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## Quest for the Veil of Veronica in Jerusalem

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# *Quest for the Veil of Veronica in Jerusalem*

Lenten Friday afternoon stations of the cross. We adore Thee, oh Christ, we praise Thee, because, by Thy holy cross, Thou hast redeemed the world. My wandering attention always circled back to the sixth station. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus. There must be this record of His features somewhere—map of His facial hair. How high the forehead of Christ? How wide set the eyes? What the noble slope of his nose?

I read in an obscure passage of a dog-eared Jerusalem guidebook that the cloth of Veronica was in possession of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. With just one day in Jerusalem to explore on my own, I take upon myself a pilgrim challenge to locate and view the cloth.

Years ago, in a Mexican market of colonial antiques, one tiny object seemed almost to emit some force to hold my focus, insist I take it home. A miniature retable depicting the blood-stained face of Christ displayed on a cloth. Unable to resist, I paid the inflated price.

In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, I accost a string of worshipers until one priest directs me through the Old City's labyrinthine passages to the Patriarchate. I have to stop three times on the way to confirm directions, each time closer to zeroing in on the right place. A kindly Palestinian man holding a huge iron key opens an imposing door and asks how he can help me. I plead that I've come to see the veil of Veronica. He cannot understand my request but assures me their religious museum has been closed for years. Wishing to be helpful, he opens the chapel for me to see the ancient icons. He contents himself as I marvel at paintings and the elegant throne of the Patriarch. But I am still not dissuaded. I beg him to ask if I can perhaps even see a photo of it. I am impassioned, humble but insistent. He pours me tea, brings biscuits, invites me to sit.

Finally I convince him to persist. He leads me up twisted stairways to where he says I am free to request information from the secretary. A splayed-out tabby cat luxuriates before the worn wooden door. Having knocked three times, each a bit less sheepishly, I am ushered into a modern office that might be in any US high-rise, but that this is actually Jerusalem. Three clerics, baffled by my no-Hebrew mime, direct me to one young woman who speaks English. Tear-eyed I tell of my desire to see the Veil.

“I can see this means a lot to you. Do we even have it?” she shrugs. “I don’t know if we have that.” And off she goes to ask.

She soon comes back to report, “He’s not even here, but you can wait.” I try to sit as unobtrusively as possible amidst the bustling activity. She explains that everyone is busy getting ready for next week’s visit from the Pope.

I try meditating to quell my impatience as the minutes drag . At last the arrival of an old orthodox priest, long gray beard, black, academic-looking robes, a hat like an eagle’s nest atop his head. She tries to explain why this American woman is sitting in his office.

“No”, he shakes his head vigorously. “We do not have it. The Capucin nuns have been in possession for centuries.” He says something to his secretary about the haggling over sacred treasures that contaminates the holy places.

I understand little of it, but she translates. “Down this street, right, left, then right again, through the passage beyond the arch, around the fountain,” etc., directions to the convent of the Capucin nuns. “They wear white habits,” she tells me.

I bow a thank you and back away, through the old door without disturbing the cat, down three turns of stairs with a brief stop to express my gratitude to the Palestinian keeper of the keys.

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Having followed the Patriarch's direction, I find myself still among vendor stalls. No one seems to know anything about the Capucins. I ask and ask, retrace my steps, try again. Nothing. All afternoon I traverse narrow streets of the old city. Repeatedly traversing the Via Dolorosa, I mime the kindly gesture of Veronica. Finally a sweet Jamaican nun leads me to the sixth station, the home of Veronica.

Descending stone stairs into a dark chamber, I imagine the young girl having stepped outside into the offal of contaminated streets to see a man straining under the weight of a huge crossbeam, trudging up toward the skull place.

Moved by compassion she grabbed a cloth and dabbed His blood-stained face.

The impression of His pained features stayed on her veil.

Surely here they can tell me where I might see it. A small stall in the same building sells Russian-style religious paintings. The French-speaking nun returns from the back room with an icon of Veronica holding the cloth.

"No," I insist, "I was hoping to see the real one. The very one. The original image."

"Oh," she looks gently amused but not mocking, "It's legend. The actual cloth does not exist."

I abandon my search with prayers before the slab of unction that smells of myrrh and is infused with the piety of millions of Christians. ( It is actually not the stone on which Christ's body lay for burial preparation. Only two centuries ago it replaced another that had lain on the spot since the 12th century. )

I hadn't considered the theory that Veronica, derived of vera (truth) and icon (image), was a picture of the Word, recalled verbatim—outside the throat, beyond the eye, no brave woman at all, but the two-thousand year old embodiment of our desire for some physical evidence that He lived, that He walked the sorrowful way to Golgatha, past a woman full of compassion.

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