

A Toga for Billy

Billy had always loved the Greek Mythology story of Jason, Leader of the Argonauts. On evenings the little five-year old boy would sit in the crook of his father's arm, listening in rapt attention to the great tale of Jason capturing the golden ram's pelt. So, when Halloween came along, Billy decided the perfect costume would be a toga. He eagerly watched as his mother sewed him an elaborate toga out of gold-coloured material. Impatiently, he looked over her shoulder, watching her pin it, cut it, and sew it. At last the costume was done and pronounced a success! How he pranced about the neighbourhood, getting candy and swishing his toga in delight! But when he came home and it was time for bed, he would not take off the toga.

“Billy, dear,” his mother would begin. “It's time to take off your costume now, darling.”

In steadfast determination Billy would shake his head. “But Mummy, I like it!” he would protest.

This continued until Billy's bedtime had been delayed long enough, and his mother reluctantly allowed him to go to bed in the toga.

In the morning, Billy was still resolute. No matter how much his mother coaxed, wheedled, petted, and shouted in turns, it did nothing. At last she gave up, but Billy was her joy and pride, and it hurt her deeply to see him lie on the rug flipping through the big book of Greek Mythology in his well-worn toga, or eating his scrambled eggs in that dreadful costume.

With absolute embarrassment, she had to take him to the store in his costume. People smiled and complimented her on her darling little boy, but as the weeks passed, the smiles changed to cringes of disbelief and shock.

Billy began to notice that his mother was more and more withdrawn from his life, but he would not let it bother him. He stopped asking her to take him to the park, or to the nearby grocery store for ice cream, because she would only say quietly,

“I will when you take off your costume, Billy, dear.”

His resolution began to fade slightly after this, but he loved his toga so much that he brushed his nagging worry and unhappiness away. At first, Billy's father took it as a joke, but seeing how it divided his son and wife up, he began to work on Billy as well, saying,

“Take off your toga, son, and we'll fix your bike, or something like that.”

Billy had begun to feel like a wounded animal who was slowly dying. At night, he would blink back tears, and then quickly reach out and hold his toga tightly. It seemed to be his only comfort.

Several weeks later, Billy's mother tripped on the stairs and broke her ankle. His parents went to the hospital to get it put in a cast, and when they came home, she lay on her bed in much pain.

“Is Mummy all right?” asked Billy, with a white little face.

He was supposed to be in bed, but he had heard the babysitter leave and his parents return, so he wanted to talk to his father.

His father laid a hand on his shoulder, a nearly extinct gesture since Halloween.

“She'll come through all right, son,” he said softly.

“Will she, Daddy?” asked Billy.

“I guess so,” said his father slowly. He wasn't really paying attention to Billy.

Billy got up, swallowed his fear, and asked, “Daddy, did she break her ankle because of *me*?”

Billy's father whipped his head around. “What are you talking about?” he demanded.

“I-I thought--” began Billy fearfully.

“Of course not!” snapped his father. “Don't *say* things like that, Billy!”

Shocked at his father's austere manner, Billy got up and ran to his room. The house was cold and silent. Billy ran to his bed and burst into tears.

“It's my fault! My fault!” he wailed into his pillow. “Daddy's just hiding it from me!”

After a long while he got up. His eyes were red swollen, his pathetic little toga drooping out of

shape and wrinkled. For a long while he stood in front of the window, and then it became frighteningly clear to him. He must take off the toga and get into his old clothes. It was the only way to make Mummy better and to make Daddy happy. It was the only way. This was a big sacrifice for Billy, but he knew he *must* do it. So, with sad composure, Billy removed the toga that he had worn for so long. He felt tears prick in his eyes once more as he closed the door to his room, for he knew he would never wear a toga again.

He walked up to his parents room, and knocked softly on the door, then entered. His mother was lying in the bed, looking tired and pained.

“Billy!” she cried. “What a nice surprise!”

Billy jumped up on her bed and curled up beside her.

“You took off your toga, Billy, for me?”

Billy nodded. “It made you sad and sick,” he said, “So I took it off.”

“Oh, Billy! It wasn't your fault that I fell,” said his mother, as tears welled up in her eyes. And then, after a short pause she said slowly, “I'm sorry, Billy, I could've handled this entire situation so much better, now that I think about it. Please forgive me.”

Billy looked into her blue eyes, so much like his own. “Will you forgive me?” he asked.

Billy's mother hugged him so tight he could hardly breathe. “I forgive you, Billy,” she said, “And thank you for becoming my own Billy again.”