

That Night - the perspective of a slave girl *written by Janet Killeen*

Silent feet, silent tongue. That is how they train you. And we don't tell them, sharpened sight. We see and hear everything. When we can snatch the odd time off, between dinner and bed maybe, or in the heat of the afternoon when the mistress is resting, we meet up in the market place, or the wine shops down the alley by the gate, and catch up on the gossip. We all know one another, share the same secret life. Comradeship. Where the mask can slip a little. Small jokes. Kindness. Maybe even the hope of a future husband or a wife, if the small savings can be garnered away and the luck turns. Who knows?

But this evening. How can I begin to talk of it? It's very late now, but there are still lights in many houses, and torches carried along the streets, and the crunch of soldiers' feet, the scruff and scurry of sandals, and a distant murmur of unrest, like the growl in the back of a wild dog's throat. The wild dogs hang around the rubbish, snarling.

Sharpened ears, sharpened sight.

I'm trying to sort it in my head. Who I was, even yesterday, is not who I feel I am today. It began, I think, in that odd moment by the well. I'd drawn up the water, filled the great jar, and was hoisting it up to carry it through the streets, the last of many, but this one to be carried upstairs to the guest room.

I was tired. Maybe I've always been tired, since the day my father sold me to pay his debts. Just out of childhood, twelve years old, and I remember my mother weeping. Down in the dust, begging him. He shook her off, and sent me to the city with a friend of his, in a cart full of new wineskins and goatskin rugs, stinking and hot, and I sat, still as stone, and the tears have never come.

You could say I was lucky. When I hear other stories, I know that's true in a way. I came to the house of a good woman and her family, none of them cruel or rough, and she put me in the care of the steward and the cook to train me to serve at table, and to learn to prepare the food. They were kind, mostly, except when the household got very busy at the festivals and once a year I was given a gift of money and clothing, and the hope grew that one day they might set me free. Although, when you think about it, freedom is a blade with two edges, and one points towards you. There's no life in those dark and churning streets for a woman on her own.

Ten years since I came, just a child, and now I carry the water and attend to the guests and serve at table, silent, watchful. Just a pair of hands really, until those odd hours of fleeting laughter and talk in the stolen moments of the day or night.

So I'd filled the great pitcher, and turned, feeling the balance of it, when a man stopped me. "Daughter," he said, "let me carry that for you." I thought he was joking, or if not, maybe he was one of the slaves like myself, wanting to give me a hand. But men don't carry water, that's a woman's job.

"No," I said slowly, facing him, unsure how to deal with this. If it was a joke, it was a bad one. If it was a genuine offer of help, I needed to be sure that I could trust the man and know he was not looking for any favours. I looked. I had never seen him before, and even though I looked hard at him I could not tell the details of his face.

"My daughter," he said again. "You are very tired. Let me take that for you." As I looked at him, I felt as if he knew me, and I was afraid that the crying might begin and never stop. "Don't worry," he said very gently, and took the heavy jar, balanced it carefully and walked away. A few heads turned as he walked up the street and a couple of men began to follow him.

Gathering myself as soon as I could, I followed too, anxious and hot as the sun was now moving further overhead. But I need not have worried. He took the pitcher to the house, climbed the outside steps to the upper room, while the two men behind him went inside to talk to the master. They had taken no notice of my helper. As I came near the door, he came downstairs, smiled, and was gone. I went to the back of the house, puzzled, silent. Then the master of the house came in and gave directions for the upper room to be prepared for thirteen guests to eat the Passover meal.

There was no time to waste: food to prepare, not just for the family but for these guests. The room to be spotless and the furniture and cushions ready for them to recline around the long table. Lamps to be set out and wicks trimmed. The pitcher of water, the jug, bowl and towels for their feet to be washed, my job, before the meal could be served. You could tell, from the whispered excitement in the house, that these were important guests and everything must be perfect. The silent, sharp-eyed service that I was trained for.

The sun turned red and sank lazily beneath the clouds that rise from the Great Sea, far west—I have never seen it, but so they tell me. Dust gathered in corners and spread slowly over the city, the lamps were lighted and torches flared in the streets. I remember standing at the doorway, out of sight, as the men came up the stairs, bringing with them the sweat and restlessness of the day and its dust in their hair and clothing, and on their feet and sandals. I stood ready with the bowl, waiting for them to take their ease on the cushions around the low table.

They were excited, talking and gesturing as they took their places, and I noticed, as you do, the way in which they pushed for position to lie near the head of the table.

They did not notice as I moved forward, expecting to kneel and begin the task of easing their feet and cleansing them before the meal ahead. Nor did they notice as he came in and silently took the bowl and jug and towel from me and began my work, the slave's work. Finger on lips to me, and that same steady look, the gentle smile, then the intense focus on the feet of his friends, washing them with great tenderness, as if caressing them with kindness. At first they thought it was the slave: so familiar was the pattern of hospitality, they barely recognised that it was happening. Then one of them, a burly man who seem, by the strength of his voice and presence, to have some sort of leadership, swung round and realised. He was loud in his protests, loud with the strong accent of the north, but his friend, who I see now was the true leader of the group, persisted. I saw his red-faced embarrassment as he submitted, and the rest of the group, frozen, I thought, speechless as their leader washed their feet and dried them, carefully, tenderly. It takes a long time to wash twelve pairs of feet. The room waited, the meal forgotten, and the evening gathered itself around the table. I felt the darkness waiting as if about to spring. The oil lamps held it at bay.

Then at last the figures came to life. The meal began and I ran to and fro with platters of meat and bread, the wineskins to pout into the jugs and then into cups – it takes a steady hand and all the special ceremonial food for the Passover. I watched them, and listened as the conversation rose, with arguments and flourishes of hands and arms, and food and cups spilt onto the table. “Who’s the most important?” they were saying. “Which one of us will be in the place of power when the kingdom comes?”

“Well,” I thought to myself, “have you learned nothing?” But I had to go then and get more food and more to drink. When I returned, the group had quietened. “Is it me? Is it me?” they were saying. But I did not know the meaning.

There was one moment as I lingered when he stood and took the bread and broke it, tore it apart, and said a strange thing. “My body,” he said and handed it to them.

When I went back to clear the table, one of them was rising to his feet and, leaving hurriedly, and the stir of air at his passing caused all the lamps to splutter and the darkness entered as he left. I brought light quickly and renewed the lamps but the mood had changed. They shifted uncomfortably, then stood together to sing the psalm and left, down the steps and into the dark streets.

I did not get away until much later that night, after the first cockcrow, but you could sense that rising murmur of excitement, anger, fear, call it what you like, it was all those things, and the city still hums with it. I joined old friends at the wine shop and heard the stories that were running round like jackals. Malchus, slave of the High Priest, came with the news of betrayal and arrest in the garden, clutching his ear, and we marvelled at his story, and touched his ear, and the tale grew of the man in the garden and the followers who ran away.

Anna came in bursting with the excitement of her story, always a gossip. "I recognised him, I tell you," she said, hands on hips. "He was one of them, one of those men from Galilee. You could tell it by his voice. And I've seen him around with that Jesus. Big fellow, but not so big now, I can tell you. Three times he said he didn't know him." Others came with the details of the show trial at the High Priest's and then Herod, and we knew the next step would be the Romans. The taste of the story turned bitter to all of us and we found ourselves scattering, even the most talkative, frightened by the events that were overtaking us, events of great heaviness, terrible things.

I thought of the man. He had called me 'daughter'. No-one had done that since the day I left home, a slave. Two of my friends were walking up ahead as I returned through the alleys to the house. Fragments of their talk reached me and stay with me now. "They say he sold him for thirty pieces of silver," they were saying.

The slave price. The price my father was paid for me.



Reflection:

The gospel narratives tell us that jostling for position and significance continued right up to the last hours before the walk to the garden of Gethsemane. Why was this so important for the disciples? Is it still true in our lives, as Christians, as church members?

How do you imagine the washing of the disciples' feet? Is it a symbolic or significant act that is still meaningful today?

How does this part of the story help us to understand the reactions of people who are not church members but onlookers?

What aspects of this story can be discerned in the cases of slavery and human trafficking today?