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presents

The Dragon Pearl

by

Magee Gilks

I remember the day Yeshe brought the dragon pearl home.

I remember, not because I knew then what thing of wonder and power he carried in his hands, but because he came home empty-handed; home to our house with no food to lay upon the table. Again.

He stood in the doorway, swaying slightly: a small, sallow man with lank hair and stringy muscles.

"Yeshe, you said you had work digging ditches in Codover Stead today!" I wrung my apron between my hands, twisting the worn material tight as the anguish and frustration gripping my heart. I cursed the God that made me first child and female in a poor man's family of thirteen. Cast off, I'd been, and left neither means nor direction for anything but this. "You said you'd buy a hen for the pot tonight!"

"Aye, I did." Yeshe grinned, looking sheepish, expecting forgiveness, not caring if he got it. "Made me a handful of coppers today, so I stopped at the tavern to tip a glass to good fortune."

I sniffed, then caught my breath at the warm, fruity scent of alcohol that came from him. "Several glasses, more like," I said, and left it at that. The liquor could turn him mean as quick as a blink, and I had enough pain hanging heavy on my heart already. Be thankful he didn't get lost in the bottle, I told myself. Be thankful he's here with the coin, and not spending it in the red-lit house on Quinchytt Hill.

"I have something better than hen," he said. He held out his hand and slowly opened his fingers. "Look."

A dull grey stone the size of an apple rested in his palm. It was smooth and perfectly round, like it had rolled along a streambed for half of forever before washing up on some shore.

I stared at it, so far gone in despair that even this could not surprise me. "A stone," I said in my mother's voice -- tired, defeated.

I crossed my arms, hugging anger close. Releasing it would change nothing, would only drive him away, into the brothel or into the bottle or worse, into rage. Perhaps if the babies had lived there'd be something here to hold him, to make him care of others beyond himself. The last, born dead, had torn me. There would be no more.

"Nay, nay, not just a stone, Niera!" Yeshi came into the kitchen, weaving slightly, and set the stone on the scarred wooden table. "It's a dragon pearl. The man I bought it from stole it from the dragon's mouth himself. He said it's imbued with magical powers!"

"And what would those powers be?" I asked in a flat voice.

Yeshi frowned, bemused. "I don't know," he said, all surprise. "He didn't say!"

"Yeshi, you fool!" I wailed. "You spent our last few coins on a stone, a river rock! What will we do now, Yeshi? What will we eat?" My throat strangled further words and I whirled away, blinking hot salt moisture from my eyes. What now?

My eyes roved the poor kitchen, seeking solace if not escape. They fell on the black iron stewpot waiting by the hearth and in that moment, staring at the pot that held nothing but water and dashed hopes, the heartbreak and simmering frustration of the past five years boiled over.

I turned and snatched the stone from the table. "We'll see how much better your dragon pearl is at filling an empty belly, then!" I said, and strode over to the hearth and threw the stone into the pot. It hit the water with a plop and sank to the bottom with a dull clatter. Onto the fire it went, and I straightened and brushed my hands together and turned to glare at Yeshi. "There! And if you want more than stone and water, you can fetch a turnip--"

"I've been digging all day, woman; I need my rest! Fetch the thing yourself."

Yeshi retreated to the loft to sleep off the drink and I lifted the shovel by the door and stepped into the kitchen garden.

The water in the stewpot was boiling, bubbling over the rim in a great sputtering, hissing stream when I came back into the kitchen. I dropped the turnip on the table and ran over to ladle some into the washbucket before the torrent put the fire out completely. Too much water for one meager turnip, anyway.

The water boiled over the rim of the stewpot again as I finished chopping the turnip. With a muttered curse, I swung the pot out, ladled off more water, and dumped the turnip in. Now I had a washbucket half full of water ladled from a pot half the bucket's size. This was impossible!

Another sputter of protest sizzled on the hearth as I stood contemplating the washbucket. I whirled, half knowing already what I would see, but still unprepared for the absurd orange fountain of cubed turnip that flowed like lava from the stewpot.

"Impossible," I breathed, "this is impossible!"

The fire died under a deluge of water and the stench of burnt turnip, but I didn't care. The stewpot I upended over the floor, and I dropped to my knees to grope for the innocuous grey stone that could produce such plenty. If it

could multiply waterdrops and bits of vegetable, what else could it generate?

While Yeshi slept, I tested the bounty of the dragon pearl. The last dusting of flour erupted into a white shifting mound; the hole in the garden from whence the turnip came blossomed with new growth, then in a wink burgeoned with tubers. I laughed delight, ran here and there, conjuring plenty where only want had been.

Finally I sat in a chaos of kitchen staples with the stone cupped in my hands. Could the dragon pearl make . . . ? I didn't dare form thought further, but my hand touched my belly, and an old yearning stirred there. Not a child of my womb, perhaps, but a babe nonetheless . . . someone to love and care for; a son to win Yeshi from the whores and the bottle.

Tomorrow I'd visit the cooper's wife, who'd just given birth to a fine son. Clasp the dragon pearl in his tiny babe's fingers, and slip away with his twin. I'd concoct a story of hidden pregnancy and a solitary birth. Yeshi wouldn't know. He'd lain with me only twice since my last came dead, and hardly noticed me since.

I only hoped that Yeshi would forget the dragon pearl, come morning.

As though the thought touched him while he slept, I heard the bed in the loft creak as Yeshi stirred. My eyes flew around the kitchen, lighting on the betraying provender. I would have to hide this before morning!

Then the top rung of the ladder squeaked protest at bearing weight, and I knew with a great aching lurch of my heart that it was too late; Yeshi was awake, and he would see the wealth in his kitchen, and know how it came to be there.

"Gotta piss," Yeshi said, stumbling into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes and his privates. Then he stopped and

opened his eyes full and looked around. "What the devil's this?"

I watched him hopelessly from the floor of the kitchen, with the dragon pearl clutched tight against my breast.

Watched his eyes widen and slide free of sleep and alcohol. "The dragon pearl!" he exclaimed. He grinned like an idiot. "The dragon pearl did this!" Then the smile paled and he advanced upon me, saying, "Give it to me."

I couldn't. I could only stare at his hand, until it swung back out of my vision and then cracked against my cheek a moment later. My head snapped back, and I gasped and cupped a hand over the hot red sting. The dragon pearl tumbled to the floor.

Yeshi scooped it into his hand and held it up. "What have you done? Look--it's smaller! You've frittered it away on flour and turnips!"

It was smaller, the size of a hen's egg. With each demand on its power, layers sloughed off, like a pearl in reverse. Its magic was finite; soon the dragon pearl would be gone.

Yeshi regarded the stone, then smiled and said several things to himself under his breath. Then he turned and walked out the door. I knew where he was going.

He didn't return for a fortnight. The surplus I'd made became sustenance. When Yeshi did come home, he reeled with drink and he had a painted girl from Quinchytt Hill tucked under each arm. They giggled as they passed me, and talked like I wasn't there.

"Is that your wife?" one asked.

"Don't mind her," Yeshi said. "I've plans to turn her out and find me one better. Please me, and I could choose you. I'm a man of means now, you know."

The painted girls cooed and laughed and he led them up the ladder to the loft.

I withdrew to the kitchen garden, retreated from the laughter and the creak of the bedsprings and wrapped myself into a ball of rags and misery upon the damp dark earth of the garden. I tried my best not to think, not to feel, not to be, but Yeshi's words still found me. Turn me out? I had nothing. Where would I go? What would I do?

I sent my soul questing elsewhere, anywhere, for something better. Only I had never been anywhere else, and the only other *where* I could conjure was featureless and grey and blank. Nowhere.

But nowhere wasn't a place. You couldn't stay nowhere, not stay and live. Nowhere was a frame of mind, a loss of simple dignity. Nowhere was surrender, not refuge. And I held too much anger close to surrender to weak and hurtful Yeshi, or even my father, driven by poverty to indifference, or my mother, so bone tired and weary of life that she could wish no better upon her daughter. In that moment in the garden I knew I couldn't stay.

I sat there for awhile anyway, only because it was better than nowhere. Then I heard the front door bang shut, and the crunch of footsteps growing faint on the road and fainter still, the clink of coin trapped in the moving skirts of the two whores.

And then, my soft, sudden intake followed them like a punctuation.

I realized three things when I heard the painted women leave: Yeshi had coin; he had the dragon pearl, and sated, Yeshi slept.

I climbed to the loft up under the eaves, beneath the roof thatch. The air there was humid, heavily spiced by sex and liquor and sweat. The smell wrapped around me, brushing obscenely over my skin as I crept up the ladder. Yeshi snored on the bed, his nakedness a sallow stain across the broken-backed mattress.

I found coin in a pocket of his trousers, three copper pieces only--not enough, of themselves. I needed the dragon pearl. Did it even exist anymore, or had Yeshi squandered it away? I searched the room, sent fingers questing through clothing and into crannies. Nothing. Finally I turned to the bed.

The dragon pearl hung in a small cloth satchel on a cord around Yeshi's neck. I gasped when I saw how small the satchel was, how loose the cloth folds hung. Why, the dragon pearl could be no bigger than an acorn! It would be gone in days, and my chance for freedom with it, if I didn't act now.

Carefully, carefully, I lifted the satchel from his chest, worked at its puckered mouth to free the pearl, but the cord was knotted there, and my efforts only tightened the knot.

Yeshi's own knife freed the prize from around his neck. He stirred and mumbled as the satchel came free with one last tugging slice and I froze, my breath trickling slow and silent over my lips until he was lost in sleep again. Then I stepped back and yanked the satchel open; the dragon pearl tumbled onto my palm and I curled my fingers around it.

"You thieving bitch!" Yeshi's eyes flew open, glittering with rage and avarice in the lamplight. He sprang from the bed, caught my wrist as I swept the knife toward him. He grappled for my other hand, and the dragon pearl.

He bellowed a constant, incoherent stream of curses. When the knife clattered to the floor he kept my wrist trapped and pummeled me with his other fist. I sobbed and sank to the floor under his onslaught, still clutching the dragon pearl, my one last hope for elsewhere.

"Give it to me, you worthless lump!" he shouted, kicking me now so that I huddled in a bruised, broken ball

on the rough planking of the floor. "Give it back or I swear to God, I'll kill you!"

And I heard the cold scrape of steel as his fingers found his knife and pulled it across the floor toward him.

One way or another, dead or alive, I am leaving this place tonight, I thought, and brought my own fist to my lips. I tasted blood as the dragon pearl slid into my mouth.

"Swallow that, and I'll gut you from crotch to gullet; mark my word, Niera!" Yeshi growled when he saw what I'd done.

I didn't care anymore what he did to me; he'd wounded my soul near to death already, and if my death could wound him back, I'd embrace it. I looked him square in the eye and swallowed the dragon pearl.

He didn't slice me open. He lay into me with fists and feet, and I groaned and wept and trembled and jerked under the blows like a ragdoll, but I noted the wailing pain as I'd notice the soft brush of an insect's legs over my skin. I could feel the dragon pearl inside me, and all around it grew a great fire, woven through with passions and emotions I had never known before. I opened my eyes and saw Yeshi, and the loft, and the world with a glowing clarity unfamiliar to me until now. I smelled my blood, and I smelled Yeshi, and the odors sang to me, beckoned to my empty belly. Power sang inside me, calling to my soul.

I opened my mouth and roared.

Yeshi fell back, his narrow face contorted in terror. I rose, up, up, above him until I could feel the dry thatch scratching the tough hide of my neck. And then I dropped toward him. Yeshi shrieked as my talons drew ragged red lines across his chest, ribboning the flesh there to tatters.

When he lay still I pushed through the moldering thatch and spread my wings. The world rolled away below me, beckoning. With one booming downsweep of my wings I



lifted from the ashes of my old life and rose to meet the new one.

The End

About the Author

Magee Gilks has been writing about places of the past and future for over ten years. Her fiction, poetry and articles have appeared in magazines, newspapers, newsletters and on the Internet and she's won several prizes (most recently, second prize in the Best of Soft SF Contest, 1999). She works as a freelance editor, writer's mentor and writer through Scripta Word Services.