

The Pearl

by David W Brown on December 22, 2023. © All rights reserved

I watched his eyes as he spoke and it seemed to me there was a gleam in them; more like that of child's than the ancient man seated across the table.

"Why am I so happy?", he mused and the gleam became a glow.

"My life", he began, spreading his hands apart as if to portray its span, "my life was like grains of sand to an oyster".

He smiled again, the skin creasing around those brilliant eyes in bemusement at my puzzled expression.

"Annoyance, irritation, aggravation, and even pain. Just as an oyster must learn to endure those sharp little stones, so we too, must learn".

His eyes shone with what seemed an energy profound enough to light a path in the darkness.

"And if we do, then like the oyster, we can create something beautiful and unique from the very things that otherwise only bring us pain and aggravation".

My confusion registered clearly and those gleaming eyes inexorably sought mine, or perhaps, what was behind them.

"You don't believe me, or don't understand me?", he asked softly.

I looked closely at his dirty clothes, unkempt hair and beard, the yellowing of his remaining teeth, almost as if I were an archeologist sifting through antiquities in a dig.

“Here”, he smiled and pointed at his eyes.

“Here”, he pointed to his head, “and here”, indicating his heart.

“You cannot see the pearl when you look at the shell of the oyster, can you? It’s only when you are able to see inside it that you find the treasure that the living of its life has created”.

We sat in near silence for a few minutes, save for the sounds of Christmas music playing in the background and the murmur of other patrons of the coffee shop.

I could see snow falling outside the window and wondered what he would do when we parted. Where would he go to be safe and secure on a frigid day in December?

“Thank you for the coffee and kindness, my friend”, he began to rise, seemingly reading my mind. “I have to get back to the shelter”.

“Please, stay a while”, I replied, surprising myself. “I’m enjoying our chat”.

He nodded and sat down quietly. His mere presence across the table was comforting and it quieted the chatter in my head,

Here was a man with apparently nothing - in a material sense - but a priceless serenity that I could barely comprehend.

I looked out the window again at the falling snow.

If it hadn't been for that infrequent wet, cold, Vancouver phenomenon, I wouldn't be sitting here, feeling the warmth of my companion's tranquility.

Rising real estate prices. Stock market fluctuations. A few extra holiday season pounds. Conflict with an egotistical colleague. A social media argument with an old friend over politics. Stress of the season. Resentments and worries and regrets.

These were the petty burdens I carried as I headed out for my morning seven-dollar coffee when I'd encountered the old man.

He was sitting on a bus-stop bench, his laboured breathing forming a halo over his head in the icy air.

Something made me pause when I saw him. Was there something familiar or just happenstance?

Regardless, that's when he smiled at me for the first time and the sour narrative in my head paused as if my brain were connected to a psychic remote control.

"Can I buy you a coffee?", I heard myself say. "You look cold".

And so, he brought his smile and brilliant eyes and metaphor of the pearl, and somehow they coerced or convinced my cynical consciousness that perhaps there was a different way.

"A Christmas miracle", I heard my voice say, as if I were listening to an audio book.

"I'm sorry, were you speaking to me?".

I looked back from the snowy tableau and saw a younger woman's face where the old man's had been. My shock must have been apparent, as she instinctively made a kind of soothing sound, like a mother might coo at a frightened child.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have disturbed you, but there was nowhere else to sit and you didn't respond when I asked". She turned and looked towards the counter. "Ah, it looks like someone's leaving. I'll let you have your peace".

My shock at the old man's disappearance was supplanted by an overwhelming need to speak with another human.

She was around my age, well-dressed and groomed, the polar opposite of the person who'd mysteriously vanished from the seat she rose from.

"Wait", I blurted out, suddenly feeling my cheeks warm with a blush as bright as the old man's eyes.

I stood and pointed back at the sadly empty chair. "Please, please, sit down. I'm so sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me, I'm not usually so rude...".

She held up a hand to stop my apologies and smiled a smile that may have melted the snow on the adjacent sidewalk.

"It's the time of year", she said and sat down, smoothing her hair with one hand. "There's so much pressure and so little time to enjoy what we actually should treasure. Thank you for inviting me, you seemed like you were far, far away when I first sat down. Can I ask what you were thinking about?".

The idea of telling her about the old man made me blush again, and I struggled to think of what to say.

Should I tell her about the lesson I'd just learned? The wisdom of a phantom guru I'd found sitting on a bus-stop bench in the snow? The loneliness and isolation I'd felt behind all the petty grievances and anxieties before I met him?

Miraculously, she saved me from such a difficult decision. "Maybe I should introduce myself before I start delving into your personal thoughts", she said and smiled that thousand-watt smile again.

"My name's Pearl", she said, extending her hand across the table. "What's yours?"