someone of her stature would even notice them. I imagined that such a woman would always buy flowers from the vendors in the market.

“No Claudia” she said, when one day she brought me a fistful of small purple cactus flowers. “The wild ones are best. At least I think so. Look at these! What person could not pass these by and cry out in praise to the gods?”

She held them out straight, then buried her nose in them, inhaling noisily. That caused a sneezing fit, and we both laughed until tears ran down our cheeks; hers smooth and brown; mine, disfigured and cursed. Somehow, the tears erased the difference. It was that day that we talked more deeply, and I told her some of my story. Her eyes filled with tears again, and they ran freely down her face as I talked. When I was done, she didn't speak, but held my words in the gentle cup of her silence.

. Lydia showed me better ways to care for my body, especially at the time of the moon blood. No one had shown me these things, and although I lowered my head with shyness, inside I felt as though a tiny drop of something beautiful had snuck into me; into the place that was really me; where long ago something had washed away the colours in my soul leaving me bleached and silent.

She talked of her gods, whom she served and praised along with others in the city. I was enchanted; I had never considered that the Powers could be anything but

frightening and freakish. She spoke with such passion about the deep things of life; its rhythms and colours, the search for what is good and true; the infinite value of each living thing. And most of all the Power that held them together, and bound them to each beating heart.

Somewhere during that time I had a dream. A cave, and in the cave were wounded creatures. It was a place they could lick their wounds in safety, because at its mouth hunched a dragon; fierce and beautiful. The dragon breathed fire, and no one dared to approach the place. Suddenly, in the way of dreams, I was in that cave myself, licking my wounds with the healing moisture my own body produced, with a tongue that until that moment had been used only for the pleasure of others, and certainly never for their healing. The fire from the dragon's belly warmed the cave and I was not afraid. For the first time....everin my life, I was not afraid. I awoke shaken at what I knew in my deepest being must come next, whatever the cost. I didn't speak of the dream to my beautiful dragon; I simply held it next to me; and trusted that the next move would become clear.

One day, she found me at the river, where I was washing blankets, and my master's robes. Other women were there, and soon fell into that fluid way that women have when they work together. Easy, liquid, refreshing . I had never experienced the company of women before coming to Philipi, before meeting Lydia. I stayed silent, unaccustomed to normal speech, but oh how I listened!

"I have finally found the Way that is to be *my* way." she said. "All my life I have worshipped the Divine in the ways of our people. And now, in Jesus of Nazareth, everything has come together. Like...like this shawl."

I looked at her, head tilted to one side, and waited. . By now I knew the patterns of her speech, the way her mind leapt, like a child, from stone to stone across the river. The explanation would come. The other women kept on working, waiting for her to continue.

She drew my shawl from the water, sopping and smelling like a wet sheep. I was ashamed of it, and of the rest of my tattered robes, and tried to wash them when others weren't around. But Lydia spread it out for everyone to see, and then took from her basket a sharpened bone and a length of the most beautiful fabric I had ever seen. She began to mend the shawl, talking all the while.

"It's like this shawl, sisters."

We all listened. As she talked, her words were like fresh water. It was as though we all took those words, rubbed them over the stones of our own experience, scrubbing the stains and rinsing, wringing out what remained.

She mended my shawl as she kept talking. "I have worshipped our gods all my life. How could I not?"

They nodded; each woman there knew the ways of Isis, Astarte, all of them ...

She spoke slowly, deliberately. "Jesus, the Nazarene, seems to knit them together like this shawl, until they are One, in a way I hadn't seen before. I am a trader, a worker in cloth. I feel I have found the fabric that can hold the garment of my life together; that can mend and strengthen and warm not only me, but the world.

She told us about meeting his follower Paul; “I was at the river. Paul was arguing with some men from the city. What intrigued me were not his words, at first, but the passion in his voice. That, and ...”

She lowered her head; a half smile and closed eyes taking her back into that moment.

“That, and how poorly he was faring. They were making terrible fun of him. He was tired, I could see that, and not as polished in speech making as his opponents. I wandered over to the rocks where the crowd had gathered, and found myself inwardly cheering for this skinny little man with the crooked teeth and halting speech. The way he leaned into the words; the intensity of his eyes as I drew closer – all compelled me to stay and to listen. Many others in the crowd did so too. While some jeered along with his opponents, many stayed to hear the message; which came, not so much from his words, as from his being.”

“I tried to talk with him afterward. He’s not unkind, but a bit awkward with women.”

She tied a knot in the thread she was using, holding one end in her teeth as she skilfully wove the frayed remaining end back through the shawl with brown and nimble fingers.

Lydia kept on talking. I was listening with one heart, but inside, something new and moist had begun to uncoil. I felt its sleek and fragile wings within me, fluttering against my despair.

“...and so I too have become a follower of the Nazarene” she was saying. “The women of their company have invited me to break bread with them at the next turning of the moon; three days from now. Their table is open. If any of you would like to join me there you will be warmly in their bosom. Will you come?”

I bent to my task; of course the invitation was for others. I concentrated on a pomegranate stain, listening intently to see if any would respond. Her hand on my shoulder came as a shock. Her eyes caught and held my own. “Will you come, Claudia?”

A thousand, thousand reasons why not melted before the heat in her eyes. “Yes” I said, in my new voice. “Yes, I’ll come”

Three days later, the day when the moon turned toward fullness once more, Lydia came. She brought a sharp knife. With two quick slices she cut through the leather straps that tethered us to the caravan, and simply took me and Feathers home.

And that is how you see us now. I learned her trade, I work in this factory where we make purple cloth by day and break bread by evening’s light.

My goodness look at the colour of the sky – is it sunset already? I’ve been talking so long! I’ve learned to use my daytime voice well, as you can see. And my evening voice? It has changed as well. These days I use it to bless the bread and cup.

Well now. I’ve told you my story....you must tell me yours. Please join us at the table, and let us hear your voice. Day time or night time sounds and colours....The Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth is making all things new. Come – would you like to help?