

A HALLOWEEN TAIL

Four year old Joey was the happiest little boy that ever lived. His home was a little piece of heaven located on Mountain Laurel Road in the shadow of South Mountain. He lived there with his family, Mama, Papa, and his two older sisters, Ashley and Megin. Ashley and Megin went to school, but Joey didn't, and he stayed home with Mama and played all day. Such a wonderful life.

Joey loved to wake up early every morning. He did not want to miss the goings on as Mama got everyone ready for the outside. Papa was first. Joey couldn't always wake up in time to see Papa off because he woke up so very early. Papa had to wake up so early because he worked far, far away in the city. But when he did wake up in time, it was so exciting. Papa scurried around so fast because he had to beat the traffic, and would say, "I gotta go, I gotta go," and Mama would say, "You have plenty of time," and Papa would be in his work clothes, which were different from his play clothes. Mama would hand Papa his lunch bag and his travel mug because the coffee went to work with him, and how Joey loved to be squashed between Mama and Papa. Then Papa would say "See you soon," because Mama wouldn't let him say goodbye, and he would grab his lunch bag and his coffee and he was off. Joey would run to the window and watch Papa drive away until the tail lights disappeared around the bend.

Ashley and Megin didn't have to wake up for another hour, so Joey would stay in the kitchen with Mama as she prepared their breakfast. She would lay out the bowls for the cereal and wash the strawberries and cut them up, and

then she would pick a couple of ripe bananas and peel them and cut them up. Joey loved bananas. He would nuzzle up against Mama's legs and go around them, never losing contact, and he would turn his head up and she would smile and pop a piece of banana into his mouth and he would close his eyes as he mashed the banana against the roof of his mouth, and then open up for more.

Then it was time to wake up Ashley and Megin. This was a job for Mama. The girls didn't always listen to Joey because they didn't want to wake up and he was so small. Mama would help them pick their clothes and brush their hair and made them brush their teeth and then let them choose their cereal and pour their milk. "Don't dilly-dally," Mama would say. "The school bus is coming." Sometimes one of the girls couldn't find a shoe or a coat, and Joey would race off to find it, and when he did Mama would say, "You're such a good boy, Joey," and he was.

The big yellow school bus stopped right out front, so if the weather was cold or rainy the girls could wait at the door. Joey always waited at the door because he loved to be the first to see the school bus and holler, "School bus, school bus."

"My little watchman," Mama used to call him, and the bus never snuck up on their house. The bus would stop out front, lights flashing, and the kids would climb in and the door would shut and the lights would go off, and Joey would watch until the bus went around the bend. Then it was alone time with Mama. He would eat his cereal and fruit and drink his juice while Mama cleaned

the kitchen, and they would then turn on the television, snuggle up on the couch, and watch cartoons.

After an hour or so Mama would get up to do some of the endless chores, and Joey would continue to watch cartoons, occasionally getting up to seek her out for reassurance and a loving embrace. Then came lunch time, and afterwards, more play time. Of late, Joey pretended to be a dog or a cat. Joey wanted oh so bad to have a dog or a cat or both for a pet, but there were no furry friends in the home because Papa was allergic to them. So Joey contented himself with pretending to be one. Sometimes he was a dog. He would crawl around the house, barking at cats, chasing squirrels, begging for bananas, and reveling when Mama said "Good doggie," and petted his head. Now Joey was a cat. He would crawl on all fours, meow, lick his paws, sharpen his claws on the sofa, beg for bananas, and weave in and out of Mama's legs.

When he tired it was nap time. He would curl up on the sofa with his blanket and pillow, and when he woke up, it was time for Megin and Ashley to come home from school. If the weather was fine, he and Mama would go outside to play and wait. Ashley and Megin would have a little snack of milk and cookies, and then it was time for homework. This was done at the kitchen table, and little Joey would be on his knees on the chair, and Mama helped him learn his numbers and the alphabet. Then supper, and after that the girls were allowed to watch their favorite television show, and if traffic wasn't bad, and if Papa didn't have to stay late, he would soon be home, and Mama and Ashley and Megin and little Joey would all greet him and throw their arms around him

and Joey would squeeze in between the tangle of legs and bodies and grab Papa's leg and pull until he reached down and picked him up and took him upstairs with the girls following, to make them brush their teeth, put on their pajamas, and put them to bed. But first, he would read them a story, or better yet, tell them one, about how he got the scar on his face or how he used to walk five miles to school, or how once he was a pirate on Rock Creek. He would then kiss them all goodnight and tuck them in and go downstairs to eat supper and have alone time with Mama. And so unfolded Joey's life in his little bit of heaven.

At about this time Joey became cognizant of an electric buzz in the air. Megin and Ashley kept repeating the word Halloween as if it were some sort of supernatural incantation. Joey remembered nothing of prior Halloweens, but he was swept up by the excitement nonetheless. It was Megin and Ashley's favorite holiday, next to Christmas. They loved dressing up in costumes, they loved trick or treating in the mysterious cool night air of fall, and of course, they loved the candy.

Megin wanted to be a little princess. She had decided to be one the very instant she saw the lovely party dress at the BonTon when she was with Mama shopping for back to school clothes way back in August. Such a pretty lavender dress with a crinoline under slip that made it so puffy and rustled as she walked. It had lots of sparkles on the bodice and a dark purple bow.

Ashley wanted to be a pirate. When Mama asked "Why a pirate?," Ashley answered because she wanted to wear an eye patch and lots of black make up. She wanted scars, and a black good eye and big, black bushy eyebrows. She wanted to be the scariest pirate ever. So she put on her black pants and tucked them into her boots, and one of Mama's way too big white blouses with billowing sleeves and Papa's black tie that he wore to Aunt Tillie's funeral was used for a sash around her waist. But for all that she was too sweet to be scary, but Mama only smiled.

Joey was so excited that he just couldn't contain himself. He ran up to Mama and said "I know what I want to be Mama, I know what I want to be. You know what I want to be, Mama? Huh Mama, you know Mama, you know Mama, guess Mama, guess. I want to be a cat." He even knew what kind of cat that he wanted to be. He wanted to be a black cat with white paws and a white tip on his tail. He had seen such a cat in an ad for cat food in a magazine. So Mama bought him black pajamas and a black stocking cap. She sewed little ears on the cap. But what to do about the tail? Mama had an old threadbare black coat that she never wore anymore, and it had a cloth belt. Mama snipped the end of the belt off, filled it with bits of foam, and sewed one of Joey's white baby socks over the end to seal it, and then attached it to the seat of the pajama pants. Joey's white sneakers completed the transformation. Joey was ecstatic. He wore his costume every day, all day. He became the cat. Mama thought that she would have to make him another costume by Halloween, and

when the day finally came, Joey looked like an old alley cat that had been in one too many fights.

On Halloween day Megin and Ashley went to school and Joey kept asking when they would be home and why did they have to wait until dark and could he go outside to show the neighbors his costume, and Mama said soon, because, and not yet.

Joey was too wound up to nap, which made the day longer, but Megin and Ashley finally came home. They had to have a wholesome snack because they wouldn't be eating supper, and of course they had to do their homework. After all, work before play. Papa came home early because it was a special day, and he was going to take them all out while Mama stayed home to greet the trick or treaters.

The time came to get ready. Megin became a little princess and Mama put on just the littlest bit of make up because everyone knew that real princesses didn't need make up, and Papa said that he had seen her in the movies. Megin became a pirate, and Mama used lots of mascara and nobody told her that she really didn't look scary, and Mama even used a little on Joey to give him whiskers.

Everyone did last minute rushing around, looking for their plastic pumpkins to put the candy in, and everyone went to the potty for the last time because it wouldn't do to have to go on such an important night.

Papa called out "Alright everybody, it's time to go," but there was no Joey. Then they noticed that the front door was open. There was a sharp squeal of brakes from the road, then a dull thump, then silence. Thus began their descent into hell.

Mama intuitively ran frantically to the car stopped in the road. A confused old woman was beginning to get out, and Mama rushed to the lump. Mama knelt down and began to wail. "Dear God, please help us." Papa came running with Ashley and Megin. Neighbors were pouring out of their homes. The poor grandmother was disconsolate, and even though there was no way that it was her fault, it didn't help much. Police and ambulances and fire trucks arrived, and then flashing lights made it look like the marquee of an old fashioned theatre on opening night. The medics worked grimly on Joey and soon they heard the sound of the distant thumping of the helicopter's rotor blades as they echoed off South Mountain. The helicopter hovered as the State Troopers secured a spot to land, then it descended. There was no longer a sense of urgency, and the rescue personnel began to mill around. Papa held back a sobbing Mama as the neighbors embraced Megin and Ashley while a trooper carried a small blanket draped bundle in his arms to the waiting helicopter. And then it lifted off into the night.

And so began the nightmare for which there was no relief in the waking. They all felt the anguish of the devastation, none more acutely than Mama, for after all, Joey was the fruit of her womb.

Ashley and Megin missed a week of school, and Papa stayed home another week, fearful of leaving Mama home by herself. But life must go on, and the day arrived when Papa returned to work. Mama walked Megin and Ashley down the driveway, tightly holding their hands, and she held them both in a tight embrace long after the other children had gotten on the bus and taken their seats, but the bus driver waited sadly, door open, even though it meant that she would arrive to school late.

Mama released Megin and Ashley, the door shut, the flashing lights went off, and Mama watched the bus go down the road until the tail lights disappeared around the bend. She turned slowly and began to trudge up the drive, then saw a cat on the landing at the front door. Mama kept walking, eyes on the cat, and as she began to ascend the three steps, the cat got up, tail erect in the air, and greeted her with a happy little meow.

"Aren't you a friendly little cat," said Mama, and she bent down to stroke the cat, and in turn the cat met her hand and began to purr profusely. After a few minutes Mama said, "I have to go in now, cutie," and got up and opened the door, and the cat slipped inside just as smooth as could be and went straight to the kitchen and stopped in front of the refrigerator, turned around expectantly, and followed Mama with its eyes as she hurried in.

"My aren't you a bold little thing," and the cat purred loudly and came up to her and wove in and out of her legs, pushing hard against her, then returned to the refrigerator. Mama's heart melted and she smiled for the first time in too

long, and said, "Does kitty want some milk?" and she could have sworn that the cat said yes. She poured some milk into a saucer, and the cat hungrily lapped it up. "Would kitty like some more?" and once again the cat answered affirmatively. When done, the cat licked its paws, washed its whiskers, and then wove in and out of Mama's legs.

"You are such a sweet little kitty," and the cat purred fit to burst, then went into the family room and stood in front of the television. "My, you are a bold one," said Mama. "Who do you belong to?" The cat just went up to Mama and lifted its head to be stroked, then turned around and jumped onto the couch.

"Are you going to keep me company today?" The cat looked yes.

Mama turned on the television and sat down and the cat snuggled up next to her and they spent the morning together watching television. Noontime came and Mama got up to fix herself a little lunch. She poured the cat some more milk and fixed herself some cottage cheese and fruit, and when she began to pull back the skin of a banana the cat came over to her and begged for some. Mama shared the banana with the cat and said, "You are such a strange little kitty. Who do you belong to?" The cat wove in and out of Mama's legs.

By now it was time for Megin and Ashley to come home from school, and as it was a particularly fine day of the waning fall, Mama went out early, and the cat never left her side. When Ashley and Megin hopped off the bus, the cat ran up to them to greet them. At first the girls were taken back, but were so

delighted that they bombarded Mama with questions and ended with, "Can we keep it Mama, huh, please Mama, can we keep it?"

Mama responded with, "This kitty belongs to a family who loves it and would miss it terribly," but it was a very half-hearted response indeed. They all went inside and the girls had their snack and the cat never left their side. They did their homework with the cat at their feet. They then prepared for Papa to come home from work.

"You know girls, we can't keep the kitty. You know Papa is allergic to animals," and kitty just wove in and out of Mama's legs purring, and Mama's words trailed off, and the girls laughed and clapped because that's just what Mama always did when she relented.

Papa came home, and they all ran to greet him, and all three girls threw their arms around him, and the cat squeezed in between their legs and got up on its hind legs and placed its paws on Papa's knees.

"What in the world?" said Papa, and he looked down and saw the cat.

"What is that cat doing in the house? You know that we can't have pets," but Megin and Ashley both talked at once, and when he looked to Mama, she had the melting look in her eyes that he could not deny.

Vanquished, he looked down at the cat, and the cat looked into his eyes and purred. Bewildered, he looked back at Mama. He had dreaded the state of

her condition upon his return, was amazed that his worst fears were not realized, and decided right then and there that he would change nothing.

"Now look here, that cat has to belong to someone, but if we can't find the owners we can keep it, I guess."

The girls screamed in delight, Mama smiled, they threw their arms around Papa, and the cat wound its way through the tangle of legs and rubbed up against Papa's. Papa's eyes puffed up and teared and he sneezed a lot, but he said he would learn to live with it, but everyone would have to make sure that the cat stayed away from Papa's and his and Mama's bedroom. Kitty knew this, and slept in the girl's bedroom.

Needless to say, they never found the cat's owners and truth be told, they didn't look very hard. Papa learned to live with his allergies and the cat made sure that Mama was never alone. When Mama was a little girl she went to the beach every summer with her family. On some days the surf was so rough and she was so small that she would dig a large hold in the sand and try to fill it with her little bucket so that she could have her own little swimming hole. Try and she might, no matter how many times she ran down to the ocean with her bucket, she could not fill the hole. So it was with the hole that Joey's death left in her heart. Yet the cat helped to ameliorate the chronic pain of her loss.

The cat was really a most beautiful cat with silky black fur that was almost iridescent, four white booties, and a tail whose tip had been dipped in white. The whole family grew to love the cat, and Mama depended on it when

everyone was gone. When they took the cat to the veterinarian for a checkup and shots, they found out that it was a boy. Ashley declared with reverent seriousness that the cat had been sent to them from heaven by God because he followed Mama around just like Joey, and Megin began to call the cat L'il Joey, and that was that.

Time went on and Joey became a sad yet vague memory of the distant past for Megin and Ashley. Papa suffered periodic bouts of melancholy, and was more apprehensive with the girls, and would always be so. Mama had come out of her deep mourning and was getting stronger, only occasionally overwhelmed by her grief. L'il Joey knew this and spent more time sleeping on the couch as Mama bustled about the house.

The one year anniversary of Joey's death was rapidly approaching, and so was Halloween. At first Mama was dead set against any kind of activity associated with that night, but Papa reasoned that it was unfair to Megin and Ashley and won his point. Besides, the girls had come up with a brilliant idea for a costume. They were to be a mother and child kangaroo.

Mama poured her heart and soul into creating the costume. She even went to a fabric store during the middle of the day, alone, something she hadn't done since that awful day. L'il Joey just watched as she left, knowingly. Mama bought three yards of plush brown cotton velvet. When she came home, excited as could be, L'il Joey was waiting for her and purred ever so loudly when he saw how happy she was.

What a wonderful costume Mama made. Ashley and Megin did cartwheels in the living room when they beheld it. Ashley was the mother and Megin was the baby, and they stood side by side in their costumes with their long tails. But wait, there was more, and this was all Megin's idea. Mama had sewn on a very large pouch, and had left not only the top open, but the bottom as well. Megin would stoop all the way down and wiggle up through the bottom opening, and when she stood up she looked like a Joey who was just about done with the pouch and ready to live outside. Mama laughed so hard she began to cry, and even L'il Joey smiled as he purred and wove in and out of their legs. The girls practiced walking with Megin in the pouch, and when Papa came home and saw their antics, he guffawed so long and heartily that laughter truly returned to the house, and they had a four cornered hug and L'il Joey wove in and out of their legs. Papa said "What the heck," and picked up L'il Joey and put him in the middle, and the purring felt like a vibrator.

Halloween arrived and Papa came home early, just as it turned dark, and it was a cool, crisp night and there was a beautiful orange harvest moon, and in the excitement nobody noticed that L'il Joey had slipped away. Papa was just getting ready to take the girls out when they all heard a child's voice call out loud and clear; "Goodbye Mama, goodbye Papa, goodbye Ashley, goodbye Megin." Astonished, Mama screamed out, "Joey," ran to the door and flung it open just in time to hear the sharp squeal of brakes from the road, then a dull thump, then silence.