

## “The Jar”

appeared in *The Copperfield Review*

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The jar traveled north in a red silk pouch beyond the Great Wall. Made of white jade and carved with protective dragons, it fit into the palm of the young daughter of the Emperor's minister. The Woman of Beauty journeyed in a lacquered wagon drawn by black horses with six other young women – seven being an auspicious number – destined as shameful tribute to a barbarian lord. The Emperor, with his armies in disarray, hoped that beautiful women, gold, and silk would soften the warlike nature of the hordes beyond the Great Wall.

Her father told her it was her duty to family and Emperor. Her mother gave her the jar to hold her bitter tears. "Fill it only at night. Let not the enemy sense your fear," she counseled. So the Beauteous Woman passed out of the land of rushing waters, lush rice paddies, and cities teeming with merchants, actors and priests. She met her barbarian husband on the cold steppes and entered his dark, stinking yurt, where others could not see her beauty.

She endured with a quiet grace the indignities heaped upon her by his other wives, the nightly brutish rutting of her husband, and her own loneliness. At night, she prayed to her ancestors to turn her into a bird, so she might fly away from this desolate life. But they were too far away and did not hear. Day by day, her beauty faded, as she ate little of the raw meat and curdled milk provided for her sustenance, but her belly grew great and she filled the jar to overflowing. She died giving birth to a lusty boy.

Her barbarian husband, having little patience for women's things, gave the babe to another wife to suck and traded the jar for a knife with a good blade. There would be another Beauty from the soft land in the south with the new year's tribute.

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In a damp city filled with the smells of sharp spices, incense, and wet monkeys, a Woman of Power searched for a special vessel. She spotted the white jade jar, gleaming in the sunlight on a merchant's table. She bought it without haggling. Fingering the fine carvings, she knew this was the one and took it to an apothecary who filled it with a special mixture of poppy juice and cobra venom.

The Powerful Woman retired to her palace to advise her husband, the Prince of this land. He listened to her in all things – the disposition of his armies, gifts to his retainers, negotiations with the Princes of foreign lands – for he was a simple man, but had the wits to recognize her wisdom. After the difficult birth of her second child, she had made sure his bed was warmed with beautiful young women skilled in the arts of pleasure, thus freeing her for her first love.

The Powerful Woman put the jar in a hidden place in a chest in her room where it stayed for many years. When she took it out, she was still in the prime of her life, her black hair lightly threaded with silver, her skin smooth and brown, tight as in her youth. Her Prince was dying.

She caressed the jar, knowing its contents would save her from the one horror she had no power to control.

After two days, great lamentations spread through the palace. The Prince was dead. After conferring with the Prince's counselors and giving her final wisdom to her son, the Powerful Woman retired to her room. On the day of her husband's funeral, she dressed with care in sheer silks and jewels, anointed herself with sweet oils, and drank the contents of the jade jar. A lassitude quickly spread throughout her limbs. She left her body and watched as the servants gathered her mortal clay onto the ceremonial chair. She followed the procession as it wended its way through weeping throngs, her tie becoming ever more tenuous. It finally snapped as they tossed her still breathing form onto her husband's funeral pyre.

Her son proved as witless as his father. The neighboring Prince invaded over some slight, sacked the palace, and carried the people off to slavery. A soldier pocketed the jar as part of his booty.

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The young woman, fragile as a flower, finished her song and took a sip of lemon water from a goblet blown of sea green glass. As a reward for her tender performance, her master gave her a white jade jar, tightly stoppered with cork from Spanish Gaul. The Woman of Song cast her eyes down and clutched the jar to her meager chest with hennaed hands. She murmured her thanks while her unsteady heart stuttered. At her master's dismissal she bowed low and exited the brightly tiled audience room, traversing corridors carpeted in red silk and green wool.

Her room was a small jewel perched at the top of a winding stair. She had to stop at each landing to catch her breath. When she finally reached the top, she unstopped the jar and loosed the scent of roses into the air. Such a heavenly scent would surely bring her to the notice of the son of the house, even if her singing did not. She carefully placed the jar among her henna and kohl, noticing how the strange beasts carved on the bottle had a soft worn look. She settled on her pallet covered with second hand pillows, her sandaled feet resting on a cedar chest with a crack down the side. The thought of her secret love made her restless. She wandered to a lacquered table strewn with papers, dipped her pen in the ink and started yet another poem.

Over the next months the Singing Slave haunted the house, putting herself wherever she thought the object of her desire might be. The scent of roses wafted in the garden by the splashing fountain, although none grew there. She sent sweet song flying to his window at night, urging him to love. He occasionally rewarded her with a smile or compliment.

On the day he wed, she prepared her most poignant paean. She sang it at the banquet in a high sweet keening tone that brought tears to everyone who heard. He called her forward and at the touch of his hand, her weak heart burst with grief.

The jar, her chest, and clothes were given to the next Singing Slave, a woman who had more need of cash than baubles.

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The Healing Woman packed her bag for her monthly trip to the various farms and small villages scattered on the uneasy border between civilization and barbarism. She had studied the healing arts with a doctor in the City of Constantine – a Greek woman of the School in Alexandria. In that great walled city by the sea the Healing Woman acquired a curious jar reputed to be from the far country of Chin. She filled it with healing draughts, for although the lip was chipped and the jar showed the wear of many hands, it was perfectly serviceable for her purposes.

After years laboring in a hospital for the poor and indigent, the Healing Woman took her vows and moved to the dark forests to dispense medicine and the grace of the Christian God. Today she dressed in her warm wool trousers and a felted tunic, dropped the gold chain with the sign of the cross around her neck and tucked her short gray hair into a knitted wool cap. Her donkey waited patiently by the door with her supplies and she set off.

In the middle of the night at the third village she visited, a great din arose. Horns sounded. Men shouted. Women screamed. A raiding party set fire to the village, capturing the young and strong as they tried to escape to the woods, killing the rest. Because her hair was gray and she wore the cross of the weakling God of Peace, the yellow-haired barbarian did not know the Healing Woman's worth. He smashed her skull as she vainly tried to shelter a toddler from a similar fate. Her bag with the jar traveled North and West as Viking spoils.

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The Woman of War looked over the feast with pride. Her thane dropped the coveted bearskin she had won for contest of arms over her shoulders. Never again would she wear mail, but go into battle with the cries of the Valkyries on her lips and the spirit of the she bear animating her limbs. A priest in an antlered mask cut her palm, dripping the blood into a white jar covered with carvings that looked to her eyes like fierce bears. He stoppered the jar with wax and gave it to her to keep in a leather pouch with her rune rods. She would add the blood of strong enemies vanquished in battle to give her their strength.

In the spring the ice cracked from the fjords and the sap flowed in the fir trees stirring the blood of warriors to great deeds. The Warrior Woman took her ship and men west, raiding the misty isles. There were few enemies worthy enough to add to her jar, so it was barely a quarter filled when she put to port at the Island of Fire and Ice. There fellow Vikings spoke of a green and fertile land to the West with vast forests teeming with game and grapes and streams filled with fish. They said the seals roiled the seas and the Great Whales could be hunted with harpoons.

The Warrior Woman was taken with a great desire to see this beautiful land and possibly claim it for herself. The season grew late and the men sometimes spoke in fear of the frost giants who stranded ships in frozen seas, but not in the Warrior Woman's hearing. An autumn storm drove them to a rocky shore where the long boat crashed shearing the mast, and punching a hole below the waterline.

The Warrior Woman, canny in the arts of survival, ordered her men to fell trees and build a shelter on the edge of the woods. The winter was long and bitter. The men busied themselves trimming another mast, and planing staves to repair the boat. Game was scarce and the plants unknown. Two died a horrible death after eating dried berries. They ate only meat until their

teeth grew loose, their hair fell out in clumps, and their muscles weakened. Bears slept in the winter, so the Warrior Woman felt bereft of her protective spirit.

At the first sign of spring thaw, the seals come to the shore and the Vikings made a great feast after repairing their boat. With the seals came bronze-skinned warriors dressed in the hides of deer and warmed with the skin of beavers. The Warrior Woman led her men in attack, but the bronze warriors were many and valiant. She faced one almost as tall as herself, hewing at him with sword, parrying his stone tipped lance. At a crucial moment her strength left her and she stumbled. The bronze warrior thrust his lance under her arm, cracking her ribs and penetrating her lungs. He ripped the lance away leaving the sharp tip embedded in her body. She fell, her blood soaking the ground.

The bronze warrior turned the body over and ripped away the bear skin shirt. He leaped in surprise at finding his formidable opponent a woman. To honor her he, buried her in the floor of the wood hut in his people's way, with her sword in one hand, her medicine bag with the bottle in the other. He covered her with the bear skin, mounded earth over the grave, and pulled down the timbers. The Warrior Women was denied her fiery entry to heaven as her body and the jar moldered in the ground for over a thousand years.

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The Woman of Reason discovered the barrow and brought her students to dig for two weeks each summer. The eager young people marked off the mound with stakes and string, painstakingly removing grass and dirt, layer by layer. The Woman of Reason watched over their efforts, chiding one too eager with a pick, showing another how to patiently brush at rocks. She snapped pictures, kept logs, and labeled their finds – a handful of flint arrowheads, a shell midden evidently used by the natives for decades, a fire ring.

On the next to the last day of the fourth summer, one of the students came running up to her tent. "Professor, we've got something new. It looks like timbers. She tested the theory that the natives might have used this for a wintering spot as well as a summer camp and rejected it as too exposed. She approached the dig, took more pictures, and made additional entries in her log. Many of her colleagues chided her because she still clung to her old-fashioned tools, filling her field book with drawings and notes written in neat Catholic School script.

The students carefully removed the rotting remains of timbers, exposing holes for a foundation and a sunken place in the floor. A glint of metal caught her eye. The Professor lowered herself carefully into the pit and brushed away the dirt exposing the hilt of a sword. She gasped at the intricate runes carved into the handle. "This is proof! We did it. We found proof of Viking visitation!"

Her heart raced at the thought of papers to be written, seminars attended, the acclaim of her peers for an aging academic at a backwater college.

"What's this, Professor?" One of the students held up a stone bottle, which might once have been white, but was now stained with the color of the red earth. She carefully picked away at the dirt, a puzzled frown marring her usually placid face. It looked like jade and the runes did not match those on the sword. They looked distinctly Oriental. She gnawed at the puzzle of an Oriental jar

in a Viking barrow in Newfoundland and did not like the solution. A hoax? Did someone bury these artifacts like the fake rune stones found a decade ago?

Her hopes crashed. She turned the jar in her hand and tasted bitterness. The Woman of Reason was unreasonably shaken by emotions foreign to her – despair, pain, loss. Tears started from her eyes as she struggled to gain control. She looked at the young faces displaying an equally bewildering array of emotions from dismay, concern, fright, to a knowing sneer. This jar might ruin her achievement, but artifacts were artifacts and not to be tampered with.

She wiped her face on her sleeve and answered their question, "It's data, another clue to the mystery of this barrow." She wrapped it carefully in bubble wrap, stored it in a box, and labeled it with her neat hand: "Jar, apparently jade. Found in grid HJ, level 12."

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The jar sits on a dusty shelf at an obscure university, waiting for the Woman of the Future to claim it.

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*Author's note: This piece was an experiment. I wanted to show the various roles women had exercised through time and across cultures, but needed a connecting theme. I had recently seen an old Western on TV called "The Rifle" which followed the stories of several men who over time owned the same rifle. Hummmm, what would be valued by women and how would it travel around the world? While at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, I was taken with a particular jade jar and – voila!*