HARI AND HIS ELECTRIC FEET

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Conkers



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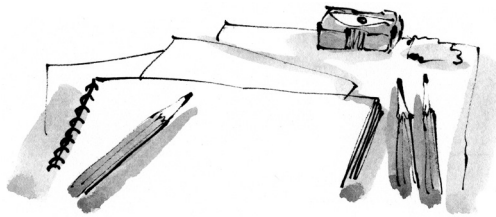
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CHAPTER ONE

Hari

This is the story of a boy who could dance. Lots of boys can dance, but there was something special about the way Hari danced. It was so special, in fact, that it changed everything for Hari – and for other people too. It was so special that when I heard about it, I decided that I should write the whole story down. And here it is – the story of Hari exactly as it happened.

Hari lived in a city in India. This city was

not the biggest city in the country – there are some very large cities in India – but it was still big enough. Nobody knows exactly how many people lived in this city, as it had been some time since they had all been counted. But just about everybody agreed that there were over one million people who made their home there. One million people is a lot of people – try to imagine them all lined up. If you started walking along the line early in the morning, just as the sun came up, you'd still be walking at the end of the day, when the sun went down and the birds all flew off to their beds in the trees.

Here is a picture of Hari. He was twelve at the time of our story and you will see that he has a friendly smile. People like boys who smile, and Hari was popular because he always smiled



at others when he spoke to them. They also liked him because he was kind. Hari did things for other people, even when they did not ask him to.

Most people liked that. He would also share the things he had. They liked that very much indeed.

Hari lived with his older sister, Amala, and his aunt. His parents did not live with them because there was no work for them in that city. They lived a long way away, in the countryside, in the hills of a place called Assam, where they grow a lot of tea. Their job was to pick and prepare the tea in a large tea garden owned by a wealthy man, a mean and unhappy person who thought only of money. It was not well-paid work, and their life was a hard one. That was why the aunt had offered to take the children.

"If they live with me," she said, "then that will mean there are two fewer mouths for you to feed."

Their parents knew that this was true. At

the same time, they did not want to say goodbye to their children, and it was a sad day for them when they waved the two children off at the beginning of their train journey to their new home. They hoped that one day the family would be reunited, but they also knew that this might never happen.

Both children tried to be brave.

"We'll see them again next year," Amala said, as the train snaked its way out of the railway station. "Or maybe the year after that."

"That won't be the same as seeing them every day," Hari muttered, fighting back his tears.

"No," said his sister. "But I'm sure you'll be happy enough living in a city. Just think of all the things there are to do in a big place like that."

She was right about that, of course. There were many new and exciting things to do in the city, but you had to have a bit of money to do most of them. Unfortunately, Hari and his sister were poor, as was their aunt.

"I'm sorry that there won't be much spare money," she said to her nephew and niece. "But if we all work hard we shall get by all right."

The work that the aunt did had to do with clothes. She was a seamstress and she had a sewing machine that she worked by treading on a pedal beneath it. This was an old-fashioned way of sewing, but at least it did not use any electricity and the aunt was skilled at making the best of what she had in life.

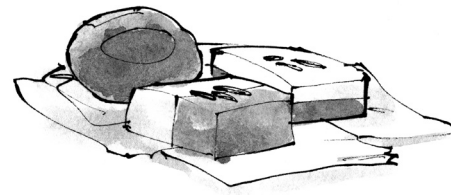
Amala and Hari soon found out what work they were expected to do. Amala was to assist

her aunt with dress-making and with repairs to people's clothes. She also sometimes helped a woman who lived down the street to look after her young daughter, who was three years old, and her even younger son, who was barely one. That could be hard work, too, as children that small can be very demanding.

Hari's job was to deliver food for a man who ran a nearby take-away restaurant. At noon each day, when school stopped for lunch, Hari would pick up all the lunch boxes that had been prepared for the customers. These were called *tiffin boxes* and they contained the tasty curries and breads that the chef had cooked that morning. People who worked in offices would eat their lunch from their tiffin boxes, and then later in the afternoon Hari would call to collect the

empty boxes. He would wash these once he got back to the restaurant and stack them up ready for the next day. That was his main job.





But Hari also had another job, which was to make sweets. For as long as he could remember he had been good at making special Indian sweets, and the aunt had encouraged him to do this when he went to live with her.

"I'll start you off with the ingredients," she said. "You make the sweets and then you can sell plates of them from outside our door. People will love them." She paused. "And once you've paid me back for the ingredients, you can keep the rest of the money."

Hari was very pleased with this arrangement, and he soon became quite well known to the people who walked to work along the street on which the aunt lived.

"That boy's sweets are really delicious," people said. "They are so tasty that we can't resist them!"

With the small amount of money that he earned from selling his sweets, Hari was able to treat himself to a seat at the local cinema every Saturday afternoon. He loved the films shown there – the great adventures made by the film studios in Mumbai. He loved everything that happened in these films – the horse-riding, the treasure-hunting, the thrilling car chases and, of course, the dancing. Hari loved to watch people dancing.

"I like to watch dancing even more than I like to make and eat sweets," he said to his sister.

Amala looked at him with surprise. "Are you sure?" she asked.

Hari nodded. “Completely sure,” he answered. “One hundred per cent.”

“If you like dancing so much,” Amala said, “then why have I never seen you dance? Why don’t you dance yourself?”

Hari thought about this for a few moments. “Maybe I shall,” he said. “One day.”