

Gopal's Magic leg

(A story for children)

It was early morning and birds were just stirring in the bushes around the house. Gopal too stirred and his hands instinctively went down. To feel his left leg. Was it there? Was it there still? Was he pinching the quilt? Or the leg? But it hurts! It has to be his leg only! Gopal jumped for joy and swung his both legs in one clean movement on to the ground and raced off to the field in front of their house. Then, he remembered something and returned.

The other day he was able to rescue a sparrow, being attacked by a bunch of crows. Probably it was too young to fly and just tumbled out of the nest by accident. He had put it in a shoe box. He gave it some grains from his food quietly. Mother did not like this. But Gopal was very fond of this little ball of feathers, a sharp little beak and two shiny bead like eyes. He had heard that the morning dew was very good for animals- not just human beings. So, those mornings when he felt good, he would take it out, cupping his hands around its trembling body and gently encourage it to sip dew from the grass, flowers and leaves in the meadow.

But then there are those days, when he finds that his left leg is missing. Just missing. Then, he puts his hands under the bed to hunt out the crutches. On these days, everything is a big effort. But he knows, he must go to school and carry on with everything as if nothing was the matter.

This whole thing started few days back when they were going to school. There was a drain, over which everyone jumped. Some with effort, some simply sailed like a deer. Then, it was Gopal's turn. Suddenly he looked into the deep drain and stopped at the edge. He stumbled and fell down. He looked for his left leg. It had vanished- magically. Anil, the other boy, looked surprised:

What happened?

My leg! My leg!

What about your leg? It is there where it should be! Why did you stop?

Gopal shook his head in exasperation. He himself was surprised and had no clue. No one else could understand either, not even Anil, his best friend. This was his magic leg! Others could see it. He could neither see, nor use it. It had just vanished.

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The teacher looked at Gopal's crutches quizzically.

"Gopal, what is this? why do you carry it?"

"I cant walk without it, sir."

There was some snickering at the back of the class.

"But-" the teacher looked down at his legs,

"But, why cant you walk? Your legs are OK. Aren't they?"

Gopal fidgeted with his hands- the topic of his magic leg was coming up again. And who could understand, if Anil had failed? He carried on to his seat, put his crutches under his chair neatly and opened the book. Teacher looked up and shook his head, as if to say- these children, who can understand their strange fancies and fantasies!

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The sparrow craned its neck and sipped one whole dew drop. Another. And still another. Wow! Gopal was thrilled. He was confident that the sparrow was now strong enough to fly and dodge the crows. But the sparrow made no effort to fly. Gopal put it back in the cotton lined shoe box. Now he would take it to the banana grove. That was another secret between the bird and Gopal. There is a moist dark red bud, which curves down to a bunch of green banana on the tree. Radha had told him that every morning, before sunrise, a drop of sweet essence trickles down this bud and drops on the banana. That is what makes them so sweet and tasty when they are ripe. If the bird could be made to drink it- just one drop, it would become stronger than any crow in six days. That is why birds get up early in the morning!

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The class had divided in two groups. Radha was in one. Anil in the other. Gopal waited with baited breath to see, who would opt for him. It was one of his good days but still. Anil too was wondering. After some time, Anil took a deep breath, when another lad moved towards his team and Gopal had to join Radha's team. All the children who had been running in the field, from one end to the other, sat on the sidelines to watch their game. A torn rubber ball, with many rags wrapped around it, served as the football. Whenever, it began to unravel, the game will stop for few minutes and some one will tie it again and throw it up in the air with loud shout. Gopal sometime looked at the ball and sometime at the distant hills. Too many children were trying to kick the ball. He had no scope of entering the melee. Suddenly, the ball came flying towards him and he heard a lot of wild shouting- shoot in the goal, shoot in the goal. Yes, goal was just a few feet away. Gopal trembled with excitement. To kick it with his right leg, he shifted his weight on to his left leg, and tried to swing the other.. and suddenly the thought crossed his head: what if his magic leg were to play the old trick? This very moment? As the thought crossed, he stumbled and fell. He was confused and ashamed. Radha looked disappointed. Her team had lost the wonderful chance. For no apparent reason! She wanted to scream- but stopped short, when she looked at Gopal. Their eyes met and Gopal knew that his self loathing was justified after all.

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Gopal sat in the class alone. Others had gone out- some to library, others to play ground. Radha was the last one to leave the room. Gopal had declined to go out with her. He wanted to read the book on birds, which he had brought from the library. He wanted to know how birds could be taught hunting worms for themselves. He was fed up of feeding his sparrow all the time. He felt thirsty. He thrust his hands under his chair. No sign of his crutches. How is that possible? It was one of his bad days and he had brought it with him. But he always kept them under his chair. Someone had moved them- he concluded. But who? Who was the last one to leave the room- Anil? No it was Radha. He screamed at the top of his voice: **RADHA! BRING THEM BACK NOW!** No response. He shouted again; this time somewhat hoarsely since his throat was already dry with thirst. Something moved at the half open window. Radha peered in carefully from the window. What are you shouting about? My crutches. Bring them back now. What crutches? Why do you need them? **MY CRUTCHES! NOW!**

