

Pixie Dust and Peacock Feathers
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Christmas brought Jennifer Gray five peacocks and a lesson in beauty in magical Scotland.

I am an American spending a particularly quiet and isolated winter at the foot of Mount Bennachie in northeastern Scotland. The light comes and goes fitfully here, with darkness taking over by 4:00 p.m. Sometimes we are honored by the northern lights, but they are rare indeed. Many native Scots say they have never seen them, but I saw a fleeting display my first week here — gone too soon.

But Bennachie remains a magical place. Although not even classified a *munro*, a mountain exceeding 3,000 meters, Bennachie is near and dear to the Scots of Aberdeenshire. And not only to recent residents. It's covered with ancient hill forts, standing stones and cairns, and even a place called Hosie's Well.

There are magical tales, too, of giants and even wee folk. A plowman and his friend were walking in these environs and were entranced by the sight of pixies dancing. One managed to pull himself away and escape, but the other was not seen by his friend until a year and a day later. The man was still standing, rooted to the same spot, watching something intently. His friend asked him to come along, but the man said he would rather wait a little while longer, and he has never been seen since.

Call me crazy, but I've seen places on Bennachie where I would live, if I happened to be a pixie.

But that is another story; and this is a different tale of magic.

I've been working on some pretty tough personal issues in this place, chanting copious daimoku, hiking and attending meetings with the very sincere Northern Lights District members.

Two weeks after my arrival here at Howeford Cottage, I, along with other SGI members, suffered the loss of my long-time mentor, Jimmie Inaba. His death hit me hard and brought out all kinds of internal gunk. I decided this was my safe place to drag it all out for the last time, chant about it and finally heal. It's been painful but necessary.

First, I decided to pour my grief into re-editing *Jesse's Dance*, my first novel, still unpublished. I wrote it a year ago and dedicated to Mr. Inaba, and in it, I tried to honor our unusual relationship. The pages have now taken on a whole new life.

And second, I've been journaling. My fingers are about to fall off, but good stuff is happening here.

In this frame of mind, I looked out the window on Christmas Day to see a monster. It was bloody huge, mate! Upon closer examination, it proved to be a 20-pound peacock — NO! Five of them! Four hens and a male. (Yes, I know they're really peafowl — only the males are known as peacocks, but the story tells much better with "peacocks." I knew you'd understand.) I went out and gained their trust with slices of stale bread (animals go for that where humans never do). They turned their beaks up at the old bagels, but I figure the bunnies will eat those scraps later.

As in the case of wild horse herds, there was a hierarchy (pecking order, as it were), and the largest hen, the "Maude" of the group, seemed to be in charge. It was Maude who went first into uncharted territory and she who kept an eagle eye peeled for predators such as foxes.

I went back inside and sat in a window of my old stone cottage to watch. Old Maude led

her female companions over to my window, where they craned their heads to look back at me through the glass. They left the cock to fend for himself, farther out in the yard looking for unlucky bugs.

He was pretty enough, I suppose, even without his elegant tail feathers, apparently shed for the season. He was covered in deeply hued turquoise, right up to the little sprigs pirouetting like fairies on his forehead. But he seemed, for all his beauty, to be a bad-tempered, miserable old sod, jealous of the hens' bits of bread and cackling as he tried to steal them out of their beaks.

For the most part, the hens seemed to ignore him.

Under my window, the hens gazed at me with their own cockiness. They didn't seem fearful of me, glass or no glass. I'd been told pea-cocks can be intimidating, like geese or turkeys, but these never threatened me. They were just curious, and crazed for stale bread.

Their feathers were muted — duns, ecrus, taupes, blacks. But high up on their necks, like iridescent ascots, were flashes of other tones — hints of color on some, more impressive on others. Even these were more muted than the male's, with lighter teals and paler turquoises. Because I had to look harder for the beauty of the hens, I appreciated it more. My hens were magnificent. They spent the whole day with me.

I'm always trying to appreciate and find lessons in nature. Sometimes it's my horses, sometimes it's dolphins. This Christmas it was five peacocks (not gold rings; oh, well). They were a gift from the cosmos — or were they? Maybe.

Or maybe there are pixies.

I lost my grandfather 16 years ago today. I dumped my mother's cremation ashes in a Minnesota river three years ago on Christmas afternoon. I lost one of my best friends a month ago. But today...well, today I got peacocks.

It was "chust sublime."

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