

## The Emerald

Somewhere in Africa, a great volcano sloped down into the jungle below. At the top of the volcano, smoke rose steadily into the sky. Sometimes, the volcano would become angry, and it would send great streams of hot red liquid rock down its sides to the village below. But this had not happened for a long, long time, because the chiefs were careful to keep the volcano happy. They took good things from the harvest up the long path to the top, and threw them into its fiery belly, and the volcano stayed quiet.

In the village below, there lived a man called "Jilele", which means, "raise yourself". He had this name because his parents had died soon after he was born, and the people that took him in wanted to remind him that as soon as he was old enough, he would have to make his own way in the world without their help.

Before he was a man, he had gone to work in the emerald mine near the village, digging and breaking rocks all day. The emeralds were precious stones that the volcano had left behind in the rock many years ago, as if it was saying sorry. Sometimes, just sometimes, he would find a little emerald during his hard day's work. When he found one, he would keep it safe until the traders came, and then sell it to whichever one gave him the best price.

Jilele had made enough money to marry, and he took a wife called "Ipe", which means "Would you please give me?" She had this name because her parents had no farm of their own, and had had to beg for little strips of land where they could grow food for their family. Jilele and Ipe were poor, but they had been poorer, so they were happy. For a long time, they wanted a child, but no baby came. So when eventually Ipe's belly grew round and she gave birth to a baby girl, they decided they would call her "Khumbo", which means "wish".

They were very happy. But they quickly realised that all was not well with Khumbo. Though she was beautiful to them, she did not look right. It seemed that she would never find a husband, and that would mean a very hard life for all of them.

Jilele went to the magician who lived in the village, and asked what he could do for his daughter. The old man looked at the girl, and said, "There is a spell I could perform. Unless you have made the gods angry, the spell will cure her. But it needs some expensive herbs I will have to send for. What money do you have?"

Jilele showed him some tiny emeralds he was waiting to sell to the traders the next time they visited. The old man sniffed, "Those will not be enough. You are wasting my time." Jilele was ashamed. So he went back to work, hoping to find a stone that would be big enough to pay for the magician's spell.

He carried on working long after the other men had gone home. Deep at the bottom of the mine was a tunnel that had been cut into the wall, following the trail of the emerald rocks. Halfway along, the roof of the tunnel had collapsed. There was just room for a man to squeeze through, but few had dared. Jilele squeezed himself backwards through the hole, carrying a wax torch.

Moving the torch slowly over the rocks that had fallen down, his eyes saw the biggest emerald they had ever seen. As his eyes blinked, he understood all this meant for his family.

The emerald was too big to hide in his hand, so Jilele waited until night had fallen before he took it back to his hut. When he got there, he buried it in the mud floor near the wall. He made Ipe promise she would not scream, and then he told her about their good fortune. They danced quietly in the little hut, and drew pictures in the dust of what they would buy. The pictures got sillier and sillier until they nearly burst with laughter.

But in the morning, visitors came early to the house to congratulate him on his good luck. Someone who could not sleep had seen him sneaking home from the mine, and had realised what had happened. Some people thought it was wrong of Jilele to try to keep it a secret.

The magician was one of the first visitors. He told Jilele, "Now that you are a rich man, I shall send for the herbs I need for the spell to cure your daughter. You will be able to pay me when you sell your emerald."

People brought Jilele gifts. They all expected him to give back more in return when he sold his emerald. One man declared that he would promise his son as a husband for Khumbo, whether or not she was cured, because beauty was not important. The family slept happily with their bellies full of the food they had been given, and waited for the traders to come.

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They did not have to wait long, for rumours of the emerald had spread around the nearby villages. The first trader to arrive came to Jilele's hut and said, "Let me see if this emerald of yours is as good as people say." Jilele dug the stone out of the mud, and polished it with a rag so that it shone. The trader was quiet for a moment. Then he put the emerald down. "It is large of course. But there are too many white streaks in it, and this shade of green is not in fashion at the moment." And he gave Jilele such a low price that he snatched back the emerald and told the trader to leave his hut.

The next day, two more traders came. One offered Jilele a price for the emerald that was a little higher, the other a price that was lower still. He told them both to go away.

That night, someone crept into Jilele's hut, and tried to dig up the stone from the place where it was buried. But Jilele chased them away.

On the third day, a fourth trader came to the village. He looked at Jilele's emerald and said, "You are lucky my friend. Most people would not want a stone with so many white streaks, but I have a customer who cannot tell an ugly emerald from a beautiful one. He will buy yours just because it is big." And he offered him twice as much as any of the others.

But Jilele still did not believe this was enough. "You are trying to cheat me," he said. "I will travel to the marketplace myself and sell my emerald for a fair price."

The marketplace was many days travel from the village, and few of the villagers had ever been there. Jilele decided he would take his wife and child with him. He had heard that people from another village planned to make a raid to take them away and force him to give up his emerald in exchange.

The traders, who had met together outside the village, heard that Jilele was going to sell his emerald himself. They were not happy. Though they always arrived alone, they travelled

between the villages together. They always agreed in advance who would offer the best price, and the others would offer less so that the miner thought he was getting a good deal. They kept the prices low and shared the profits together. If Jilele sold his emerald himself, others might do the same, and then where would they be?

So each of them chose one of the paths Jilele could choose to take to the marketplace. Each of them had a gun. They all waited.

Jilele walked along the path through the jungle. Ipe walked behind him, carrying Khumbo in her arms. They turned a corner, and found the fourth trader blocking their path.

“Who do you think you are?” he said. “You find emeralds, and I sell them. If we start doing each other’s jobs, where will we be? Now give it to me.” And the trader pointed his gun at Jilele.

Jilele thought about how hard he had worked, about his wife and how she never complained, and about his daughter and how he wanted her to have a good husband. He began to shake with anger, which the trader thought was fear. He took the emerald out of the pouch he was carrying. He held it up to the light as though he was looking at it one last time, and he saw the trader’s eyes follow the stone.

Then with a crack, he brought the emerald down on the side of the trader’s head.

As the trader crumpled to the ground, the gun went off.

Behind Jilele, Ipe screamed.

The baby was dead.

Jilele carried the emerald. Ipe carried the baby’s body. They did not carry on towards the marketplace. They turned around and went back to the village.

They walked past their hut, past the magician, and past the man who had promised that his son would marry Khumbo. They walked on past the emerald mine, up the slopes of the volcano, along the path that the chiefs took. They stood at the top of the volcano, where the smoke rose steadily into the sky.

Jilele took one last look at the precious stone. Then he stretched his arm behind his head, and with all his might, back into the belly of the volcano, he threw the emerald.

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This story is a reworking of John Steinbeck’s novella “The Pearl”. It preserves much of the structure of the story, but has no pretensions to have retained its literary quality.