

CLAIRE'S DILEMMA

A Strippers Monologue
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CHARACTER

CLAIRE

Attractive, voluptuous African American woman. A stripper. Early thirties.

TIME

Early to mid-1970's.

(Lights rise behind sheer curtains. A silhouetted Black woman dances sensuously to a slow 1970's soul tune)

CLAIRE

I went to the corner store one morning. When I stepped through the door, this young pretty girl I'd not seen before was working the counter. The child couldn't have been no more than fifteen, maybe sixteen. She said she knew of me and heard somewhere that I strip for a living. I told her yeah, I ain't ashamed of it. Matter fact, I do quite well for myself. "Well, then . . . what kind of car you drive?" I looked and asked, "What's it to you?"

"I just wanna see if you do as good as you say."

"And where'd you hear tell of what I do for a living?"

"Boys at school", she said. "Couple of 'em even been to see you. At least, that's what they said."

I went on and gathered up what I was after. When I went up to pay her, she asked me if I thought she was pretty.

"Come again?"

"You heard right. Am I pretty enough to do what you do?"

I wanted to laugh at that child, but I thought better of it. "Honey, all a woman needs is to *believe* she's got enough to stop the world. Once you know that in your soul, every man walking in a pair of shoes will know it, too."

"I want you to talk to me some more about what you do."

"Sure! Anytime, child. Just ask y' mama first."

(She laughs, then enters from behind the curtains. She is dressed in a leather halter top, tight jeans and suede boots)

Just before I took m'self out the door, I told her I didn't drive no one car, by the way. I had two: a red Coup de Ville convertible . . . and a silver Vette!
That killed her!

(She laughs. Lights rise in the plush, luxurious living room, early 1970's chic, of an inner-city apartment. A large black-and-white photograph of Claire – a' la Avedon/Scavullo – in a nude, erotic pose hangs on the wall)

Yes! Claire does quite well for herself.

(She prepares a drink)

This handsome white daddy had me up to his house the other night. There's times when I'll see a man at his house for a party . . . or if he just wants a little something all to himself. If the cat is clean and goes about it like a gentleman, and if he's willing to lay some real bread on me, sure! I'm with it! Well, this one was some kind of high-class lawyer who fronted for gangsters. He'd come to the club, smile nice, say a few kind words, then slide some heavy skins between my panty straps to dance for 'im.

(She sips her drink and makes a few moves)

I sure grew to like that man. He had the smoothest hands I'd ever felt on a cat. He looked good, too. Handsome! Like Paul Newman handsome! So, in time, yeah – it won't no big thing for me to visit his house. He said he'd pay well, but the truth is I was ready to go with him for free.

We went to breakfast the next morning. Before driving me home, he said he had a client who might be interested in making my acquaintance. "Him and his wife, that is. Would this be a problem?"

"No. I don't believe I'd have a problem with that."

"Good. I'll call and let you know later. How do I reach you?"

(She downs the drink, then pours another. She puts an album on the turntable and sips the drink. A sensuous soul tune plays)

My mother and father are church folks. Down the line. Truth is mama was the church goer while daddy played the part of the sinful rabble rouser. He loved his card playing, he loved his scotch and soda, and he loved his running around.

Mama sang in the choir. She sure had the voice for it. I'll be knocked down if she didn't sound just like Dinah Washington. Lord! Hearing that woman sing would be all the heaven you'd want. She'd aimed for a career singing secular music, but soon found God. And made the decision to sing only for Him and devote her life to the church.

Now, with church people for parents you're probably wondering how in the world did this woman get herself mixed up in the stripping game. It was through my aunt. That's right! My mama's wayward sister. She was about two years younger than mama. And a whole lot more fun to be around. And, of course, mama forbade me to even look in her direction. Damn, I loved that woman. Sometimes I'd steal to her crib on a Saturday, or after school when she won't working. She told me the stripping racket did right by her. But the way she saw things, it won't for me. "You can do better", she said. "So, don't let me hear tell of you taking off your clothes for no man's money. It ain't no way to live."

As to what it was exactly that set her and mama so far apart, well . . . before daddy got religion, he and my aunt had a thing going, unbeknownst to mama. They'd carry on until he let mama drag him to service one Sunday morning. You see, a man can't know his weakness until you hook him up with a church going woman. He'll find he's no match for her. I can't put it all together, but there was something about the preacher's sermon that morning that started to work on daddy. When the preacher got through, he asked if there be any souls who wished to be saved. Daddy stood up, went before the altar and fell to his knees, pleading with the good Reverend to baptize him and thus save him from sin.

When they got home that evening, he broke down again, this time before mama, and cried to her to forgive him for committing sin with her sister.

Mama would forgive his sorry ass. As for her sister . . . she would not speak another mumbling word.

(She sips the drink)

I'm pleased over the fact that Claire ain't no dope head. She ain't got no drinking problem, though I do like my liquor, on occasion. And, though I live good, I ain't one to throw money away. I got me a few investments, some land. Health insurance. A nice cushion in the bank. All that plus, at thirty-two years, still able to heat the blood in a snake. Thus, Claire don't want for nothing . . . except . . .

(She downs all of the liquor in the glass
in one gulp)

. . . except *love*.

(She laughs, then pours another)

Don't worry. I ain't got no issue with liquor. I know my way around it. So, I ain't nor will I ever be no drunk. Just . . .

(She takes a swig)

. . . lonely as the devil.

(She puts on another record, this time something up-tempo and funky)

Here that? That's my first boyfriend playing guitar. First man I ever opened my legs for. Him . . . and his wife.

(She dances a bit to the song)

Two years shy of the age of consent when I first warmed their bed. Ain't even had my drivers license yet. Yet he and his woman was only too happy to welcome me into their fold to commit sin on a regular basis. He was cute. Twenty-five. And built like a racehorse. His woman was older. And looked it. Yet still in possession of enough to work a spell on a man. She'd done a little stripping in the not-too-distant past. And he showed me some pictures from earlier times when she had more youthful fire. But, like I said, there'd been enough heat in her still to keep the dark in a man good and warm. They took a fancy to me. And I them. Thus, I went along with the game.

I ran off with some girlfriends one night to a dance. That's when I first saw him in the band, playing his guitar. It didn't take long for us to lock eyes and even dance together. And didn't need to breathe a word before I let him kiss me that first time.

I'd soon leave home to move in with him. And his woman. Mama disapproved, of course. But there won't nothing she could do. My mind was made up. She understood yet told me if I left to not so much as broach the thought of coming back. Daddy tried to intervene, but mama had laid the law down. And it was done with.

My man's woman would speak of how high she thought my body. "Honey, you don't look to be no child of sixteen", she'd say. "It looks to me that God done made you a woman before you could even wash yourself good!" She put a record on and asked me if I could dance. I made some tired teenage girl moves that made her laugh. To which she put on something slower, then showed me how to pull everything righteous out of that music and into my body. "You got what it takes to make some good long money", she said. "If you do right, that is, by what the Lord gave you." She showed me how to move and talk with my soul, and not just my body or my mouth, so that every stitch of clothes I had on would loose from me of their own accord, as they loosed from Lazarus when Jesus commanded them thus.

After a while, I got so good that I'd dance for her and our man . . . just before we'd make love.

Now, I'd been led to think they had something of a good thing between them. But I learned at a young age that you can't truly know folks until you start living with 'em. Once you move in, it's like they decide to become *themselves*,

y' know? Every so often, I'd catch him eyeing her, then see her wilt like cabbage gone bad. He'd holler at her. Then she'd get up the strength to holler back. One morning at breakfast, I watched him reach across the table smack her, hard enough to make her get up and run off crying. "What's wrong with ya'll?" I asked. "I mean, what the fuck is up with all this? Is there something I ought to know?"

"Don't worry 'bout it", he said.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I can't help but worry – "

"Listen, it ain't your business. She know what time it is. Now leave it alone."

"Do it got anything to do with money?"

"You don't know shit, girl. Now shut your damn mouth."

He was right: I didn't know shit. But I could guess. And as young as I was, I knew enough about the world to know how ugly money can make folks.

I'd come to find I'd been right. See, that woman of his had been married before they hooked up. Her husband died from a heart attack. Before then, he owned a line of strip clubs and one or two chicken joints. And before passing on, he'd left her a piss-pot full of money. She had it – it was hers. And without speaking half a word made it known that she won't ceding one rusty nickel of it to him.

"She knows what she's doing", he'd say.

He was right about that, too. The woman loved him. Like a mad dog. And in her crazy way of thinking she believed that if she let him stick his hands in that pot, he'd leave her. So, the way she saw it, I guess, keeping hold of that money was . . . what do they call it? *A deterrent?*

Anyhow, things would feel calm for a few days. Then they'd disrupt it all again with fighting. Or he'd just eyeball her. Real evil-like.

They'd sent me to the store one night. Coming back, I heard, then saw through the kitchen window the two of 'em wailing at each other like two alley cats. After he told her he couldn't stand it – wouldn't stand it no more . . . and it was like I knew what was to come next. So, I shut my eyes . . . *and heard the shot.*

Next thing I knew I found myself in the house . . . and looking down at the dead woman – seeing the woman's face which won't there no more because the bullet went right through the middle of it and – and tore the face plumb off and took all if it right through the hole it made and – and blood! Blood was all over everything.

"Help me", he said. "Come in the living room with me and let's get the rug".

We took the rug and rolled her up in it. Then I helped him hide it in a space under the house.

“We just gon leave her here?”

“She’ll be alright. I’ll get some lime tomorrow. To cover up the smell. Won’t nobody notice. It’ll be alright.”

“But – “

“You ain’t got to be scared. I’ll take care of it.”

“Well, what about the – “

“The Po-lice ain’t gon know or care. The bitch is under the house. Out of sight! Out of mind! You hear?”

“You – you crazy!”

“Are you with me on this, or what?”

Now I was scared. I couldn’t stop myself from trembling. Lord help me, I had to pee!

Then he kissed me. Real soft. Real slow. “I’m gon take care of you. Now I said not to worry. Alright?” He tried like the devil to hide the evil intent burning in his eyes. But it was there. He couldn’t help himself. And I knew that if I wanted to keep my hide intact and not wind up like that bitch under the house, it was in my best interest to shut my mouth and go along with the game.

“Only thing is I – I guess I won’t be getting none of that money, will I?” And the muthafucker laughed. Yeah! He laughed. While I stayed scared. And still having to pee.

For a while, I didn’t even notice the passing of the days. My man covered the space under the house with lime, so at least there won’t no smell. But like B.B. King used to say, the thrill was gone. Long gone. We’d lay in bed and couldn’t bring ourselves to make it no more. Couldn’t sleep, neither. At night we’d just lay together like two slabs of warm meat. He’d bring himself close. He wanted me. We wanted each other. Something held us back, though. Lord, I needed a good fuck like a baby needed his mama! Bad! Damned bad! But, fear, or something – I couldn’t tell what – kept us locked out. I loved this man. The situation, though, was such that I knew I’d never have him. Not really. And that scared me to death.

Two o’clock one dark morning I’d finally drop off to sleep. And from the minute my eyes closed, I didn’t do nothing but try to pull myself out of a nightmare: the dead woman under the house had started to rot, and the smell was choking us. I watched the stink strangle my man to death . . . then the bad

scent reeked through the house and set it afire! And I saw the woman raise herself from out of the flames . . . !

(She shudders. Silence)

In spite of it all, I wanted to hold on. Going back home was out of the question: mama had shut that door for good. Pretty soon, my man lost his mind, then turned himself over to the po-lice. “Don’t fret”, he told me. “Your name ain’t gon come up.”

He left me with his smile. Lord . . . that man was cute!

(She pours another drink and gulps it down)

When I met Gigi, I was twenty-five, a woman full-throttle, and stripping in this joint run by two Mexicans which won’t nothing but a front for dope peddling. Once in a while, I’d see them loping in and out of some back room with one or two other men to talk business or what-not. Every so often, the po-lice would show up, just to get their take. Which told me the operation was tight. And I won’t gon worry over it. Aside from the fact that it wasn’t my business, I was making long money. And they treated me good.

Gigi’d been in the Army with about a year left on her enlistment when she stepped up to me that night in her uniform with a fifty between her fingers. She put it right in the crotch of my panties and said, “I’m gon see you later,” which she did when I gave her the table dance of her life. Every swingin’ dick in the joint had his eye trained on us in that corner, their damn tongues drooped so that, I swear, they could’ve mopped the damn floor.

She came to the club two weekends in a row. Then one night she warmed my crotch, not with a fifty, but a c-note, then cooled it down with a long, big kiss, like a bee stinging me with sweetness. I didn’t give a shit if any of them men in the clubbed looked – which they did, anyway. I touched her face, and for the very first time noticed how pretty Gigi was: skin like honey, eyes like frosted glass. I fingered her short, curly brown hair and moaned at the softness. “You want to go to dinner with me?” she asked.

“Let me finish my set.”

The day after, I moved in with her. Later that year when she was finished with the Army, we celebrated in Las Vegas for a weekend.

The best sex I’d had with any soul born of a woman was with Gigi. When we started shacking, we made a “blood” agreement to never stray with nobody else. And though the two of us liked ourselves a man every so often, we swore to be true to each other. The world we had was ours and ours alone. And that was enough.

Gigi never let on, though, that she’d *had* a man. They were together for about a year before they split, but still kept something going. What’s worse was I

didn't uncover it until I got word of her being in jail. I came to find out the bitch had been seeing the nigger on the sly for a month. Although they did have the decency to hook up and do their shit at his apartment and not in our bed. I guess that warrants some credit. But the hurt cut into me something awful. I was just about out the door at closing when I got told there'd been a message for me. Gigi was in jail. That night her and that man got into an argument, I was told, over something stupid. To this day, I ain't caught even a hint as to what it was. Only that it was all over something *stupid*. And Gigi stabbed the niggah to death.

She got a trial. And the judge had no mercy. The killing won't premeditated, so they couldn't execute her. The pitiful little lawyer assigned to her made a feeble attempt to get a reduced sentence – manslaughter with ten years and the expectation of parole in five. For the judge, though, it wouldn't do. Maybe he had something against black women. But he might have served Gigi better if he'd just stomped on her head and called it a day. Instead, he gave her twenty years. With no hope of parole. I couldn't even bring myself to look at Gigi, let alone visit her.

(She fights back tears, then pours and gulps down another drink)

Damn, I loved that woman!

(She pours again and drinks, and we see her gradually being affected by the liquor)

I'd gave that handsome lawyer my number . . . that lawyer with the soft hands. And he called me back, just like he'd said, about that couple who'd like to know me. Before the hook up, he laid it down that I keep the *liaison* between me, this man and his wife under my wig, so to speak. I told him I ain't never been one to put my business in the street. He said just the same that this is a highly important individual. He's got a rep. And what goes on between you three can't get out. "You keep this in that dark space between your tits, and you'll be compensated well. Very well. Okay?"

That Sunday afternoon, he drove me up to the man's crib in Santa Barbara, a house on the coast, more house than any two people would ever need, overlooking the beach.

A woman met us at the door, the man's wife, a dark-skinned, pretty thing. She'd tell me later that she was third generation *I-talian*. The man said they'd see to it that I got home later. He gave me a nice little peck on the cheek, then left me and the woman to ourselves.

She made me a drink but didn't make one for herself. She didn't like the taste of liquor, she said. I sipped the Scotch and soda she'd made me, and I swear before the living God and the devils wife that nothing standing over hell could

get me to take my eyes off her. You'd think she just stepped out of a magazine – she was so beautiful. “My name is Dana.” She offered her hand and I kissed it. I expected her to speak with some kind of accent, but no. She told me she was a California girl. Born and raised. “Just from the San Fernando Valley. Sorry.”

(Claire chuckles. Silence)

I took her hand and kissed it again. Ah, yes! She'd broke into my soul that quick!

While we ate each other alive with our eyes and thoughts, her husband stepped in: Silvio Lucci. That's right! I knew him. Or rather I knew of him. Probably the biggest gangster on the West Coast. The new top dog of the Lucci family. I kept cool about it, though. I wasn't gon rattle. All I had to do was go along with the game. Take my money when playtime was over and go on home. If I could do that, everything would be slick.

He took hold of my hand. “I'm Silvio. Of course, I'll bet you already knew that.” He kept holding my hand and looked at me like I was supposed to acknowledge as to whose presence I had the privilege of being in. I tried to smile, but something told me to swallow it. He waited and kept on looking at me with a face like a rock. Finally, I stood up, bowed my head, and motioned to kiss his hand.

“No”, he said. “On your knees!”

I wasn't gon fight it. I knelt to both knees, took his hand, and kissed it. Then he grabbed my neck.

“Everything will be, how do you spades put it? *Slick?* Yeah! Slick! Real slick. For as long as you're aware of the arrangement and as to who is pulling the damn strings. And for as long as you can remember to keep your fucking mouth shut.” Then he squeezed tighter as if to seal the deal. And I knew then that playtime was on.

Now most folks would have turned tail and run after something like that. Yet I knew from the start that it was a game. That's it. The scratch I'd make would fill up a good-sized pot. What's more, I'd have that fine prize, his wife, to play with.

Silvio liked it rough. Though I was thankful for the fact that he didn't go out of his way to hurt us too much, and he wouldn't bring himself to leave no scars, still, that big guinea liked it *rough*. Sometimes he'd indulge himself with both us, at other times with one while he made the other look. Or, when the mood would hit him, he'd have me and his wife go at it, with him sitting on the sidelines with his scotch or his brandy, calling the shots. Even then, he wanted it hard and nasty.

We'd meet every other Sunday. And it stayed that way for a little over two months. I held on to my gig at the strip joint, though, where I was still making good bread. I didn't see no reason to give that up.

One night I was onstage doing my thing when I saw the wife, Dana, out in the house, sitting by herself at a table. When I was through, I went to her and asked how in the hell she got here.

“Please, don’t bother to ask”, she said. “I just had to find you – “

“Why? What the hell do you want – “

“Listen! I – I need to talk to you.”

“Bout what?”

“Please, Claire. I need someone to talk to. That’s all.”

She stayed till closing. 3am. And we went to breakfast. I told her if she knew what was good for, she’d high tail it out of here and get back to Silvio. Neither of us needed to be told of the fact that that wop hood would not take well to her seeing me without his knowledge.

“I don’t get to associate with a lot of people because Silvio . . . he keeps me on a short leash.”

“Look, you need to split – “

“Claire, please . . . please . . . !” She started crying. And that got to me.

“I have no friends, Claire”, she said. “I need somebody to talk to. Please.”

Against my better judgement, I’d hook up with her twice a week for coffee, lunch, or just a quiet walk. After a while, we got cozy with each other. And she told me things about Silvio and his operation that neither she nor I was supposed to know of. Like some rumor that he had his own father killed. I asked her how she got wind of all this.

“Oh, I listen. I don’t get to talk much. So . . . I listen.”

As said, over time, we’d warm up to one another. She visited me one afternoon at my place. And we spent all our time together in bed. Silvio wasn’t there to play overseer or to quarterback nothing. Not this time. We had each other all to ourselves. In the way that suited us. Until it came time for Dana to go. As she got dressed, she turned that perfectly beautiful face toward me and spoke the most beautiful words yet said by a warm-blooded human . . .

“I love you, Claire.”

I told her – I told her I loved her, too.

“Then . . . we’ve got a problem.”

“Yes. We do.”

We hugged. And cried. Then I prayed in my heart for God to curse us both with death. Rather than abide with a love that can only hurt.

That Sunday afternoon, Silvio had gotten into his fine silk robe, then poured his Brandy. He’d sit and watch today. And referee. He told us to raise the stakes. He wanted real pain this time. He told us not to kill ourselves or draw blood. He just wanted the screams to come from a deep and hellish place.

“Don’t worry, Claire”, he said. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

“If I live through it”, I said.

“Hey! I said don’t kill yourselves. I ain’t cleaning up after nobody. Just make it real this time. And I mean *real*. You got it?”

“And may I ask why we’re upping the ante all of a sudden?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Well, I think I have a right to know. Seeing as it’s my hide we’re dealing with.”

“No, sweetheart. You got it wrong: it’s my game. And as long as you’re involved in my game under my goddamn roof, your goddamn hide is mine!”

I was about to curse that man . . . when I felt Dana’s touch. I looked at her pleading eyes. And I ceded to that plea. She leaned closer like she wanted to speak in my ear. Or kiss me. But she didn’t. Instead . . . she bit the top of my ear. So hard . . . I bled.

Against “Massa” Silvio’s instructions . . . blood was drawn that day. From us both. And the sonofabitch laughed. In fact, he laughed all the way through it. Dana fainted when it was over. And Silvio threw a bucket of ice from the bar on her. As for myself, I was weak with the devils pain. And dying of heartache.

“*You knew about us, didn’t you?*”

“Now isn’t that a dumb question”, he said. “A man like me? I mean, you wouldn’t up and broach something like that to God, would ya?”

Dana had recovered and was crying like a whipped bird. The game was done. For good. And so was I, or at least . . . it sure felt like it was coming to that. I got scared. And took one last look at the big, sadistic wop muthafucker . . . just before I passed out . . . and told him to call me an ambulance.

I strip still. And make good bread. I just ain’t got the heart to get involved with nobody else. I guess I’m too much in love with the past, with lovers long gone who yet live. Thus, the act of stripping takes my heart and head out of everything. I need something to kill this loneliness. Like a starved dog needs meat to kill hunger.

(She makes another drink. She is now visibly drunk)

That’s my dilemma. And Claire will learn to be satisfied . . . with her lonesome self. And her liquor. Which she’ll always be able to handle. Don’t you worry.

(She pours and downs the drink, then puts on another record. Another sensuous soul tune plays as she makes yet another drink, then reclines on her sofa. She sips the drink as lights fade)

(End of Play)

