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Filius, the Little Cuckoo

Filius, the little cuckoo, sat in a pipit's nest by the edge of the forest, watching the flies, bumblebees and birds fly by. His parents had been gone far too long. This happened a lot, and he was always hungry. He could hardly wait for the day when he could fly away and find food himself. THEN he wouldn't be hungry any more, but would eat butterfly larvae all day long. That was what little Filius believed, in any case. But if he had known how dangerous the world was, he would probably have thought differently.

At last his parents arrived, carrying flies in their beaks.

Filius gobbled them down.

"Sri-sri. I want butterfly larvae!"

"Ist-ist," said the mother pipit, cocking her head.

"But it's my favourite food!" complained Filius.

As soon as Filius had learned to fly, his parents brought him to a nearby lake. They sat together on a stone by the water's edge. Filius looked down into the water and saw two tiny birds with a big, grey bird between them.

“Who are they?”

“That’s us,” the mother chirped.

“Us?” Filius looked at his mother and father, and then into the water again.

“But is it you who are so big, Mum, or is it Dad?”

“No, it’s you,” answered his father proudly.

“But...” Filius looked at the reflection in the water again. “But... why am I so big?”

“It’s because we’ve given you so much good food,” said his father, even more proudly.

Filius practised flying every day. If he got hungry he perched on a branch and called out “Sri-sri,” and his parents would bring food to him straight away.

One day his parents brought him to a high cliff.

“Fly until you’ve reached the middle of the gorge, then turn back,” chirped his mother.

“Remember, no farther than halfway,” said his father.

“All right, all right,” answered Filius, as he took a step towards the edge of the cliff and looked out over the landscape.

In front of him was a gorge, and on the other side he could glimpse a low forest.

He spread his wings and flew away.

This is the life! Yippee! thought Filius.

He flew over the gorge and dived down between the tree trunks. He just touched the forest floor before zipping off again. Then he remembered that he was supposed to catch larvae, but quickly forgot again. He took off once more and flew straight up into the sky. He did a somersault high over the treetops and dived straight down. When he got tired of that, he flew into the forest again. He whizzed past the tree trunks like a sparrowhawk on the run. He was so happy. He didn’t want to stop flying, and couldn’t stop even if he had wanted to.

The hours passed, and he was hungry and tired. He looked around. There was dense forest everywhere he looked.

Did I come from that way, or from there?

“Sri-sri,” he called. Again and again.

But nobody answered, and nobody brought him food.

“Be careful! Don’t talk to anyone. Just find the way home,” whispered a voice inside him.

But Filius had to have some food now, and landed on a branch where a squirrel sat eating from a pine cone. Filius stared at the pine cone and took a step towards the squirrel.

“Sri?” he said.

“Grr! Get away from me!” the squirrel snarled.

“I haven’t eaten all day. And I’m very hungry. Sri-sri?”

“You’re not the only one,” the squirrel said as it smacked its lips.

“Get away, you sly, nasty creature!”

“Nasty? I’m only hungry.”

“Nonsense,” said the squirrel, and pulled another seed out of the pine cone.

Filius flew away.

Night fell, and the midnight sun shone softly on the weary little cuckoo who was flying between the trees.

“Mum, sri-sri,” he peeped as loudly as he could. “Dad!”

A mother crow was irritated by the noise, and cawed, “Stop that shrieking at night! We’re sleeping.”

The words struck Filius like a whip on his back. He made a belly-flop onto the branch under the crow’s nest, clung to it tightly, and looked up at the mother crow who was peeking out of her nest, looking down at him.

“A-ha,” she said. “A little cuckoo.”

“The squirrel called me a cuckoo too, and said that I was a nasty creature. But it’s not true. I’m a pipit.”

“Ha-ha” the crow laughed. “You’re a reeeel little cuckoo, and your parents were certainly not your reeeel parents!”

Filius flapped his wings. How could they have lied to him like that?

“I just flew too far away from my parents.”

“Reeeeeeally all alone in the world?” the mother crow asked. “Would you like to come over here and warm up?”

“No, I’m not cold. I’m just hungry. Sri-sri-sri?”

In a flash, the mother crow was perched next to him on the branch. She was very big. Huge. But she didn’t look angry, and she didn’t chase him away.

“Myyyy children are also hungry, but you look nice and fat.”

“Yes,” he said. “But I’m starving to death. I haven’t eaten all day long.”

“Pooooor child,” said the crow, snapping her beak together. “Why don’t you come hooome with me? I have a surpriiiise for you!”

“A surprise? Oh, thank you!”

The crow flew up, and sat by the entrance to her nest.

Filius followed her up.

“Yeeees, you can go right in!” she said.

Just then her eyes gleamed dangerously, and suddenly Filius understood why he had been invited to visit. He dived from the branch, with the crow right behind him.

There was a sudden stinging in his tail. He turned around. The crow had one of his tail feathers in her beak. He shot ahead, flying in giant loops. He was so frightened. He dived between the tree trunks. He flew as long as he could, and all at once he was above the gorge again. It was only then that he dared to look behind him.

He was alone, and on his way home at last.

Filius flew straight to the nest. He could hardly wait to see his parents, and to get some food. He would never complain about his mother and father again.

But the nest was empty. His parents were gone. He called out to them, and chirped as loudly and pitifully as he could, but nobody came.

He finally flew away to look for them. But everywhere he went he was chased away, and he made sure to stay far away from the crows.

When evening fell again, Filius landed in a small birch tree. He hurried onto the trunk of the tree, and pressed himself as flat as he could into it. His heart was pounding in his chest. He was so frightened that he hardly dared to breathe. He thought about his mother and father. He had been so safe and happy. Now he was sad and afraid. Nobody wanted to give him food, and everyone who could have helped was cruel to him.

The next morning Filius was awakened by a sunbeam that shone between the branches and onto his face. His stomach was rumbling with hunger, and he was going to call for his parents. Then he remembered that he was alone. Completely alone.

In the next tree over, two pipits were flying about, feeding their child. Filius was suddenly wide awake. The child looked exactly like him. Big and grey. If they see me, maybe they'll like me, too, he thought, and smoothed his feathers with his beak. Maybe they'll feed me, and help me find my parents! I'll fly over to them, he thought.

But he didn't dare. He hid his head under his wing and sighed. Through his wing feathers he caught a glimpse of the nest holding the child, and the parents who flew back and forth. Then he froze. The mother was on her way home, carrying a golden larva in her beak. A butterfly larva – his very favourite food.

Before he could think twice he was in the air, sailing straight towards the mother.

“Sri-sri,” he called, and tried to snatch the larva out of her beak. But the mother veered away. Filius dived after her.

Then the father arrived. His sharp beak struck Filius's head so hard that he saw stars in front of his eyes. Ashamed, he flew back to his branch and sat with his back to the neighbouring nest.

That evening a cold north wind blew through the forest. Filius pressed his body closely to the tree trunk. If he found his parents, he would never complain again. Never. Then he fell asleep. He dreamt that he perched on a branch full of fat, juicy butterfly larvae that crawled straight into his open beak. One after another. The larvae made his stomach feel nice and warm, and he gulped them down.

The next morning he woke up suddenly when the branch he was perched on shook. A grey bird, a little bigger than him, sat there, looking at him.

"Good morning, little cuckoo," the bird smiled.

"Good morning," whispered Filius, flattening himself against the tree trunk. "What do you want?"

"Want? You're a cuckoo and I'm a cuckoo. Is it so strange for us to have a little chat?" said the grey bird, cocking its head.

"I'm a pipit child, and my name is Filius," said Filius.

"Filius the pipit child? No, little one. You're a cuckoo and I'm a cuckoo," the grey bird said decisively.

"Are you my father, then?"

"Either your father or one of your relatives."

"What?" shouted Filius. "You don't know whether you're my father?"

"No, we cuckoos don't know those things. But we do keep each other company now and then, as we're doing now."

"But what about that?" Filius pointed to the neighbouring nest.

"Oh, that." The grey bird ruffled his feathers. "We cuckoos can't build nests ourselves, and our children have to grow up somewhere."

Filius turned away. The tears were gathering in his eyes, and he blinked them away.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the family in the next tree, and the child who opened its mouth wide and swallowed.

Cuckoo or not, parents were good to have. Suddenly he realised that he had to find his mother. The one who had laid the egg, his egg, in the pipits' nest. And when he found her, he would be very, very, good.

“Are you hungry?” asked the grey bird.

“Sri-sri,” Filius answered eagerly.

The grey bird nodded, and flew away.

Filius could hardly believe it. He was saved! The father cuckoo would certainly return with his beak full of larvae.

Filius sat on the branch, ready to open his mouth and swallow.

“Sri-sri,” he called, and looked haughtily at the neighbouring nest.

Filius waited and waited, but when the humid evening mist began to settle over the forest he realised that he would spend yet another hungry night if he didn't do something about it himself.

He flew away.

And suddenly he saw it – a butterfly larva. On the ground, just underneath him, crawling along. As quick as lightning he dived straight down and grabbed it. A moment later it was in his stomach.

And then he saw another one. And another.

With a full stomach and dizzy with happiness he flew to his tree. That night he slept well for the first time since losing his mother and father.

The next morning the cuckoo came to visit again.

“Good morning,” he smiled.

Filius turned away. He didn't want to be friends with the grey bird any more.

Just then they heard voices under the tree.

Three young girls were looking up at them.

“Cuckoo in the tree, tell my fortune to me. How many years will I live?” they whispered in chorus.

“Come on,” said the grey bird, and they flew to the top of the tree.

“Why did we leave?” asked Filius.

“To get away from their nagging. We cuckoos aren’t like other birds.”

“I don’t care. I just want to find my mother.”

“Your mother? You’ll never find her.”

“But I want to,” said Filius.

The grey bird shook his head.

“Well, then, you must find the nest where you were hatched in the beginning of May. The mother cuckoos sometimes return to the same nest year after year, but not always.”

The leaves on the trees changed colour, and the forest became a colourful display of red, orange and yellow.

Filius changed, too. His splendid new feathers were dense, shiny and steel-grey, and he had dark stripes on his chest.

The grey bird stopped by, and told him that now the cuckoos were going south, to Africa.

“To Africa?” Filius had no idea where that was. “Can we fly there together?”

“No,” said the grey bird. “We cuckoos are solitary souls, twilight birds. We fly alone, and only at night. During the day we eat and sleep. That’s the best way. I’ll see you at the next cuckoo assembly.”

“Wait,” Filius called. “How do I find the way, and how will I know when the cuckoo assembly is?”

But the grey bird was already far away, and didn’t hear him calling.

Once again, Filius felt abandoned. But this time he didn’t mope for long.

Because he began to feel a need to fly far, far away. He ruffled his feathers and looked up at the blue sky. Then he bent his knees a little, took off, and flew away towards Africa like the others.

The following May, Filius went to the nest where he had been born. He flew straight there, as though he knew exactly where it was, and he recognised it at once.

In the course of the winter he had become a handsome, full-grown bird. His head, back and wings were steel-grey. His stomach was light grey with clear, dark stripes running across it, and his long tail bobbed up and down hopefully.

During the next few days Filius stayed in the area. A young pipit couple built a nest under the mound where he himself had been hatched. They were nearly finished when Filius saw a female cuckoo perched in the neighbouring tree, smoothing her brown-gold feathers. His mother?

Could it be?

“Excuse me,” he called out with a trembling voice. “Were you here last year?”

The female glared at him.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because you might be my mother,” said Filius.

But the female cuckoo laughed.

“Your mother? What kind of cuckoo are you? We cuckoos don’t care about family.”

“But were you here last year?”

“Here?” She looked around. “No, I’ve never been here before. I only stopped to rest. My place is farther to the northeast. And it’s much prettier than this place,” she said.

Filius watched the female cuckoo until she had disappeared among the trees, and then he bowed his head. He was a twilight bird, doomed to be lonely for the rest of his life. He was getting ready to fly onwards, when he saw – her!

A girl cuckoo was perched in a nearby tree. She glowed like newly polished copper, and lit up the whole forest. And her eyes shone like black pearls in the sunlight.

Filius was excited, and polished his feathers until they gleamed and were arranged perfectly. Then he glanced at the girl cuckoo again. His tail feathers spread out like a fan, and his wings pointed downwards. Then he felt a tingling in his stomach, and suddenly he called out:

“Coo-coo!”

Surprised and proud of the sound he made, he called again.

“Coo-coo!”

The girl cuckoo cocked her head and answered with a soft little warble.

“Coo-coo!” he called again, with hope in his heart.

“Trrrrillll,” she answered again.

It was then that Filius realized that he was a real cuckoo. He swiftly perched on the branch beside the girl cuckoo. He took a deep breath and was just about sing out with his finest call, when it suddenly stuck in his throat. He had heard something. A completely different sound. He looked down at the ground. People. Young girls again.

“Cuckoo in the tree, cuckoo in the tree,” they whispered.

Filius and the girl cuckoo flew quickly to the top of another tree.

“You see?” Filius laughed. “We have a lot to do this summer.” He lifted a wing and pointed at a brand new pipits’ nest.

“What do you think of that one?”

“Trrrrillll, it looks fine to me,” she answered.

They looked into each other’s eyes, and then they flew away.