

The True Picture

True – *Vera*, Picture – *Icon*; *Vera Icon* – Veronica.

Veronica is a high-powered businesswoman in ancient Tyre, a glamorous ex-temple dancer with a dark past, exporting purple dye to her family business back in Rome. Steeped in the luxury colour, and the stinking vats of sea-snails it comes from, Veronica uses all the skills she learnt as an assistant priestess, like singing and drinking, to make a killing in Phoenicia's commercial capital.

As a young handmaiden to Venus she was gang-raped in the men's baths, girding the goddess statue with myrtle for her feast day. She left temple service in pieces, to be repaired like fine Roman pottery by her father; fit to deal with senators and generals, to sell purple for the stripes on their togas; dye worth its weight in gold.

She has heard of Jesus three times before she meets him one night at the necropolis. He's come from Sidon with a crowd of new followers, ablaze with the stories he's told and the miracles he's done. And though she is not blind, or bleeding, Veronica is slowly cured, too.

She's supposed to leave business behind when she follows him but the trade route is so strong between Tyre and Jerusalem, Veronica thinks she can run the *purpura* in its rich vein. She cashes everything in for a silk tunic dyed with the heavenly colour and sets off to find Jesus again.

Her companions on this journey are bossy big sister Publia, who is married to Balthazar, the Phoenician dye tycoon; and his brother Abibaal who Veronica banks with, drinks with, but definitely doesn't sleep with (though she did have a complicated thing with one of his slaves).

With them on the edges of the group who walk with Jesus from Galilee are Emeshmoon and Farzan, booksellers from Byblos, whose business in papyrus was big till they met the living word; and Marcus Manlius, a Roman actor who has converted to the truth. In the care of a Jewish aunt of one of the twelve disciples, Nathaniel, they lodge at her house in Capernaum; and indulge her fancy for the rude bits of Ovid.

At first, Veronica finds it hard to be one woman in love with the lord of all; impossible to feel special to him who loves everybody. She gives up her elaborate hairdo, her expensive make-up, her ivory bust of Dionysus and her amethyst bracelets; and she is brutally robbed of her purple dress on the first night out of Tyre. Stripped of her assets, she finds out how wealthy she really is; no longer seducing, or selling, she can still sing.

A thread of purple leads her to her station on the Via Dolorosa: where she wipes her master's face with a handkerchief as he carries the cross.

This is *vera icon*, the true picture; Christ's image never fades from her white linen cloth. She is the famous St. Veronica: with a sequel that takes her back home to Rome for the beginnings of the Catholic Church - and ends in her martyrdom.

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Nothing is known about the 'real' Veronica. She may never have existed at all. She is not mentioned in the bible. She appears in the Catholic 'Stations of the Cross', number *VI*; the woman who wipes blood and sweat off Jesus' face with her veil.

'Vera Icon' might just be a play on words, and the image that never fades might just be a myth; but legend says Veronica took the cloth to Rome and presented it to the emperor. Her sainthood implies that she died for this brand new faith.

My version of her story is pure fiction set against a backdrop of gospel fact. Researched in fine detail, it follows the timeline of Jesus' words and deeds according to historical and biblical evidence. But the voice of Veronica is fresh and modern as if this were happening now: the newest testament.

