

*Pearls
Before
Swine*

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for Martina

Pearls Before Swine

There was once a widow, who had three daughters. Now the two elder daughters were intelligent, beautiful, and artistic, one being a painter and the other a violinist. But some people thought the youngest daughter ugly, because she was cross-eyed, and she also had the reputation of being crazy. In the mornings and late afternoons, she'd work in the family's vegetable patch. During the hot part of the day, she'd work indoors, go for walks in the woods, or sit in the middle of the vegetable patch without moving for ever such a long time.

"What's so crazy about that?" you may well ask. Well, she'd talk to the vegetables, and then seem to be listening, as if they were answering her. And every evening, after working with the vegetables, she'd go and sit in a mud puddle in front of the house. She caused her two sisters a great deal of embarrassment, and her mother no end of worry, but she was as happy as the day is long, and as healthy as the night is wide.

"Oh, Mother, can't you do anything about her?" wailed her sisters "None of Our friends will come to visit us with her sitting there like that."

And the mother would go out once again and try to convince her youngest daughter to come into the house and clean herself up. But the young woman would only shake her head and say: "I want to stay here." Only when the last hints of the sunset had filtered out of the sky would she stand up and make her way slowly and silently to the back of the house, where she'd wash herself at the rain-water barrel. Then she'd put on a clean dress, collect a few vegetables for the evening meal, and enter the house.

And as the four women sat eating in the kitchen, she'd say strange things that nearly drove her sisters mad, such as "The world is a huge seed waiting to grow into a pepper plant." Or "Today I saw that my body is bigger than the whole world, and smaller than a drop of water." And her sisters would grit their teeth, or roll their eyes, and say nothing, but finish their supper and leave the table as soon as possible. And her mother would sigh and shake her head.

Twice a month, the elder sisters were spared listening to these observations. Each night of full moon or new moon, their sister

would remain sitting in her puddle for the whole night, hardly moving. On nights of full moon, her eyes would follow the moon as it rode from one side of the sky to the other, while on nights of new moon, her eyes would remain shut, but her head would rock slowly, very slowly, from side to side.

Then hard times came to the land where they lived. The rain stopped falling, the ponds and streams dried up. The crops did badly, especially since swarms of insects came and ate up many of the crops before they could be harvested. Now although one of the sisters was a painter, and so didn't depend directly on the crops, the lord and lady for whom she painted depended on taxes from the farmers, and these depended on the crops. So they told her that they couldn't afford to pay her to paint their portraits. And although another of the sisters was a violinist, and so didn't depend directly on the crops, she played in the town band, which played for dances and parties. And as the Crops were doing so badly, the people weren't in the mood for dancing or parties, and also didn't have the money to pay the musicians. The youngest sister's mud puddle had dried up, and now in the evening she sat in the dust, but she still was happy and healthy. She ate less, because there was less to eat, but she said as many crazy things as before, because there was always enough to say.

"All times are hard," she said during the evening meal one day, and her eldest sister pounded the table and shouted "Oh, shut up!"

"We have to DO something!" she continued, after a pause in which her mother and one sister stared at her. The youngest sister hadn't turned her head. "Unless we do something, we'll starve... I've decided to go to the king's palace to see if there's any possibility there."

So, after a day or two to get her things ready, the eldest sister set out for the king's palace. It took her two weeks to get there, and all along the way ordinary people spared her something to eat and a place to sleep for the night, even though they didn't have that much for themselves. Well, the people of that country are like that. And the closer she got to the palace, the greener everything looked. This part of the country, at least, had continued to have rain.

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But when she got to the palace gates, one of the palace officials turned her away. "Who ever heard of a woman violinist" he snorted. "Besides, the king already has an orchestra with a hundred musicians, and twenty of them are violinists. No, we don't need any violinists, thank you very much."

So the eldest sister sadly made her way back home, and told her family what had happened. Then the second sister decided to go to the palace to try her luck. "I'll offer to paint the king's portrait for free," she said. "He'll be sure to give me a place to stay in the palace and food as well for the time I'm working on the portrait. And if he likes it - as of course he will - maybe he'll pay me to paint another."

So, after a day or two to get her things ready, the second sister set out for the king's palace. It took her two and a half weeks to get there, and all along the way, ordinary people spared her something to eat and a place to sleep for the night, even though they didn't have that much for themselves. Well, the people of that country are like that. And the closer she got to the palace, the greener everything looked. And it even rained once or twice while she was on her way.

But when she got to the palace, one of the officials scoffed at her. "A woman painter? Well I never." But there are already four artists working on portraits of His Majesty, and he's getting quite bored of all the posing he has to do. He may be vain, but he's also got other things to do. Be off with you!"

So the second sister sadly made her way back home and told the others what had happened.

"Well that's it!" moaned the eldest sister. "We're just going to starve."

"I'll go," said the youngest sister quietly.

"You?" exclaimed her two sisters. "What good could you possibly do? What are you planning to do, sit in a mud puddle outside the royal palace?"

"Maybe," answered the youngest sister. Quietly she went to get her things ready, which took her about two hours. She packed some fruit and nuts still left from the last year, then went to see

her sister, the painter. "Can you lend me a dress?" she asked. "You know I've got nothing to wear suitable for the king's palace."

"Well, at least you're showing some sense there," answered her sister. "...here, this is a dress Lady Daphne gave me. It's not my colour at all. You can have it."

"No, no. Please don't give it to me - just lend it to Me.

"Alright. I lend it to you." And she shook her head, "Silly thing!"

Then the youngest daughter packed the dress away in her bag, and set off to the palace. Along the way she slept in woods and meadows. The people she met along the way offered to share some of their food with her. She thanked them, but explained that she already had food with her. "But could you spare me a drink of water?"

It took her a week and a half to reach the palace, and when she saw it ahead of her, not too far off, she changed into her sister's dress and continued. When she got there, she did in fact see a mud puddle in front of the palace gates, so she sat down in it. Of course she drew strange looks from passers-by, and people began to talk. Soon, quite a crowd had gathered to stare at her. What was this young woman doing sitting in a mud puddle? Was she crazy?

The crowd soon captured the attention of the king, who at that moment was posing for yet another portrait, and feeling very bored. So, wanting a break, and also a bit curious, he sauntered outside to see what was going on.

As the king approached the mud puddle, the whispering in the crowd grew more excited, but had died down completely by the time he actually arrived. Some of the people were even holding their breath, waiting to see what would happen. The woman in the mud puddle appeared not to have noticed His coming.

"Do you know?" she said at last, to the crowd in general, "I'm a very rich woman. Why, I could show you a pearl that weighs as much as..." and she paused as she looked around the crowd, then pointed to a young man, and continued, "as much as that man there." The crowd gasped. "But I'm also very generous. I'll bet anybody here that I could give you more than you'd be willing to

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give me... Let's set this bet at two wagonloads of corn, one wagonload of fresh fruit, and one wagonload of fresh vegetables - to be delivered immediately to my home if I win the bet, and to your home if you win."

Some of the crowd gasped again, but most muttered and shook their heads. "She must be crazy," said some to their neighbours. "Who could afford to lose that bet? And if she's got a pearl as big as she says, who could possibly win?" And the young man who she'd pointed at found himself being looked at again and again by everybody in the crowd.

But the king smiled to himself. After standing for so long in one position for the portrait, he was in the mood for a little game. But he was also shrewd, and he thought to himself, "Well, how can I lose? She might be crazy, but then there are a lot of rich crazy people... If she offers me a lot, for example that huge pearl, I'll admit that she's won the bet, that I'm not willing to give her that much. Then I'll have to pay her the wagonloads of food, but I'll have the fantastic pearl (or whatever else she offers). And that'll be worth more than the food.

"And if what she offers isn't worth that much, well then I'll offer her the same, with just a tiny little bit more. And with this extra little bit, I'll win the bet and all those wagonloads of food. How can I lose?... Only if she's lying and can't pay. And then I'll make her pay in another way.

"I accept the bet," said the king out loud, and half the crowd was ready to go crazy. This was fantastic! "But I'll tell you that I am the king, and I don't like lying. If anything you have said is untrue, I'll have you thrown in -the dungeon for the rest of your life. Now, what is it that you offer me?"

"I offer you everything that I own in the world," said the woman in the mud puddle. Now, will you offer me that?"

The king laughed, and said good-naturedly, "Well, I admit defeat: the wagonloads of food are yours... But now you must give me everything that you own in the world."

"It's all in this bag, your Majesty," she said to him, holding out her bag. "You can't have the dress I'm wearing as it isn't mine. I borrowed it from my sister."

The king smirked. "And the pearl as heavy as this young man? Remember that if you've lied about that, you spend the rest of your life in the palace dungeon."

The young cross-eyed woman stood up and indicated herself with her hands. "Here is the Pearl as heavy as him," she said. "My name is Pearl, and I think you'll find that I weigh as much as him, if not more."

The king burst out laughing. And when he finished, he said, "I won't bother weighing you. You've given me a right royal laugh on a boring day, and that's worth the bet we agreed."

So Pearl returned to her home, sharing out food to the people she met on the way, as well as the people in her village.

Well, the people of that country are like that.