

Dear Journey Within



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Fables for Grown-ups

Prologue

"One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a letter, four for a boy..."—I heard the little boy count the magpies as he fed them grains of corn in the field. It suddenly took me back to my childhood when I used to count magpies too—and it was this very magpie rhyme that could foretell what the day held in store for me. In those times, the longest future I could imagine was the length of the entire day.

It had been several decades since I had recited the magpie rhyme. Meanwhile, I had grown to understand the world better—learnt from books and witnessed the world as a catalogue of history. Slowly the mysteries vanished and was replaced by a world of empirical collections—objects, numbers and data.

The voice of the child counting the magpies in the field—it somehow transported me again into that world where 'future' connotes the remainder of the day at hand. I guess

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deep within, there was still a part which wanted that life. A part that considered the remainder of the day as the cusp of infinite possibilities. It called out to me—and I followed its hypnotic rhythm.

The grains of corn felt alien against my fingers: it had been long since I held them in this manner. I walked a few steps and sprinkled them upon the grass, it was a pleasing thought that my fingers had not yet lost their dexterity... and the golden-orange grains sparkled in sharp contrast to the fresh green blades of morning grass.

I waited, my heart beating... hoping that the magpies would find it. A tiny flutter of wings—but my heart sunk: it was, "One for sorrow." I waited with bated breath... and soon came another magpie: it was "Two for joy!!"

There's a trick here and I remembered it well from my childhood days: the trick is to walk away from the game when you have reached your desired result. So when I counted two for joy, I turned my back and walked to the kid.

We both had a lazy long day together and although I suspected he might be missed at school, I did not bring the topic up. We spent hours by the pond waiting for the fish to take a nibble at our bait. Then we swam in its cold waters and when we were hungry we plucked some fruit

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from the forest. We sat under the shade of the peepal tree and somewhere between our conversation I figure we both drifted off to sleep. It must have been close to evening when I woke up from my slumber. The boy was gone—I suppose he must have headed back home.

The magpie rhyme had predicted well: I had a truly joyful day! Somehow, the experience of the day had reopened a bridge to my childhood. "This is a good life indeed," I contemplated. "Live for each day, explore a bit more of this beautiful world and make new friends along the way!"

Under the peepal tree, I heard the magpies at play—but this time I resisted the temptation of the magpie rhyme: the trick was to walk away from the game when you have reached your desired result. Thus I took to the forest trail and have been travelling ever since... and whenever I feel lonely, the animals and the trees keep me company.



A Dash of Sparrow

It was the greatest moment in the life of his parents. Mamma sparrow and Papa sparrow puffed their feathers yet again, their chest swelling with pride. Mamma sparrow brushed aside a little tear and straightened the feathers of little Albert once again. "No mother could ask for a better child," she whispered to herself, thinking back on the past weeks when Albert had matured from a tiny chick into a young sparrow. She had taught him everything she knew—the social graces, the mating calls, the dining habits and how to find the juiciest worms that cover themselves in green slime to become nearly invisible in the leaves. Each passing week she watched him grow, watched as the soft down of his wings was replaced by little feathers. "He is a dashing young man," Papa sparrow spoke with pride as they watched Albert now.

Albert was patient, observant and never missed a single courtesy expected of high society sparrows. "Someday I

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will be a minister sparrow," he would often tell himself "and I will make my parents proud!" Well, today was his day. "Fly or Die," he told himself, little realising how close to reality these very words would prove to be.

As Albert approached the edge of the branch, the assembly of elders fell silent. His little heart pounded, his mouth felt dry as he inched towards the edge of the branch high above the ground. Albert looked down from the heights and nearly fainted—the ground was too far away. "Pull back from this insanity... you are young and there will always be another time," his heart cried. "Throw yourself head first. Don't bring shame on yourself and your family," cried another voice inside him. The attention of the onlookers was like a physical force pushing him towards the abyss.

There he stood, peering down the depth into the patch of ground far below. He felt the anticipation of his parents, the impatience of the other birds around and the babble of voices in his head; he began to feel a little sick in the stomach. Somewhere, from the maelstrom, another voice arose... distinct, quiet and indifferent: "I am Albert and I know it. Does it really matter what others think of me? I don't need to define my identity based on their opinion! Why should it matter to me!"

Something within him changed as he listened to this voice.

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That was his defining moment—a moment when he felt a vague sense of calm descend upon him. All that existed was the silent voice in his head, and the gaping abyss ahead of him. He felt the air wheeze past him as he fell, fell, fell. The ground was coming up fast. He knew it was time for him to spread his wings. He should catch the air now because any later, it would all be over... but free fall was beautiful, just like the steady whisper that continued to rule his head. This is how Albert, the little sparrow, found out that there are moments of absolute clarity when time stands still.

Meanwhile, at the foot of the tree, the Gypsy Monk had just spread his mat. It was near evening and he set his pot to boil, putting the last remaining vegetables into the stew. The aroma of the stew wafted through the evening light as he sat in silent meditation, contemplating on the nature of life and creation. "But hunger speaks its own language," he smiled to himself, thinking, "If only I had some meat, this broth would have been epic." No sooner had the words escaped his lips, little Albert crashed into the ground at his feet. "Ah the Lord has answered my prayer," whispered the Gypsy Monk, as he raised his hands in silent prayer.

The creatures of the forest say, "Hunger is the best sauce"—but if you ask the Gypsy Monk, he will tell you the real secret: "Add a dash of sparrow to it!"

