

16 The juggler's apprentice

You may remember that Billy can juggle. He's actually very good. His hero is the world famous Jacko the Juggler who came from Driptown and even went to Driptown Primary School, just like Billy does now. Billy's Mum loves to watch him juggle.

"That's brilliant Billy!" she shouts, as he throws more and more balls higher and higher into the air. Billy loves it when his Mum claps and cheers his juggling.

"You should have a go Mum," he often used to say.

"Oh no, oh no, not me," Mum would always reply. "I couldn't possibly do that Billy. I'd be no good at all."

"Go on have a go, you'll see," he would say, "it's not that difficult really!"

Now and again, after Billy had gone to bed, Mum would pick up one of his juggling balls and hold it in her hand. Sometimes she almost threw one of them in the air, but she always put it down again thinking, "I'll only drop it, best not to have a go at all."

But secretly, as she watched Billy juggling, Mum often thought, "I wonder if I could do it? I wonder if I could?"

Sometimes Mum would dream that she could juggle. Just like Billy she would be throwing more and more juggling balls high into the air. In her dream, of course, it gave her an amazing feeling of freedom as each ball fell back straight into her hand. Sometimes as she woke up she would almost grab something and start juggling. That is, before she remembered that it was all a dream, and that would make her feel really rather sad.

"I wish I could juggle," Mum would whisper to herself, "but I'd probably be no good. I'd probably be a real failure!" So Mum contented herself with watching Billy do his juggling.

Now in September of each year there is great excitement in Driptown. This is when everyone starts to get ready for the Driptown Festival. This is a weekend when the residents of Driptown all get together to put on plays and make music; it's great fun! Mum always plays in the Driptown Band, Billy's sister Amy always dances in the big show in the Town Hall. Even Grandpa always has a part in one of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas that they put on. (Grandpa can't sing by the way, but that doesn't matter in Gilbert and Sullivan anyway!) Billy though, had nothing he could do. No one wanted a juggler. So while everyone else was out doing things together, Billy was left all on his own in the back garden, juggling.

One evening Billy was reading the festival programme. As usual there were plays and concerts and musical competitions, but as usual there didn't seem to be anything for jugglers to do. Suddenly though, his eye was caught by a very strange notice. It said:

The most unusual family competition
We're looking for the family where at least two members
have a very unusual skill

Billy showed it to his Mum.

"If you learned to juggle," he said, "we could enter! I'm sure we could win. After all, no one else in Driptown can juggle."

"Oh no, oh no," replied Mum. "I couldn't possibly learn to juggle, Billy. I'd be no good; I'd make a fool of myself. No, juggling is for you, not for me."

"Oh please, please please, please Mum," Billy pleaded. "I'll show you what to do. It's not hard. I know you can do it; all you've got to do is try."

Billy pressed a juggling ball into his Mum's hand.

"Go on, throw it! Go on Mum, you can do it."

Mum felt the ball in her hand. She remembered those dreams and how wonderful she had felt when she had been juggling. She felt as if there were two voices in her head, one saying: "Go on have a go it would be great fun!" And another one saying: "Don't make such a fool of yourself. You're bound to drop it and then he'll only laugh at you!"

Mum didn't know what to do, but before she could think any more Billy suddenly shook her arm. The ball went flying up into the air and without thinking she reached out with the other hand and caught it.

"Hurrah!" shouted Billy. "That's a brilliant start! Come on Mum, do it again!"

Mum threw the ball in the air and caught it again, her smile got bigger and bigger and bigger. She threw it and caught it over and over again and by the end of the day Mum could juggle with two balls.

The next day Mum got up early, she couldn't wait to start juggling again. She and Billy juggled all day and all the next day. Over the next few weeks Mum got better and better. Billy and his Mum worked out a brilliant juggling routine using balls and skittles, pots and pans, cups and plates. They ended up with real eggs that weren't even hard-boiled! They invited all the neighbours round to watch and they performed their act in the back garden. Mr. Green clapped and cheered and laughed so much that they thought they might have to call the doctor!

"That's the most brilliant thing I have ever seen," he managed to say, as he held his sides and gasped for his breath.

Mum and Billy filled in the competition entry form and sent it off. Then they waited for the day of the competition to arrive. They changed the act a bit, adding a few even more spectacular throws and then all was ready.

There were three other families in the competition. The first family thought they were snake charmers but one snake wouldn't wake up and the other one ran away. So their act was a bit of a flop. Another family claimed that they were going to fire their Grandpa out of a cannon. Unfortunately though, for some inexplicable reason, their Grandpa didn't turn up. Billy was sure he must have got stuck in a traffic jam. The other family seemed to spend much of their time dressed up as pantomime horses and doing a sort of rather strange dancing act. Unfortunately, the Dad who normally went at the back of one of the horses had a bad back so he had to go at the front instead. He went the wrong way at the wrong time and crashed into the other horse sending them both tumbling off of the stage and bringing the whole act to a rather abrupt end.

So it came to Billy and his Mum's turn. They took their places on the stage with all their juggling things placed carefully all around them and waited for the judges to say start. Billy looked at his Mum. He could see how hard she was concentrating but at the same time he could see the most enormous smile on her face.

"Just think," he thought, "if she hadn't just had a go, she would never have been here today, and she would never have had that big smile either."

Suddenly Billy felt very proud of his Mum, very proud indeed.
"OK," said the judges, and they were off!

Billy and his Mum juggled for all they were worth. Pots, pans, balls, skittles, cups and plates went flying high into the air. And then came the eggs. The crowd gasped, everyone held their breath, and every one cheered and clapped like mad when not a single egg was broken. In fact the crowd cheered so loudly that lots of other people came along to see what was going on. So Mum and Billy went through their whole act again.

The judge made his announcement:

"The most unusual family with the most unusual skill is, of course, Billy and his Mum for their sensational juggling act!"

When mum tucked Billy into bed that night she suddenly said: "Thank you Billy."

"Thank you for what Mum?" he asked.

"Thank you for ... for ... for." Suddenly there was a gentle snoring noise from beside her. Billy was fast asleep. Mum crept out of the room and down the stairs. She grabbed two tomatoes, an orange, and three apples from the kitchen and went into the living room. On the way she caught sight of herself in the mirror in the hall. She stood there for a moment, and then said to herself:

"I'm a juggler!!" and her smile got even bigger.

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