

'The Mynah Bird'

The Mynah bird sat on his Acacia branch and sighed. He longed to be important; special. He admired the other animals from afar. Each one seemed to be distinctive – unique - special. Wolves that run, leopards that leap, bats that fly, whales that sing. All he ever did was hop from one branch to another:

"Oh why is it that everyone is special except me?"

"But you could be special too, if you could only be more like them," the voice came from above.

The Mynah bird was embarrassed that someone had heard him bearing his heart and felt foolish to have thought it out loud. But this stranger seemed to understand his problem. He was curious as to whom this voice might belong to, but he could see no body to go with it. The voice sounded like it might be of some help to him.

"But how could I ever be more like them?" he asked. "I am just a dull black creature."

"Yes, dull and black won't get you far in life," came the reply, "and I see you don't have any hands either. It would be hard to make anything of yourself without hands."

The Mynah bird's spirits dropped lower still. It was like this new companion could read his mind. How true it was! Just then, the voice's body slipped into view, hanging from a higher branch like a kind of living vine. The Mynah shuddered.

"But it's no good sitting sulking," hissed the snake. "You need to pull your finger out!"

He smirked at his own joke.

"But you don't have any hands either," pointed out the Mynah bird.

"Ah, but I'm special already. I don't need hands to make me special. I'm dangerous."

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He didn't particularly like the look of the snake, but it didn't look dangerous to the Mynah bird. With no hands or feet how could it be dangerous? He wasn't even sure how it was moving.

"So what makes you so dangerous?" asked the Mynah.

The snake's body started to slide forwards, whilst his head stayed still.

"Watch out!" he hissed and threw his head forward with mouth open wide.

The Mynah jumped with fright and nearly lost his balance. The snake stopped short and they both froze eyeball to eyeball.

"No one survives a bite from a cobra," he whispered menacingly, and relaxed back again.

"You're a cobra!?" gasped the Mynah shocked.

"What makes you think that?" said the snake, smirking again.

"You could have killed me with one bite," the Mynah flapped.

"But I'm not even venomous." The snake smiled wide and toothless.

"And I'm not a cobra. But I am special aren't I?"

The Mynah bird sat with his beak agape.

"You see, I'm special because when I put on my cobra face I can appear to be a cobra. And a cobra is special because of its bite."

"Do you mean," asked the Mynah bird, "that you pretend to be something you're not?"

He was starting to recover from his shock now.

"You chose such ugly words," the snake scoffed. "What I mean is, that you can be anything you want to be... and others will love you."

"Love me?" echoed the Mynah bird. "That would be wonderful."

"And that's what you want most of all isn't it? It's what we all want; to be loved. You just need to show them a different face. A less dull black face." And with that the snake withdrew.

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"...and they'd love me," dreamed the Mynah bird. He was alone with his thoughts again.

"But how can I be like the other animals?" he said to himself. "I can't run like a wolf, I can't leap like a leopard. What can I do to make them love me?"

As night closed, the forest came alive with the sounds of the twilight animals. The bird fell into a restless sleep.

Next morning, the black bear was ambling through the forest in the cool morning air, when he became aware of the smell of honey. Or was it the smell of honey? No, it was bees he could hear, and it reminded him of honey. He looked keenly around trying to see where the bees were. But there were no bees in sight. There was a dull black bird on the Acacia branch overhead, but no bees. He moved on. But no, the sound was definitely coming from near the bird. There it was again.

"Can you see any bees from up there?" he asked the bird. The sound stopped for a moment while the Mynah bird replied,

"No. No bees, just me." And the bees started up again.

"Are you sure you haven't swallowed a bee?" the bear asked.

"No, the only thing I've been eating this morning is grasshoppers," chirped the Mynah bird. Suddenly the bees were silent and there was the sound of grasshoppers.

Now this puzzled the bear because the sound of grasshoppers was an evening sound.

"What's going on?" he said slowly.

"It's me!" said the Mynah bird almost bursting with excitement. "I'm making the sounds of grasshoppers and bees."

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"You!" exclaimed the bear in astonishment.

In a short time, the word got around and a crowd of animals had gathered under his tree. The bird hummed like a bee. The bird barked like a jackal. The bird screeched like a peacock. The bird gurgled like a stream. The other animals stood gazing at the bird, fascinated.

"Hey look!" they called to one another. "This bird does impressions." They were all captivated, and in the space of a few short days news about the bird's abilities had spread far and wide. Soon the bird became something of a celebrity and animals came just to see him perform. The bird was delighted and said to himself:

"I knew I was special; unique."

His audience grew. He was the talk of the forest. The monkeys saw him and chattered with delight. The warthog grunted his approval. The lion roared with laughter; and when the bird heard the lion, he roared back. The animals were thrilled.

"Do me! Do me!" they called one after another.

At first the bird was delighted that his audience approved, but he was quickly overwhelmed by requests. He dutifully tried to do impressions of each of his listeners. In truth, it's not hard to do a lion, but some of his impressions were not that lifelike, and some animals aren't that distinctive. After all, one antelope sounds much like another. For the first time, he felt the pressure of expectation. It was as if his audience had turned on him. They seemed disappointed and contemptuous of his efforts. He tried to revert to his original repertoire, but now his public was more demanding and the old show seemed tired by comparison.

"We've heard that stuff. We want something new," they said.

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In the beginning it had felt to the bird like he'd been in control, but now the other animals wanted more and more from him. He couldn't please them any longer. The bird felt trapped and miserable. It felt like the other animals were eating him alive. But there was no going back now. He was a slave to their appetite. There was one thing left that he thought he could try. It was dangerous but he needed to do something to get the animals back on his side.

Now from time to time tribesmen would come hunting in the forest. Mostly they were silent, but once they had made a kill they would whoop with delight. That sound would send a shudder through every animal that heard it, because it spoke of death and loss. The animals had witnessed many killings, and some had been captured, never to be seen again.

The bird was being jeered in his show.

"You're rubbish!" they complained. "Give us a new one."

In a last desperate attempt to please, the bird let out a whoop like a hunting tribesman. There was panic throughout the forest, with animals running everywhere, tripping over each other trying to get away. This had a startling effect on the Mynah bird too. He was alarmed that his audience had turned tail, and was worried that he had crossed the boundary of good taste. But he was still kind of pleased that he'd at last found an impression with real effect.

"Don't worry. It was just me!" he called, and let out another whoop to prove it; and another. But he'd had more of an effect than he'd realised... The sunshine flickered and he found himself knocked to the ground and covered by a net. Through it, to his horror, he could see the face of a tribesman! The bird was grasped firmly and tucked into the tribesman's bag. It was dark for a long time.

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When light came again, the bird found himself in a small bamboo cage with no way out. The tribesman was looking intently at him, and his big white teeth were very close. The Mynah bird saw that things were desperate. Everyone in the forest knew animals taken by the tribesmen never came back. This must be the end! Only something extraordinary could save him. He surprised himself by how quickly a thought came. There was one thing that the tribesmen feared. He took a deep breath and roared like the lion; as loud as he could. The tribesman jumped back and dropped the cage. He looked all around him; twice. But his eyes came back to rest on the Mynah bird. He bent over to pick up the cage, even more interested now. He put his head back and gave a chilling whoop. What could the Mynah bird do if his lion impression had failed him? The tribesman's call had frightened him, so maybe he could frighten the tribesman back. He copied the tribesman's whoop, hoping that it would make his captor flee. But the tribesman just laughed and smiled and took the bird to show the others. Soon the bird was being passed from man to man as each one whooped at him or did his own attempt at the lion's roar. The Mynah soon found that unless he repeated back what they said, they would scowl and shake his cage. Only when night fell was he left alone. He was exhausted. He had spent all day trying his best to be like others. It had worked for a while, but things hadn't turned out anything like he'd hoped. Popularity, both in the forest, and with the tribesmen, was a burden he could bear no longer. He was trapped in more ways than one.

"If only I had hands I could unpick the bindings of these bars," he thought sorrowfully.

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Then there was a slight rustling in the leaves on the ground next to his cage, and a voice he recognised:

"Sssee, I was right. They all love you now, don't they?"

"This isn't the kind of love that I wanted," whispered the Mynah bird not even looking up.

"Well, there's no pleasing some people," mocked the snake. "You're something of a star now. And you were just a dull black creature last week; a nobody."

"I wasn't a nobody!" flashed the Mynah angrily. "I just didn't know what I had. I've been such a fool."

"A dull black fool," smirked the snake. "You'll just have to try harder." He turned to go. "Some people just don't appreciate good advice." He paused and called over the shoulder he didn't have: "You owe me, Nobody."

With the snake's departure the bird now felt totally alone. There was no one left to perform for. He knew he was sick of trying to be like others. All was quiet and peaceful, and the night was totally black in the leafy cathedral. Then in the darkness another voice spoke. It was the kind of voice that the bird didn't expect to have a body. It spoke into his thoughts, into the very depth of his despair. It spoke what he'd not been able to hear before:

"I have made you well. There is no one like you. You have a voice of your own."

The words were strong and kind, although the voice was so very, very quiet; so quiet that the light night breeze threatened to carry the words away as soon as they were spoken. But the Mynah bird felt grateful and encouraged. He resolved to keep the kind words, repeating them to himself so as not to forget: "... You have a voice of your own."

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The next morning started with the dawn chorus. Just a single bird sounding clearly in the distance started it, and within a minute the leafy corridors were alive with birds singing. Then came the sunlight rolling back the night with a hundred colours of green.

"I have a part in this," thought the bird and for the first time he sang his own song.

It felt wonderful. It felt right. It felt like him! And as he sang, it was to him as if he sang a solo above the vast choir of birdsong.

He sang all day in proud defiance of his captors. It made no difference now that he was imprisoned - he would be himself whatever. He only stopped to eat and drink, and when the tribesmen came and shook his cage. However much they whooped and roared, he refused to reply. He just stayed silent until they tired and left him. When he had been trying to be like the others he had been full of fears, the strongest of which was the *fear of being found out*. But as himself he was fearless.

After three more days of singing and silence the tribesman saw that the bird would give him no more entertainment and opened the cage to set him free. Immediately the bird hopped out and onto a stone. After the small cage he needed to stretch out and spread his handless arms wide. As he did, a slight breeze caught his feathers. He looked at his wings and remembered. He beat down strongly, and up, and down again; and he was in the air, passing through the branches of the forest. Up he rose to the leafy canopy and burst through into the bright sunlight and the clear blue sky. Up and up he went, carried higher by his rising heart.

"I don't want to be like anyone else," he thought. "I love being me. I am distinctive. I am unique. I am special. I'm twice blessed. I don't want to

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run like a wolf or leap like a leopard, when I can fly better than a bat and sing sweeter than a whale. I'm not dull and black, I'm sleek and black and wonderfully made!"

And with that he broke into song on the wing. The animals in the forest looked to the sky.

"Who is that singing?" they said to each other.

But they couldn't see the Mynah bird. He was too high.

As the Mynah bird soared, everything was so small below him. He could see the tribesmen's village, his tree, and the whole of the forest. All those things that had troubled him seemed so small now; the animals, the tribesmen, his own fears. And he could see things he'd never seen before; lands beyond the forest; places; possibilities. But they were for another day, and so the Mynah bird returned home.

When he landed, the other animals were excited to see him. No one had ever survived the tribesmen before. They were full of questions for him and the Mynah bird quite enjoyed the attention; although he didn't quite enjoy enjoying it.

"Whose song was it that we heard you singing?" they asked.

"It's mine," replied the Mynah bird. "You know, I have a voice of my own."

From that day onwards the Mynah bird did as much flying as he could and sang his own song at every opportunity. He was at ease with himself and knew who he'd been made to be. Occasionally to amuse himself he would do an impression of a passing animal. But when they asked him:

"Do it again!"

he never ever would.