



THE
PEACOCK,
THE CROWN,
& THE RIVER

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The Peacock, The Crown, and the River

A FABLE

by Sumayyah A.

Once, in the oldest of days and ages and times, there was a peacock, as beautiful and radiant as the pearl interior of a shell. No, my dear, I make no mistake—in the oldest of days and ages and times, peacocks were all of ivory with the subtlest shimmer of colours rippling through their feathers, like moonlight on water.

Why are they different now?

Well, if you would wait and listen you would see.

Now, our peacock had no name—he was the only one of his kind in his land, born of an egg carried in the arms of one river among the many that fed his land and made it a haven for fish, bird, and beast alike, and so he needed no name.

He was simply Peacock, and his land was green and fertile, lush and bounteous, full of tall grasses and taller trees and fruits of all kinds in all seasons. The rains came regularly and were plentiful, and the soil was dark and good, and the mud was dark and good too—for those who liked that sort of thing, like the hippos and the elephants and the rhinos and the warthogs.

Peacock did not like mud; it covered his beautiful feathers, bogged him down, trapped him. Peacock liked his freedom and his cleanliness, and when he flew (for he did so rarely) it was only to a perch where he could be best admired and remain unruffled by the goings on below. He lived an idyllic life, eating fruits and seeds, chatting with his fellows, grooming himself, and enjoying the sunshine and the way it brought out the colours of his plumage in all their dizzying array.

He would swing his tail feathers back and forth in idle pleasure, mesmerized and mesmerizing. Everybody agreed that he was very beautiful and nobody minded, for beast and birds and fish know that beauty is by design and not by choice, and only useful in what is done with it. (Such as to find a mate or warn off predators or manage the pack or herd or pride or—well, you understand).

Peacock did not do much with his beauty. He had no prospective mates to attract, and being mostly feathers he did not seem likely to be tasty, and he was alone, and so had no others to manage. Peacock did not mind this very much. He was a very sheltered creature, and life had always been this way, and so he had nothing to miss.

Or so he told himself, and it was easier to believe on some days than on those other, rarer days when a storm rolled in and everyone found someone to shelter with, while Peacock had to hide alone in the hollow of an old tree and shiver.

But just because life had always been this way did not mean it would always *remain* so.

Peacock did not notice the changes at first. He did not notice that the rainy season began to shorten and lighten in its deluge. He did not notice the water levels of the many rivers and ponds sinking, and did not notice the soil and mud drying, and did not notice the trees giving forth fewer fruit less sweet, and might have gone on not noticing...were it not for the quiet.

Peacock's home, being so full of life and goodness, was necessarily full of the noise of all its creature inhabitants. There was always hooting and howling and roaring and purring and snorting and neighing and stomping and chattering and cawing and trilling, and really every other noise you could imagine, and to Peacock it was the backdrop of life. He did not realize its comfort until it began to taper away, and that was when he *noticed*.

He noticed the depletion of the rains and the waterways, the soil and the mud, the fruits in the trees. Most of all, he noticed fewer and fewer of his fellows. For if there was less and less rain and water and healthy soil and good mud and fruits and seeds, then creatures visited less, and those who lived in Peacock's land began to venture out further and further as the resources dried up, and they stopped coming back. Why should they? Peacock's land was no longer a haven or a harvest.

It had been seized by drought.

Within a year, the land was quiet and dusty, and Peacock realized that although he had sometimes felt lonely *before*, it was nothing compared to the loneliness, the quietness, the emptiness, of *now*.

Peacock ruffled his feathers, but even *they* seemed muted and droopy. The sunlight was harsh without the balance of shadows, and the trees were withering and losing their leaves, and Peacock was hungry and thirsty and, for the very first time in his life, *frightened*.

His beautiful land was losing its beauty. *Peacock* was losing his beauty. And both he and the land were losing the vibrance of life. He did not like it. He did not want it. Clearly, something had to be done. But what?

Peacock came down from his tree and strode about to think, sweeping the dust into little eddies around his talons and tail feathers as he did. When something went wrong, as occasionally things did (because such was life, even in heavenly places), it was usually the elephants or the apes or the lions who dealt with it. They were wise creatures, and others listened to them (or, if necessary, were stomped or harassed or eaten by them). But the elephants had left, and the apes had departed, and the lions had prowled away with their cubs. Peacock thought of the eagles, with their far-seeing eyes, and of the ravens, with their wit, but they were gone too, soaring away on wings much stronger than Peacock's.

Truthfully, there was no one left to turn to, unless one counted the bugs or the fish, which Peacock did not. Bugs and fish were concerned only with themselves, and would be no help at all. And anyway the one were too small to be able to deal with the scope of things, and the other too confined. Besides, even the bugs and fish were dwindling—the bugs because there was little food or shelter, and the fish because there was too little water.

Peacock thought and thought and was uneasy and afraid and knew that something must be done and knew also—though he did not want to believe it—that it was up to *him* to do it, whatever *it* was.

He ruffled all his feathers and splayed his tail and shivered, but there was no escaping the fact. And so then Peacock did a very brave thing.

He *tried*, though he had no answers and no experience.

It went like this.

The rivers were drying up... and the rivers fed the land. Peacock reasoned, then, that the only course of action was to follow the rivers to their source, and perhaps find the reason for their dwindling. This he did. He chose the river nearest to him and began to walk its length.

He walked all day and most of the night, stopping only to rest or fly high enough to see if anyone was nearby (but found no one and nothing but dust and drying mud) and to sleep. He had brought a store of seeds with him, the last that he could forage, and these he ate, as one day turned into two, and two into many more.

Peacock had not realized the world was so large, or that the rivers journeyed so far. He had hoped that his quest would be done within a week, but seven days passed and he ate all his seeds and trudged through the dust of the river bank and became quite brown (though he was hardly aware of it, being too tired to preen and groom as he used to) and *still* did not find the river's source or the reason for the drought, only land that remained empty and dry and barren.

And truthfully, he began to despair.

Will I ever reach the end? he wondered.

And, *will I find more food?*

And, *I am so alone. Is there no one to help me?*

The answers to those questions were yes, yes, and no, though he did not know that. *We* only know because we are not *in* this story, and I do not mind telling you those answers. But poor Peacock had only two choices: to give up or to go on. Sensibly, he chose to go on. After all, what did it matter if he died where he was, or further down the riverbank, except that if he died further down the riverbank, he would die closer to his goal?

(That is admirable, isn't it? Quite practical of him really, for such an innocent, pretty creature, which just goes to show: pretty is as pretty does, and Peacock was certainly *doing*.)

Peacock travelled for a very long time, and his home fell farther and farther away behind him, and the world about him changed utterly. At first there had been trees and grasses, yellowing and spindly and dry. Then the trees were gone and there was only grass, rustling in a hot wind like many clacking beaks. Then the grasses began to diminish until they no longer dwarfed Peacock, and then until they were no longer of a height with him, and then until they barely passed the tops of his talons, and finally until they gave way to gravelly earth.

And as Peacock went on, hungry and frightened and determined and dusty and bedraggled, the gravelly earth began to refine and soften until it became vast stretches of sands, swelling into dunes and sweeping into valleys and whispering over him and sifting into all his feathers. And the sand was hot, and there was almost nothing left of the river to follow but a crevasse deep in the earth, with just enough wetness at the bottom of it to remind Peacock of what it was.

He began to worry that it would vanish underground and he would be left with nothing to follow, and what would he do then?

That was when he saw the crown.

Peacock did not know it was a crown, for beasts and birds and fish do not have crowns like *these*. They have splendid manes or spines or crests or horns, which are crowns of their own kind. But this was a metal thing, shining and jewelled, a concentrate of the colours now hardly to be found on Peacock, and fanged like the jaw of a beast or the peaks of mountains. Peacock looked at it in tired curiosity.

What a strange thing, he thought, *both ugly and pretty. I wonder what it is for.* (This is because everything in Peacock's world is *for* something—barring his own beauty, which seemed mostly to be for Peacock's own pleasure). After a moment, he pattered over to it and poked at it with a talon.

He had never seen or known metal before, and so he was surprised at the clanging scrape his talon made across it. *How odd*, he thought, and plucked it up from the sand. It was

a circlet that was hollow in the middle, as crowns typically are. Peacock put it over his head so that it slung around his neck, uncomfortable but secure, and walked on. For a little while he forgot his hunger and thirst and weariness and worry, and wondered only what the crown was and what it was for and whether he should have left it where he found it or not.

But there was nobody around, and so he reasoned it was alright for the taking. He slept with it hooked around his neck and pressing into his chest, while the stars shone cold and distant overhead and the wind danced with the sand, and he dreamed he was *home*. Home like it *was*, but better yet because he was not alone, for there was another just like him. But when he went to greet this other peacock, they dissolved into sand, and he woke up in the midst of a storm, already half buried.

Alarmed, Peacock hastily dug himself out, squinting against the sand that no longer felt fine but whipped against him like many biting insects, and tucked his head under his wings, and did a very foolish thing. He ran, without looking where he was going, wanting only to get away and be safe and not be buried alive.

As luck would have it, his blind panicked run led him to a stone outcropping, which he found by crashing painfully into it. Feeling blindly along it, Peacock came across a narrow opening in the stone and squeezed his way inside, losing feathers along the way, the crown clanking and scraping at the stone.

The storm seemed to rage forever. Peacock huddled in his little cave, miserable and bruised and aching and gritty. He had never known a storm like this. Almost, he thought he heard a voice in the roar of the wind, in the shriek and whistle of it over the cave's opening, but if it *was* a voice it was in a language he knew not and did not care to listen to.

But it ended eventually, as all things do. The wind stopped howling and the sand no longer seemed likely to bury him or flay him. In fact, the sun was beginning to rise, streaming thin rays of light into Peacock's cave, which was when he realized something very horrible that we have, of course, already noticed.

He had lost the river.

He had lost *himself*.

Peacock swallowed and swallowed again, his heart pounding against his ribs. *Oh no*, he thought. *Oh no, oh no, oh no*. And then he could hold it in no longer and burst into tears.

He cried for a long time, loud shaking sobs that—truth be told—sounded quite ugly and looked even worse. Peacock was now a thing of tears and snot, his feathers broken and dragging and drooping every which way, the crown an ungainly thing around his neck.

Angrily, Peacock wriggled out of it. It fell off of him and rolled and came to a stop beside him, cold and comfortless. Peacock hiccuped once—and threw himself down and gave into a long, hard wail. He cried for the lost river, and he cried for his dying home, and he cried for all the silence pressing in on him, and he cried for his ugliness, and he cried for his loneliness. He cried and cried and *cried*. And he only stopped crying because an unexpected thing happened.

A voice said, "You are making an awful lot of racket."

Peacock was so startled his cries simply cut off, like his voice had been stolen from his throat. He sat up straight and whipped his head around, but he saw no one—until a shadow detached itself from a wall and revealed itself to be—well, a woman.

Only Peacock had never seen a woman before, and thought she was a very strange creature, fur-less and feather-less and two-legged and draped in strange shifting things like clouds or water or leaves, but somehow not like any of that. She reminded him of the apes, only taller and more upright and practically hairless, except for what fell from the top of her head to her shoulders, and the twin arches of hair over eyes that were bright and sharp, and the fan of lashes that framed her eyes.

He blinked at her, stray tears trickling down his beak. She stepped forward and kneeled across from him.

“Sorry,” he croaked, because it was only polite and she was right, he *had* been making a lot of noise.

“Why are you crying?” the woman asked.

“I’m lost,” said Peacock, “And I’ve lost the river.”

“And that is worth wailing over so?”

Peacock sniffed, drooping his head in shame and misery. “Yes. Because if I don’t know where the river is then I can’t find what has stopped it from flowing, and my home will never be beautiful and full again, and I’ll be alone *forever*.”

“You’re a dramatic little thing, aren’t you?” said the woman, and reached over and adjusted his feathers, plucking out the ones that were half-fallen out anyway and gathering them in her hand. She shook them out and the dust and grime and sand fell away, and they were bright and shining once more in her hands.

The woman’s eyes gleamed predatorily.

Peacock did not answer her, both affronted and embarrassed, but he was grateful that she had tried to tidy him, so he did not say anything rude like he might have otherwise, being quite at the end of his rope.

“Tell me what’s happened to your home,” the woman said, trailing her fingers over the bouquet of his fallen feathers. Peacock did, with many hitching breaths. The woman listened and did not interrupt him and did not stop touching his feathers, and her eyes shone and shone like little suns in her face, only it did not warm Peacock the way the sun did. When he had finished, the woman tucked his feathers behind her ear in adornment and smiled at him.

Now, a smile is a normal and reassuring sight for you and me, my dear, but you must remember that Peacock had never seen a woman before, and to him the baring of teeth is a *threat*. When the woman smiled he shrank in on himself, afraid, the edges of the crown poking into him, half atop it as he was.

“I think I can help you,” said the woman. “The rivers are my friend. Sometimes they sulk and refuse to flow or divert themselves from their old courses, but they always listen to *me*. I will tell them to flow again through your land.”

Peacock jerked upright, all his feathers flaring wide. This was usually an impressive feat, but he had lost much of his magnificence and lustre, and so it did not have quite the same effect. “Would you really?” he asked, hope blooming in his chest like his favourite flower unfurling.

“I will,” said the woman, “But it will cost you.”

Cost was a new concept for Peacock. The elephants and apes and lions who managed problems back home never asked for something in return. They simply did, or took, or gave,

because what affected one affected all. But the woman was not an elephant or an ape or a lion, and perhaps nothing affected her, perhaps she was outside it all here in her cave, so Peacock accepted this stipulation with only a little apprehension.

“I don’t have any seeds or fruits,” he said apologetically, trying to think of what might be useful or wanted by her. “I don’t have any eggs. I don’t even have a nest. What can I give you?”

The woman laughed, which was a startling display and showed more of her teeth than Peacock really wanted to see. “You’re a funny creature,” she said, “I don’t want seeds or fruits or eggs or a nest. I want your *feathers*.”

Peacock blinked, disarmed and alarmed, and his feathers fell so quickly from their display that they created a little breeze. “My feathers?” he repeated in a small voice.

“Oh yes,” said the woman. “Underneath all your grime you are beautiful and shining, and I like beautiful and shining things. I like to *own* them.”

Peacock’s first instinct was to refuse, to scream that this was unfair, and to flee. But flee to where? And for what? Surely his feathers were a small price to pay for the salvation of his home and an end to his loneliness. Never mind that all he had was his beauty and was nothing without it. He shifted, opening his mouth to reply, and felt a sharp jab at his belly. He had forgotten about the crown.

Beautiful and shining, the woman had said. The crown was certainly shining enough, all gold and stones of blue and red and green and purple and gold. But was it beautiful? Would it placate the woman? Might Peacock remain beautiful and save his home?

“Well?” the woman drawled, “Do you accept or not?”

“Can I offer you something else?” Peacock asked timidly.

The woman cocked her head, the feathers behind her ear swaying with the movement.

“Something else? What else do you have?”

Peacock stood and shuffled to the side, and pushed the crown forward with his foot, so that it sat in a stream of sunlight and glimmered, casting dancing spots of light all around them.

The woman’s eyes grew wide. “*Oh*,” she breathed, hands twitching forward as though to take the crown up—and then drew back. “Well, that is a *wonderful* offer,” she said. “But—” and she shook her head. “No, it won’t do at all.”

“Why *not*?” Peacock asked plaintively, stifling a wail with some difficulty.

“What value to me is your giving away something that is of no great loss to *you*?” the woman asked. “No. I want your feathers. I want a *sacrifice*. It’s only fair. *I* am sacrificing for *you*, by leaving my cave and finding the rivers and spending many long hours—for that is what it will take—trying to corral them to their old routes. Rivers are slippery and mercurial and I will have to work *very* hard to get them where you want them, and doing so won’t benefit *me* at all.”

Peacock sighed and knew her reasoning was sound and that even if it wasn’t, he had very little choice besides. “Alright,” he said, his voice trembling a little. “You may have my feathers.”

The woman positively beamed, which was terrifying indeed, reached out her hand—and set about plucking all of Peacock’s feathers out, one by one, with swift, sharp movements. It hurt and he bled and he cried, but he remained still and let her do it instead of

pecking and clawing at her and running away. He thought of green and home and friends and water and how it would be worth it, and it helped him through the pain. By the end he was a shivering, naked, pink thing, and the woman had all his feathers gathered in her arms.

She shook them and wiped them down and they lost all their dirt and *shone*, shone brighter than they ever had before, shone with a light that rivalled the moon and sent rainbows leaping along the walls of the cave, brighter and better than what the crown had done in sunlight.

“Beautiful,” the woman said, exultant.

“Beautiful,” Peacock agreed sadly.

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When Peacock left the cave, it was to the woman’s promise that by the time he returned home, all would be well. He also left with the crown over his spindly neck and against his bare chest, and with directions, which was infinitely more useful.

“Follow the star on the horizon to your home,” the woman said, “And that I will give you for free, because you offered the crown, which was pretty to see. Fair’s fair. All I am showing you is the way.”

Peacock left and began the long, slow, agonizing trek home, featherless and shivering, still hungry and thirsty, and now scabbed all over. He was—and there’s no other word for it—utterly *hideous*. It grieved him, but then he would remember the woman’s promise and remember his home and it hurt a little less...or he became better able to bear it.

On the fifth day, when he thought surely he would perish before he ever saw home again, the star on the horizon dancing before his eyes with every weaving step, he came across the riverbank. *His* riverbank, which had followed out here.

Only it was *changed*. It was *full*, the water rushing and leaping along. Peacock flapped his fleshy wings and crowed with delight and hurried along until he found a place where the water flowed less savagely, and there he bent his head and drank long and deep. Afterwards, his thirst quenched and his belly full, he settled there for a rest, no longer thirsty, and closed his eyes.

As he slept, he dreamed that the river spoke to him in its many tumbling voices, babbling and burbling. “What are you?” the river asked.

“I’m a peacock,” said Peacock.

“No you’re not,” the river laughed in a gush. “Peacocks are beautiful. We have seen them. They like to look at their reflections in us.”

“I gave my feathers away, so now I am an ugly peacock,” said Peacock, “But it doesn’t change who I am.” And this was a revelation to him even as he said it, and it soothed some of the humiliation away.

“Why did you give your feathers away?” the river asked, splashing over its banks a little in its eagerness to know. Rivers see many strange things in their journeys, but they never grow tired of them, and want always to see more.

Peacock explained and the river frothed thoughtfully. “Would you like to be beautiful again?” it asked.

“What will it cost me?” Peacock asked, for he had learned, you remember, about cost.

The river rose and fell and rushed forward and eddied around the stones of its bed, and then settled a little, in its own ever-moving way. “Nothing,” it said, “What is cost to us?”

“Then why would you help me?” Peacock asked, for once you learn about cost, it is very difficult to unlearn it.

“Because we want to,” said the river, “Because you’re in need. Isn’t that reason enough?”

Mercurial, the woman had said, but Peacock thought a better word to describe them was merciful.

“But how can you help me?” he asked. “You’re only water.”

The river *surged*.

“There is nothing ‘only’ about us. We are water and we have worn down and worn away mountains and lands and things much greater than you.” It calmed, flowing more serenely. “But you’re only a peacock, so we suppose you don’t know better, and we forgive you for it. Here is what you must do: walk into our arms.”

Peacock swallowed. Walk into the river? He would drown!

“Don’t be afraid,” said the river in a gentle murmur. “We carried you as an egg, long ago, and we can carry you as you are now. Walk into our arms and be beautiful again.”

Peacock stared, fearful and yearning in equal measure. But he had learned courage, and to go after what he wanted, and sacrifice. He had learned he was more than his beauty and his feathers, but he knew also that he *liked* to be beautiful, and wanted it, and there is nothing wrong with that, is there?

(There isn’t. Beauty is by design, but sometimes it *is* a choice, and he chose now.)

Peacock stepped into the river.

He sank almost *immediately*.

Even without his feathers he should have been more buoyant, but he had forgotten about the crown about his neck. Metal and jewels are *heavy*, and they tugged him down, down, down, away from light and air, into the river’s depths.

Peacock *panicked*.

He flapped and clawed and did nothing but lose all the air in his lungs in a stream of bubbles. He thought he would die and desperately wanted to live. He wanted home, home as it was, as the woman had promised it would be. And then, quite abruptly, the river spat him out. Peacock landed on the bank, gasping and choking and streaming and very, very relieved.

“What do you think?” the river asked, sparkling.

“What do I—?” Peacock sat up from his ungainly sprawl and shook himself—and froze. Something was different. Something had *changed*.

“Come and see,” said the river, slowing almost to pond-like stillness. Peacock shuffled warily over and peeked at his reflection...and gasped.

He was *feathered* again, but these feathers were utterly unlike his old feathers. Peacock’s head was a sheen of deep blue, blue like the river but richer, and the colour flowed from his head over his body into emerald green and ruby-red and royal purple and then into a train with eyespots very like the jewels in the crown, and all of it was limned in shining gold.

“But, how?” was all Peacock could say, splaying his feathers and ruffling them and turning them this way and that and admiring the shocking depth and luster of all his new hues.

“That thing about your neck—,” said the river, “—was mostly stone, and we have worn away stone before. Water heals and washes away all hurts, and so we healed you and

washed away the hurt of your plucking just as we washed away the stones of the thing around your neck, and the colour of the stones flowed into your new feathers, and now you are *stunning*.”

“Do you mean to say—,” said Peacock, torn between anger and delight and shock, “—that my feathers would have *grown back*?”

(You must remember that Peacock was the only one of his kind that he knew of. He had always taken a great deal of care with his feathers and never lost them before. So you mustn't laugh at him—he truly did not know. And anyways, you shall see that it was not so simple as that.)

“You were very hurt,” said the water, “They would not have—not without our help.”

(There, you see?)

“Oh,” said Peacock, soothed and mollified. “Then, thank you. Thank you very much.” And he bent and gave the river a peck of a kiss, and the river laughed, for it had never been kissed before, and did not know what to make of it, but accepted it in the spirit of its delivery, and thought that this was all delightfully strange.

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It took Peacock hardly any time at all to return home after that, so filled with happiness as he was. With the river's return came growth, and so Peacock was now beautiful and no longer thirsty or hungry, for he feasted on the fruits and seeds that the river's return produced. And finally, the sand he walked on began to coarsen, and then to turn to soil, and then grass sprang up, only it was green and soft again, and it grew taller and taller, and then there were trees, and then—oh, and *then*—

Peacock was *home*.

Home as it *used* to be, teeming with beast and bird and fish and bugs, cacophonous and lovely and lively. One would almost think that there had never been a drought and never would be again. Peacock hurried along, joyful and relieved in equal measure, and proud too, a thing he had never had real cause to *be* before.

Pride in his looks was *nothing* to the pride he felt at having done what he had done, sacrificed what he had sacrificed, and for such results! And to be beautiful again, though differently—well, that was a gift, and he was grateful for it, but he realized too that it was only a part of him. He had grown to be more than beautiful, so that even if he lost it all again, he wouldn't lose the important parts of himself.

He had saved his home and he had changed irrevocably in the saving.

And one day, Peacock would find a mate, and she would not be as beautiful as he was, but he would love her nonetheless for all that she was. They would build a nest together and have eggs, and their chicks would always bear signs of what Peacock had done and been through. The females would have a collar of gold-green-blue around their throats, in the same place Peacock had once worn the crown, and the males would be the spitting image of their father.

And once in a very rare while, a peachick would be born as beautiful and radiant as the pearl interior of a shell, in memory of Peacock's beginnings.