

HOW THE PEACOCK CAME TO BE

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Illustrated by Brenda Veerman

Once upon a time in a land far away there lived a kind, old gardener whose job it was to keep a huge garden very beautiful and tidy. In this garden there lived many kinds of birds. They were of all sizes and shapes and lived in harmony with all of the trees and flowers.



One of these birds was a plain brown bird but he was very unhappy. He complained to the gardener, saying “ No one ever pays any attention to me. I’m ashamed of my dull feathers. I would give anything to have people look at me so that I could be proud of myself. Instead they always look at the other birds and I have to be quick to dodge out of the way as they walk along the path and almost step on me! ”

The gardener listened quietly to the lonely bird and decided to find a way to help him if he could.

The next day he left the garden after tending to all of the plants and trees. His last sight as he passed through the carved wooden gate and onto the street was of the sad brown bird who was so depressed that he could not even eat the food that the gardener had put out for him. The bird stood hunched and alone in a corner while the other birds gaily chirped and chatted and pecked away at their food.



The gardener rarely ventured into the streets of the village. He was so accustomed to his own little world of the garden that he did not find any need to leave it. This day however, he made his way along the bustling streets. People rushed past him, determined not to be late for their important appointments.

The gardener finally reached the gate belonging to his good friend of many years and he gently tapped his wooden walking stick against the metal chimes. Soon he could hear a quiet shuffle of feet from the other side of the gate. Then the gate door opened and a bowing doorman was inviting him to enter.

The gardener was pleased to visit his friend's home. He loved to hear the sounds of the birds singing and of the trickling water as he walked over the arched bridge above the pond. He stopped to peer into the crystal clear water to see the shiny fish circling about with the sun beaming on their golden skin making diamonds of light sparkle in the water.



Then the gardener heard the familiar sound of the tinkling bells and he knew that his friend must be working nearby with his birds. He walked over the bridge and around the corner of the shed following the sound of the bells. There he saw his friend standing under a shady tree stroking the breast of a beautiful falcon perching upon his gloved hand. Little morsels of meat were carefully arranged on a tray nearby and the gardener knew that his friend was about to feed his favourite falcon. With her razor sharp beak that could draw blood in an instant, the regal falcon gently accepted the piece of meat offered on the fingertips of the old falconer.



The gardener stood in silence admiring the care and patience with which the man and bird regarded each other. Together they had hunted in the nearby fields, the man walking along with his stick trying to scare up prey for the athletic and keen falcon flying overhead. Instinctively she circled strategically waiting for a startled bird to leave the tall grass so that she could dive upon it from a height and strike it perfectly. Exalted, the two hunting partners had returned many a night with a bag full of prey. And as the gardener watched the pair of them silently performing the ritual of eating the raw meat, he felt a little awkward, like an intruder discovering two lovers. He sat on a stool and watched the falconer complete the feeding. Soon the falcon cleaned the last morsels of meat from her beak by rubbing it back and forth on the gauntlet. She was tethered to her carved wooden perch and stood relaxed and started to preen her feathers, getting them ready for the next day's hunt. The falconer pulled up a stool next to the old gardener and greeted him warmly.

The gardener told his friend about the plain bird that had become so depressed about his appearance that he wouldn't eat anymore. He explained that he feared the bird would soon die of starvation and he wondered if anything could be done to save him. The falconer sat listening and then, smiling, rose from the stool and beckoned his friend to follow. They walked into the sun-filled room where the falconer's wife was humming as she worked away at something on her lap. As the pair approached her, the old gardener could see that she was delicately arranging beautiful feathers into an intricate pattern. He knew that she was a talented and famous artist who made pictures out of feathers, painstakingly creating mountains and trees and even people out of the feather designs. Often she used more than one thousand feathers for a single masterpiece. The falconer asked her for her longest and most colourful feathers and then he explained his ingenious plan.....

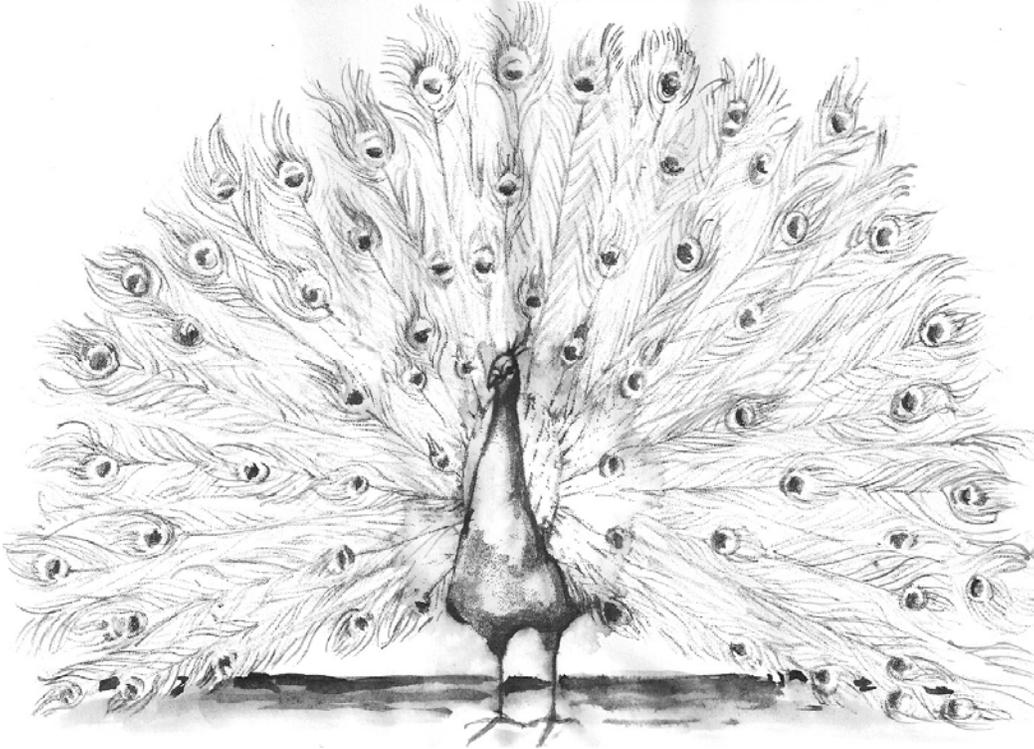
The gardener did not impose upon his friend for many minutes longer. After accepting a refreshing cup of tea he was on his way back to the garden with a long, thin parcel under his arm. As he entered the gate he soon found the lowly bird languishing in exactly the same place where he had last seen him. He picked up the bird that did not even attempt to escape and carried it over to the shade of the gazebo. "I have a wonderful surprise for you. Now you can be the most handsome and outstanding bird in the entire garden. All of the other creatures will certainly have their eyes on you." And having said this, the old man opened the package, revealing a bundle of colourful feathers. The bird was so excited that he could hardly stand still long enough for the gardener to explain what he could do to help the bird. Then using a centuries-old technique that the falconer had shown him, he whittled little pieces of bamboo into slivers about as long as one joint of a man's finger so they resembled twelve toothpicks placed in a row. He then carefully placed the bird on his lap and cut off one of the bird's tail feathers so that there was a little stump about one inch long left over. He put a couple drops of glue onto the bamboo shoot and inserted the bamboo into the hollow feather shaft of the bird. He then placed a couple drops of glue onto the remaining end of bamboo and slid a new turquoise blue feather onto it. Once the ends of the old tail feather and new beautiful feather were slid together, no one could ever tell that they were not one and the same feather.



After about an hour the delicate operation was over and the twelve short drab tail feathers were magically transformed into twelve glorious feathers, all green, blue and rose coloured. The gardener admired his handiwork and the once-sad bird strutted around in circles in front of him, his magnificent tail sweeping along the ground.

“Oh thank you, thank you Mr. Gardener. I promise I’ll never complain about anything ever again. Surely I’m the most handsome bird in the whole wide world!” Beaming with pride the transformed bird marched out of the gazebo with his train of

feathers swaying behind like a monarch with a mighty cloak. All heads turned as he approached the other birds. “Who’s the new bird?” “Look at his wonderful tail” murmured another. Smaller birds immediately cleared the path so that he could proceed past them. The brown bird inwardly beamed with conceit to hear his peers’ gasps and sighs of admiration.



By this time he felt rather hungry, not having eaten for several days, so he heartily pecked at the food that the gardener had put out earlier in the day. The gardener was delighted to see the brown bird finally eating. Other birds carefully edged closer to the new bird to inspect his fantastic plumage but he acted as if he didn't notice their admiring glances. He overheard one female whisper that she thought he looked like a king with his feathers making a cloak of brocade fit only for royalty. It was true that for the first time in his life the drab brown bird really felt like a king. That night it took him a little time to find a place big enough to sleep with his new tail all spread out but several birds were honoured to forfeit

their roosting places for him. Finally he settled down for the night, exhausted and very proud.

The next morning three chatty songbirds came to visit inquiring whether he would like to fly over to the other side of the garden to sit in the tallest look out tree with them. He was thrilled by their invitation but refused and explained that he planned to preen his lustrous tail for most of the morning. The little birds were overwhelmed that his majesty had stooped to speak to them and they quickly excused themselves for having interrupted his busy schedule. In the afternoon the proud bird decided to stroll around the garden for some exercise. Normally he walked wherever he wanted....among the rocks, flowers and trees, flying up to the branches that suited him but he soon discovered that walking was more difficult now that he had such a long tail. Several times he found himself suddenly jerked to a halt as one of his feathers got caught upon a rock or a tree root. If he walked through the flower garden his tail left a path of destruction breaking off the heads of flowers as he passed. When he flapped his wings and decided to fly up to one of the trees his body just got off the ground and then the weight of his tremendous tail forced him to come tumbling back to the ground. He was so relieved to see that none of the birds has seen him try to fly.

It wasn't long before the bird started to think that it would have been better if his tail could have been a bit shorter. After practicing his new walk for several days he decided to make his way over to the ornamental bridge so that the human visitors could admire him. He jumped up to perch upon the railing of the bridge but his tail was too awkward, a feather got caught on the rail----- he couldn't get his balance-----and-----SPLASH. Into the pond he fell with such a commotion that the gardener and all the birds came rushing to see what was the matter. The poor bird was so humiliated. Indeed for the first time all of the creatures and visitors

had their eyes on him. He trudged out of the pond and stumbled along the path, tripping on his soggy tail, all covered with mud .

For three days the bird was nowhere to be seen. Rumours spread that he had jumped over the garden wall during the night. The truth of the matter was that the bird had found a hiding place where he was determined to stay forever. He remembered the simple days when he was an ordinary bird and no one paid any attention to him. He had always had enough food and a warm, cozy shelter. All of the other birds in the garden accepted him as one of them, no better and no worse than they were.

On the fourth day the weary bird emerged from his retreat to seek the old gardener. He found the man working quietly, hunched over a miniature tree that stood in a beautiful porcelain flat tray. He watched as the gardener expertly fed a few drops of water to the little bonsai tree. Although this tree was only a few inches tall, it was the same age as the gardener. On the day of his birth his aged grandfather had planted a single branch with its little roots into this tray, and together the boy and the tree grew. The bird watched as the gardener tended to this special tree.



Finally the selfish bird realized how much love and care is needed for each part of creation to exist with a special purpose all of its own. He had never stopped to realize that every day of the year this man puts out grain for him to eat , just as he cares for all of the fishes and flowers in this garden. The bird had intended to ask the gardener if he would remove the long tail but now he realized he would have to live with his new appearance since he had wanted it so badly.

As time passed the other birds gradually accepted the bird with the long tail. Every day the people visiting the garden would ask him to show them his magnificent tail. Sadly he obeyed them, spreading out his wonderful fan for all to admire. He knew now that

his purpose was to give pleasure to others by his appearance but no one was interested in what he thought. He never complained but when alone he often uttered a sad, loud cry. He lived to a ripe old age and became known in the garden as the peacock because all of his tail feathers have bright green spots on them resembling big green peas. After a few years he even became a good flier and was able to roost in the highest trees. But if you look carefully at the peacock as he struts his tail feathers for your pleasure, you will see that indeed there are brown feathers hidden underneath, and there is a knowing sadness in his eyes.

