

## Christian, the golden feather and the fast ball

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Snow had fallen in the Rainbow Forest, and Christian and Grace were playing outside the family's grotto. "Christian, what's that...?" said Grace, suddenly, to distract her brother.

Christian turned his head to look and felt a wet thump at the side of his head.

"Grace!" he hollered. "You sneaky lion cub!"

What happened next was so sudden, Grace didn't have the chance to move out of the way.

Thump. Cold slush hit Grace's leg and she flinched.

"What?" she asked. "Where did that come from?"

"Na-na-na-na na!" said Christian pulling a face. "Got you!"

"Hey!" retorted Grace, "I didn't even see your paw move."

Christian grinned: "That is because it was a fast ball."

"A fast ball?"

Christian shrugged: "You heard me... A fast ball by this fast paw." He held up his paw and wiggled his claws. "Get it now?"

Grace had never heard of a fast ball before, but then she had neither heard of nor played cricket before. Christian, however, had had some of the best training in the forest.

And it all started with a golden feather. Or rather, a golden eagle.

Ben.

Ben had become something of a legend in the Rainbow Forest, thanks to Christian's great storytelling skills, and the help he had given to Christian and his friends after they had needed assistance reaching the Great Mountain. Of course, they hadn't made the flight there, but Ben had carried them closer to the Great Mountain than they had ever been before.

They had remained good friends.

When the Coronamonster had come to the forest, Christian's visits with Ben had become less frequent, until not at all. Still, while 'keeping safe at home', as his mom called it, Christian would find himself looking out into the sky that peeped beyond the canopy of trees. There he would look for the eagle - and listen for him (how great was the swwwiisshhh from his giant wings). Sometimes he thought he saw him - a glimmering shadow - gliding across the sky, but he couldn't be sure. There were many majestic eagles in the Valley of the Giant Oaks and oftentimes, they appeared to circle the treetops - as keen on an adventure, Christian guessed, as he was.

One day, completely fed up with seeing just Grace and his parent's faces for a few weeks, Christian had been feeling decidedly sorry for himself - missing his friends and most of all, missing telling them stories... when he spied a glimmer of gold in the distance.

Christian had thought he was seeing a mirage at first. When a cub was bored, and perhaps a little frustrated, it was possible to see anything. The golden shimmer continued to sit like a slick of glitter upon the grass in the distance, and being an adventurous cub, Christian knew he had to pursue the possibility of a new adventure.

So he stalked the glimmer: tail in the air, nose to the ground. Why it could be anything... but he would find out, and use action if needs be, to arrest any opponent who might be hiding under the sparkling disguise. Christian the Secret Agent would get to the bottom of it.

The sparkle which promised adventure turned out to be a giant golden feather, a most excellent find and one which made Christian feel just that much joyful, and a whole lot livelier. He skipped around the find, glad he still had it in him - a story worth telling. This was it. This was his next story.

He didn't know why it took him so long to realise it, but it suddenly occurred to him that this was no ordinary feather. This was a feather from one of the wings of none other than Ben. Ben had flown over! Christian had suspected it, but now he had evidence. Looking at the feather wasn't enough for the cub. What else could he do with it, he wondered? It had fibres which appeared to be made of pure gold and was sleek and strong.

Hmmm... what could one do with a feather?

But of course, a feather... he could fly. Christian the Flying Lion Cub!  
Christian got to work straight away.

He thought of Ben and how Ben moved his feathers. Perhaps this specific feather would be best manoeuvred by his tail. Lion tails, while flexible, are strong.

However, this didn't work as well as Christian expected.

He was still Christian the Lion Cub and not Christian the Flying Lion Cub, as he had hoped.

So he tried to tie the feather to a spinning mechanism attached to a wooden log with wheels, which he then pushed, and hopped onto, before turning the mechanism onto which the feather was attached.

Nothing happened. Christian just felt dizzy... and he was still Christian the Lion Cub and not Christian the Flying Lion Cub as he had hoped.

He tried many ways to fly. He even tried to simplify things, holding the feather and flapping. However, a feather on the other side was missing.

Eventually, fed up, he flopped onto the large feather with a sigh. It must've been the way he flopped down, but the feather started to slide forwards and continued to do so, building momentum, and carrying Christian all the way down the slope of the land. Down, down, down the feather slid, carrying Christian as though it were a toboggan. The feather went so fast that it burst through the hedge of chickpea bushes which ran alongside the family's garden area, and continued to go until... crash, bang, woosh, thud. What?

The feather jolted to a stop and Christian was sent flying off, into the soft grass ahead - bewildered. Christian looked around. Where was he?

He looked to see three curious faces looking back at him.

His first thought was the Coronamonster. Oh dear! They might be infected! This would infect him too!

He jumped to his feet and moved a suitable distance away.

He even held his breath, just a little, but enough to make one of the bright little faces burst into a giggle of laughter.

"He's funny," the voice, a girl, said. "Can we keep him?"

Now that Christian had recovered from the surprise of the feather toboggan ride, he wondered just how fast he had been going and whether he might've hit his head. This was because he noticed the three bright faces belonged to three cubs. Lion cubs.

"He's a lion," the girl cub said. She studied him with a scrunched and curious face.

"That is correct," said Christian.

"Can we keep him? Please," the girl lion pleaded with her two lion brothers.

"Coco," said one of the boy lions, giving her 'the look' which made her back off from Christian slightly. He was clearly the 'big brother' lion in this situation, Christian mused.

"Pleased to meet you, I'm Ruff," said the big brother lion.

"Christian," Christian introduced himself.

"And this is Coco," Ruff introduced the girl lion, who grinned. "And this is Scratch." A younger boy lion said a sheepish hello.

Christian studied the three visitors to the forest. Their fur was golden brown like his. They had tails like his. They had claws like his.

"You are lions?" he asked. It was possibly obvious, but Christian had to make sure.

"Same as you brother," said Ruff. "Coco here we wonder about, and Scratch... he's a little suspicious... but I've been told they are lions too. Lions, like you and I."

"Hey!" retorted Coco. "I am a lion. I am too!"

Christian had to smile. Coco sounded so much like Grace at that moment.

"Sisters," sighed Ruff, and he and Christian laughed.

"We aren't from this side of the Rainbow Forest," Ruff continued.

"It's true," said Scratch, scratching his head with a paw as he spoke.

"We are from the area on the other side of the Great Mountain. We travelled far to be here," the big brother lion continued.

"It's true," said Scratch, scratching again with a paw. Christian understood now why he was called Scratch.

"We made a long journey here," said Ruff.

"True," Scratch said, still the sheepish lion.

Christian knew what it meant to make a long journey. He knew what it was like to have restless paws... to be a little cub but to have big dreams. Still, he was intrigued. These cubs had been there, at the other side of the Great Mountain. How had they found their way all the way here... to his hood?

Just imagining how... his eyes lit up with wonder.

"You went over the Great Mountain?" he asked.

He practically wagged his tail - very un-lion like, but how could he not? Imagine the stories they could tell him? They could show him the way up and down the mountain.

Ruff studied Christian with visible scepticism on his face. "Has any animal actually been to the top?"

Christian shrugged: "Some say they have. They say there's a part where the waterfalls seem to leap and rainbows leap up from them... and..."

"They say," said Ruff. "But can we believe them? I mean, where's the evidence?"

Christian shrugged.

"But no, we didn't go over the mountain," continued Ruff. "We had to journey across the valley to get here."

"You went through No Animal's Land?" asked Christian, eyes wide.

"Some distance away from that," explained Ruff.

Christian wondered what could have convinced three cubs to make such a long journey.

As though reading his thoughts, Coco began to explain: "Our paws are tired," she said, "But we wanted to be free. All we have heard about these past months has been the Coronamonster..."

Christian nodded. "I understand," he said.

"You do?" asked Coco, and she smiled at Christian - a smile like the sun, Christian reasoned.

"Yes," said Christian. "I do understand. I am here because I got bored and fed-up with things - possibly like you did - and found a giant feather, and then..."

How could the cub explain his story to the three wide-eyed cubs.

"A giant feather?" asked Ruff.

"Come see," said Christian, still keeping his distance.

He took them to where the golden feather lay.

"It's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen," cooed Coco.

She circled the golden feather, as she had Christian earlier. "It's so big. I couldn't imagine a bird as big as that..."

"You have never seen a great eagle?" Christian asked.

"No - only heard about them," confessed Coco. "In stories. Stories I thought Ruff had made up."

"I'll be honest," said Ruff. "I thought I had made them up too."

"It's true," said Scratch. His eye twitched a little in the corner as he spoke.

"They are real," said Christian, happy to be telling his stories again... happy to see an audience of wide-eyed listeners. "Well, this golden feather is from a real golden eagle."

"Wow!" said Coco, "Imagine how big it must be."

"How big he must be," said Christian. "'It' is a he. Ben, actually."

"Ben, the golden eagle?" asked Ruff.

"Well, at least I think it's Ben's feather," said Christian. "His feathers are like pure gold, like this one. Only, I haven't been able to see him - since Coronamonster. He used to take me to the top of the trees, on his back. We have tried to get to the Great Mountain a few times, getting closer each time, but then Mom calls me home for dinner and we have to turn back."

Christian had the other cubs' attention: "So I found the feather in our garden at home, and being tired of being at home most of the time, I took it and thought I could try and fly with it. That's how Ben uses it. Only it didn't quite work for me."

"Silly cub," said Ruff. "It didn't work for you, because you have just one."

"You need two..." explained Coco, "... To fly."

"About five, at least," said Ruff. "Two for wings... three for a tail."

"More than that," said Scratch. "At least 11. Four for wings. Three for the tail."

This was the most Christian had heard Scratch say. He realised he was quite an intelligent lion cub. What he said made sense.

"Yes! When we play cricket Christian, we try get 11 lions together," said Ruff. "The game just wouldn't be the same without enough players. I think it's like that with feathers. The golden feather is nice, it's pretty... but it's one feather."

"You need a pride," said Scratch. "It's true."

But Ruff had gotten Christian at 'cricket'. "Cricket?" Christian asked.

"You've never heard of cricket?" Coco asked.

"Uh... We hear them at night mostly," said Christian.

"Christian, you have been missing out," said Ruff. "We will have to teach you."

Coco now appeared to be searching the ground: "There you go, a pine cone," she said. "It will do for a ball."

"And a firm stick. This will do," said Ruff. "Coco, you're up first for batting."

Coco took the stick in her tail and went to stand a little away from where the others were.

Christian, suitably distance from the others and enjoying the cool outdoor breeze, stood to watch.

Ruff continued to explain: "I take the pine cone, like this, and I tilt it at just the right angle. Focus now Coco, remember what I taught you..."

Coco stood with her tail poised, holding the stick.

Ruff sent the pine cone flying through the air with his paw, and Coco, completely focused, walloped it with the stick she held with her tail.

It was spectacular.

"Now you try," said Ruff.

Christian stepped up to bat.

He trembled as he held the stick in his tail. He felt awkward but managed to focus. He thought of the story he might tell his friends after the experience.

The pine cone ball rocketed forwards and he swung for it, hitting it the first time.

"Now run!" shouted Ruff.

"Uh -" Christian hesitated but started to run. He ran and ran, like the wind... fastest lion in the forest.

"Hey, Christian! Wait!" Coco shouted as she chased after him. "Don't just keep running in a straight line! We will lose you! You have to turn around and run back to touch your post!"

And so this is how Christian first learned about cricket. When it was his turn to bowl, he held the pine cone in his paws. It was somehow lighter than he had expected, and he imagined in that pine cone, all the things he hated about Coronamonster. He thought of Ben and Ben's wings and the golden feather which had brought him here. He thought of how he wished he could fly... and he sent the ball hurling through the air on his longing to fly far above Coronamonster and the entangled web of fear and doubt, to be free again.

Ruff held a paw over his mouth. Scratch scratched his head a little slower than usual.

"We have a fast bowler," said Ruff. "Did you see that?"

"It was like a torpedo," said Coco. She jumped up and down with excitement.

"Christian, you are a fast bowler," said Ruff.

Christian had not anticipated this. A fast bowler?



The cubs spent the morning playing in the fresh air, keeping their respective distances while playing, and each time, Christian threw his fears and concerns with the ball, imagining he was soaring like an eagle.

It finally came time for them to take a break. "Say Christian," said Ruff. "What's your secret?"

"Well, there is no secret," began the cub. "It's what I throw with the ball that makes it go so fast." He explained to them why he had wanted to fly... the fears and doubts Coronavirus had put on him, and how he had imagined letting these go, and choosing instead to be free in his thoughts... imagining he was soaring like an eagle, with that ball.

Ruff smiled: "I thought lions were just able to roar," he said.

"Roar like a lion. Soar like an eagle," said Scratch.

Coco ran around chanting this, "Roar like a lion. Soar like an eagle," and this made everyone laugh so much, they fell onto their backs onto the soft grass, just in time to see a giant shimmering shadow of gold, with breathless wingspan soar overhead.

They played until the sun was high in the sky and it was noon and then Ruff made an announcement: "We ran away... all this way... to be free, but Christian, you have made us realise we can be free, if we are free in our hearts and minds. We can be free and safe at the same time." He spoke to the others now: "I think we should get home. We can still make it in time for dinner. You know Mom. Her rules."

"Home by sunset'," Christian laughed.

"It seems all moms know that line," said Ruff.

"I could do with one of Mom's home cooked meals," said Coco. "I could eat a... I could eat a..."

"Berry pie?" suggested Christian.

Coco frowned at Christian. "You lions this side of the forest are a little strange," she said and smile the golden smile which made Christian blush.

So Christian had learned he could soar above the fear, and be free, and that freedom started first with one's thoughts. He could be free anywhere, at home, in the forest, if he kept flight in his heart. When he cast his fears and doubts, and embraced the passion of life again, as he had when he had thrown the ball, he was free to see the beautiful things around him... And there were so many of them... not just one golden feather. There were many feathers.

One feather couldn't fly. No. One feather could do many things, but it took many feathers for a lion to soar like an eagle.

"Ruff is right," he said to his new friends. I would love you to stay forever, but we will meet up again." He sighed. "You guys can't keep running. It's like cricket. When you make a run in cricket, you can't just keep running in a straight line. Remember how you taught me that Coco? How then will you score? You need somewhere to run home to... else the run doesn't count. And you have a home to run back to. Many feathers make flight, remember?"

This was how Christian recounted the story of how he learned to play cricket to Grace, as they played in the snow in the Rainbow Forest. This was how he explained to his little sister how he had learned to bowl balls that soared like torpedo eagles.

"You learned all of that from a golden feather?" Grace asked him.

"Well, yes... and well, no," Christian said.

Grace laughed. "It's true, Christian!" she said. "You really are the best storyteller in the forest."