

The Fish's Pearl

“You are my oldest daughter,” Halvara’s father said. “I never wanted to ask this of you but it has come to that.”

That was the night before her parents left. When her mother and her siblings were in bed and she and her father by the fireplace. They sat for a while. Quiet.

Halvara looked into her room. Her eight brothers and sisters were finally asleep. She looked into the room where her ill mother lay. Medicine bottles lined her bedside table. Halvara couldn’t remember when her mother last left home or even her bed.

“We will try to come back as soon as we can, but I am counting on you. While your mother and I are gone, we will need you to sustain our home.”

As he spoke to her, something heavy was placed in her hand. The keys to their house. Halvara looked up at him. Those keys hung on a hook in her parents’ room. Only they were allowed to touch them.

“Yes, Father.”

It had been a difficult summer. One filled with storms. Winds and rain tore up their farm. Halvara’s nights were spent awake with her eight siblings who were frightened by the roaring thunder. Her days were spent helping her father pick up the destruction. The family’s money came from selling crops. That was supposed to last the winter. So as the summer came to an end they knew they would be making do with very little.

Halvara lived in a home of eleven. Supplies had to be replaced often. And her mother’s illness wasn’t getting any better. Soon, her father was packing their wagon. He would look for a job. Halvara’s mother would be brought to various doctors. Halvara would run the home.

In a house with eight other children, the girl felt completely alone.

On the first night, she sent her siblings to bed and took inventory of anything she could find. Bread, water, and nothing else. If their situation didn't change, the children would starve.

The next morning, Halvara gathered everyone to the table.

“We need proper food. So today I'm going to catch us some fish. Just be good and do your chores. I will try to come back as soon as I can.”

A stick and string became a fishing pole. Stale bread crumbs she picked out of the cupboards became bait.

She set out toward a small peninsula. Many traveled there to fish. They could travel by two paths. The first one was on the left side. It was an elevated piece of land. Long, dark, and thick with thorny bushes. No one took the first one. The second one was on the right side, just over a bridge. If Halvara left in the early morning, she would be there at noon. She could stay for a couple hours. She had to leave before the tide came in and flooded the bridge, leaving her stranded until sundown.

Halvara had made the trip before so she knew it well. Down the road. Through the woods. Across the bridge. She was there. She wiped the sweat from her forehead, took her shoes off, and sat on a rocky ledge just above the waves. She felt the cool water splash her toes. Breezes through her hair.

She cast her line and waited. Five minutes passed.

Then, ten minutes.

Twenty minutes.

Hours.

The fish weren't there. She started to think they had left for warmer temperatures. Or another beach. Or perhaps even they'd had their fill of bread.

Then, she felt a tug. A small tug, but still a tug. Halvara backed up, planting her feet into sand.

As she pulled, she started to notice how quickly she could pull the fish in. How it didn't fight. How it didn't feel heavy.

A little fish sprang from the waves. As Halvara dropped it into her bucket, it made a small splash. She watched the fish carefully. There was plenty of room for it to swim. In fact, there was far too much room. She didn't want to serve that to her siblings but she knew she couldn't go home with an empty bucket. But as she put the bucket back down she jumped when she heard a voice.

"Please, girl!" it yelled, fearfully. "Please throw me back!"

The voice came from the bucket but she only saw the little fish.

"Was... was that you?" she asked, taken aback.

"Why yes it was," the fish said as he poked his head above the water.

Halvara knelt down, looking closely inside the bucket.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just, I didn't think that fish could talk."

"Well I'm talking to you now, aren't I?" the fish said with a wink. Halvara didn't think that fish could wink, either. She was absolutely bewildered.

"So what brings you here, girl?" he asked. "I don't see many of you this t

"My parents are gone. My siblings and I are hungry. We need food."

"And that's why you caught me? I'm supposed to be your food?"

Halvara stared down at her feet, feeling guilty for catching such a small, defenseless animal.

"Don't apologize. I am used to being chased after," the fish said. "Little fish are easy to catch."

Halvara's thoughts went back to her brothers and sisters. They were little. Too easy to catch.

"If you give me more of those lovely bread crumbs, I suppose I can forget your misdeed," he said.

Halvara looked at her small bag of bread crumbs. She was hoping to use them but she supposed the little fish might have been as hungry as she was.

She gave him the crumbs.

"Thank you, girl," he said. "You have spared my life. As a token of my gratitude, I would like to give you a gift. Allow me back into the water and I shall retrieve it for you."

He looked up at her with a sugary smile. Halvara was rather dubious. If she threw him back, nothing stopped him from leaving her there.

"Despite your little wrongdoing I am trying to be a friend to you, girl," the fish averred. "Friends give each other gifts. And this is not just any gift."

He motioned with his tail for her to come closer. Halvara sat down, intrigued.

"I can give you the most exquisite pearl in the ocean. Those other humans would give anything for such a priceless bauble."

He wasn't wrong. If Halvara had the most exquisite pearl in the ocean, she could trade that for anything. Fat roasted chickens, pork, even turkeys. Much more than a tiny fish. Her thoughts spun with new possibilities.

"I know where the pearl is," the fish said. "However, there is one snag we will need to deal with first. Just a little one."

"What's that?"

“I am much too small to bring it up here. But if you come each day and bring me more of those delicious crumbs, I will surely grow larger. When I am the proper size, I can bring you the pearl.”

“I could really have it?” she asked. “I could have the most exquisite pearl in the ocean?”

In her head, she saw her mother and father returning to a table lined with food. A happy home.

“You might,” the fish said. “Though that depends on whether or not you, my good friend, can give me what I ask for. Can you do that?”

“I can!” she said.

“Then you shall have it,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow, my friend.”

Making the deal was easy. Coming home was difficult. As she opened the door, she saw her brothers and sisters grouped together by the fireplace.

“Did you get any fish, Halvara?” they asked.

Halvara sighed as she sat down in front of the fire. The group gathered around her, closing their exhausted eyes.

“I’ll try again, tomorrow,” She said, kissing each of them. “Don’t worry. We still have our bread.”

Halvara served her siblings first. When they received their share, there was not much left but she still saved half for her friend. She lay in bed hungry, wishing she’d done what she set out to do. But she compelled herself to picture the feasts she’d soon bestow.

She made the same trip down to the beach. He was there, but he’d grown an inch more than he was when she first met him. Crumbs were sprinkled into the water. The fish ate quickly, making sure that none evaded him.

“I give my thanks, girl,” he said. “You really are a good friend.”

Each day, she shared her bread. Each day, the fish grew. While she was at the beach, she set the children to a long schedule of chores. She came home to find them practically asleep, too tired to think about how hungry they were. Each time she returned empty-handed, her thoughts teemed with guilt. But she never mentioned her deal with the fish to any of them. They wouldn't believe her. Not until she had what she was promised.

Days later, Halvara ran to meet the fish. She'd overslept that morning, only setting foot on the peninsula as the tide was growing higher. Water was coming up just underneath the bridge as she was crossing it. She'd have to make this meeting quick.

She could see her friend from the shoreline, twice what he once was. His teeth and fins were pointed, too. Almost knife-like. For a moment, she was afraid to go near him. But he was her friend. He wasn't dangerous.

Halvara noticed another fish with him. Small just like her friend was when she met him. He had never brought anyone else before. They were talking. She didn't know what about, so she sat at the shoreline where she could hear them.

“So the girl believes you,” the second fish said.

“She truly thinks I'm going to give her a pearl,” the fish laughed. “The most exquisite pearl in the ocean!”

The second fish laughed along with him.

“She must not be very sharp.”

“She isn't,” the fish said. “But look what I have now because of it. The others will think twice before they try to turn me into a meal.”

“And you think she'll do the same for me?”

“I know she will,” he said. “Say that you want to be her friend too, and that if she helps you alongside me, we’ll give her something more valuable than a pearl.”

“But she’ll realize we’re tricking her in due time.”

“She won’t for a while. She’s only a thoughtless little girl.”

As Halvara heard this, she found herself stepping toward them. Her feet were careful not to make any noise. But she was angry.

Suddenly, she was wrangling him. He fought frantically, spraying her with water. Halvara tasted salt and sand. She pulled on him, yanking him above the waves. The breadcrumbs that he had been scrounging for so long were knocked to the sand. Halvara saw his fear as his gills opened and closed, trying to find the familiar ocean. His spiked fins stuck her as she lifted him high. Blood ran down her arm. She couldn’t feel it. Or at least she tried to convince herself of that.

“You tricked me! You don’t have a pearl! I’ve come here each day. I’ve left my brothers and sisters. I’ve shared my only food with you. And you don’t even have it!”

Halvara felt her hunger. Only hunger.

“Please,” the fish begged, stretching toward the water. “Please, girl. Please put me back! I was only trying to live! Please!”

Halvara knew no one would believe her story. That she was tricked by a little brute who promised her riches. Her brothers and sisters were left with the chores each day. Meanwhile, she starved their home.

“Please! We’re friends, girl! We’re good friends!”

The stabbing in her arm pulsed, refusing to be ignored.

“No,” she said. “You are not a friend.”

Halvara flung him onto the beach. There, he could only flop. She considered letting this play out, but remembered that he'd be fresher if she brought him home to finish the deed. As she picked him up by his tail, she saw his friend watching fearfully.

“What?” she said. “Are you going to trick me too? Or are you a good little fish?”

The second fish stared up at her.

“Well, are you?” she asked, again.

“No, I'm a good fish,” he said, backing as far from her as he could. “I'm not like him. I would never do that.”

“Good,” she said. “Then there's nothing more for us to discuss. I'm going home to deliver a lovely dinner to my family. But when we get hungry again, I might be back. And from my experience, fish taste much better than pearls.”

Anger. Hunger. Relief. As Halvara dropped the fish into the bucket, they crashed onto her in one humongous wave. She didn't have the most exquisite pearl in the ocean but she did have something to bring home to her family.

If she could get home. As she started the trip back, she found the bridge completely flooded. The tide had come in. She'd have to take the longer, unfamiliar path.

The longer path was dark and mossy, filled with bushes of thorns. But Halvara felt the cool and quiet air. Soft grass beneath her feet. She didn't know if the fish was still begging her to throw him back. At that point, she was not listening. That night no one, not even her, would go to bed hungry. Everyone would feast.

As she came halfway through the path, she noticed something through thick trees. Pushing her way past the leaves, she found a small pond underneath the greenery. Sunlight poked through branches and shined down on fresh, clean water.

Halvara sat at the edge of the pond. She washed her bloodied arm. She soaked aching feet, lost in her surroundings. Birds sang. The grass was softer. Even the flowers that grew at the pond's edge were the most beautiful she'd ever seen. The pond itself was a clear blue, and as she looked into the water she found its most marvelous facet. It was brimming with large succulent fish.

Her mouth watered as she stared at them. The solution to her problem served to her on a silver platter. What a meal they would make. She quickly opened her bag to retrieve her crumbs but found it empty. In the midst of her squabble, the crumbs were spilled. Even if she wanted to catch the larger fish, she knew she had nothing to lure them with.

That was until she was splashed with water. Her bucket jerked. The fish was still trying to escape. As she watched, she remembered what he'd said about the bigger fish. How he feared them. Then, she remembered how he'd begged her to throw him back. Halvara found herself looking to the pond.

Then to the big fish.

Then to her pole.

Finally back at him.

And because she was such a good friend, she gave him what he asked for.

