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CAMILLA . . . WHO?

'I CAN'T WEAR THAT!' wailed Perry, when his mother pulled his costume out of the suitcase.

'It's what Roman boys used to wear,' she insisted, dropping it over his head.

'But . . .'

Perry looked in the mirror and groaned. He was wearing a bright yellow dress that reached down to his knees, with big red circles on the skirt and sleeves.

'Why couldn't I just be a soldier?' he grumbled.

'Because we're going to a Roman grape harvest festival, not a battle re-enactment,' said Mum. 'I couldn't let you dress up as a legionary.'

Perry rolled his eyes.

'I copied a picture of a boy from late Roman times,' Mum went on. 'It's . . .'

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THE BOY WHO STEPPED THROUGH TIME

‘Authentic!’ yelled Perry and his big sister together, and they both started laughing. ‘Authentic’ was Mum’s favourite word because she couldn’t just say ‘correct’ like a normal person.

‘Well, it *is* authentic,’ protested Mum. ‘I even made it for you in my weaving class.’

That explains the lumpy, scratchy wool, thought Perry.

‘Actually, I think you look quite cool,’ said Melissa, snapping photos of him with her phone.

Mum turned to her suitcase again. ‘Melissa and I are getting dressed now. You wait in the guest lounge,’ she said.

Perry goggled at her. ‘I’m not . . .’

‘You can take off the tunic for now,’ said Mum, dragging out something blue. ‘Just put it on when we get there.’

With a surge of relief, Perry scrambled into shorts and a T-shirt, and kicked his costume under the bed. If he was lucky, they’d forget it and leave it behind.

In the hotel lounge, Dad was scrolling through the sports news on his iPad.

‘Did we win?’ demanded Perry.

Dad nodded, and leaned back, smiling, in the squeaky leather chair.

‘Yes!’ cheered Perry. The only bad part about coming on holidays to the south of France was

missing out on going to footy matches back in Australia.

‘Aren’t you supposed to be putting on a costume?’ said Dad.

‘I’ll chuck it on when we get there,’ Perry grunted. ‘How come Mum hasn’t made *you* dress up?’

‘Mum knows I never dress up,’ chuckled Dad, and went back to reading his news.

Perry stood beside him, fidgeting with the mini high-bounce ball he kept in his pocket, and gazing at the tempting expanse of hard, tiled floor. He slipped the ball from his pocket, bounced it once, and looked around. No one was watching. Grinning, he bounced it again, harder this time. Whoops . . . the fluoro green ball went skittering across the floor. Perry lunged after it, crashed into the wall, and scooped up the ball.

‘This is no place to play rough games,’ snapped a voice with a posh English accent.

Perry straightened up guiltily. There was a small man, almost hidden in a high-backed armchair, glaring at him over a pair of spectacles.

‘You could have damaged that picture,’ scolded the man, gesturing at the wall behind Perry. ‘That’s a rare fragment of Roman wall painting. Nearly two thousand years old.’

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Perry turned.

A square of glass covered part of the wall, and behind it was a section of old, cracked plaster with flecks of coloured paint on it. Perry looked at it, trying to see how it made a picture. Those green, faded shapes could be leaves, and that might be a thin, curvy tree trunk, and . . .

‘Hey Dad, check this out,’ he said, hurrying back to his father. ‘There’s an old Roman painting over there. But . . .’ He lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘Watch out for the old grouch in the armchair.’

Dad turned off his iPad, stretched noisily, and strolled across the room.

The man scowled at them, but went back to reading his book.

Perry pointed at the painting on the wall. ‘See?’ he whispered. ‘It looks like a tree with a cat peeking out.’

Dad tilted his head to one side. ‘I think you’ve got a good imagination,’ he said. ‘All I can see are green and brown blobs.’

The morning was nearly over by the time Mum and Melissa came downstairs. To Perry’s disappointment, Mum was carrying his tunic.

‘How do we look?’ asked Melissa, and they both twirled around to show off their dangly bead earrings and long dresses with wide, colourful stripes down the front.

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Dad raised his eyebrows. 'I thought Romans wore those sheet things – what were they called? Togas?'

'Togas! Women didn't wear togas,' scoffed Mum. 'Anyway . . .' She glanced down at her dress. 'This is late Roman style. When togas weren't the fashion anymore.'

Perry caught Melissa's eye. 'It's authentic, Dad,' they chorused together.

Dad smiled. 'Of course it is,' he said. 'Well, we'd better get going if you want to reach the festival before it finishes.'

Mum slid into the driver's seat of the hire car.

'Don't get us lost, Martin,' she warned, turning to Dad. 'Which way first?'

'Uh . . .' As usual, Dad swivelled his phone round trying to work out the satnav directions.

'Oh, Dad,' snorted Melissa. 'Give it to me. Mum, just go straight,' she instructed.

Then she picked up her own phone again.

'Hey, Perry, everyone loves your costume,' she said, holding the screen towards him.

'Melissa, which way?' screeched Mum, as an intersection loomed in front of them.

'Oops, hang on . . . right, no . . . go round that old Roman ruin.'

'Hey, that's Constantine's bathhouse,' said Perry.

THE BOY WHO STEPPED THROUGH TIME

‘This is the way we came yesterday when we went to the museum.’

‘Don’t mention that museum,’ groaned Melissa. ‘I still can’t believe you and Mum spent two *hours* looking at dead people.’

‘It wasn’t dead people. It was ancient stone coffins. From Roman times,’ protested Perry.

‘Same thing.’

‘Well, they were interesting. I found one of a girl who died when she was exactly my age: eleven years, two months and one day old. Her name . . .’

‘You and your numbers,’ burst in his big sister. ‘Anyway, how do you know? You can’t read Latin.’

‘I can a bit,’ he said. ‘Mum was teaching me on the plane, but . . .’

‘Mum, Mum, turn here!’ shrieked Melissa.

Mum swung the wheel, and the next moment they were zooming down the autoroute.

But Perry’s thoughts were still back at the museum. He was trying to remember the name of the girl from that coffin. It had started with C . . . Camilla something? And then he forgot about her as he noticed the other cars flying past so fast they were almost a blur.

‘Wow, what’s the speed limit here?’ he asked.

‘I don’t think there is one!’ cried Mum.

‘I need something to eat,’ said Melissa, tapping

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on her phone. 'It's ages since breakfast. I'm checking where there's a good cafe.'

'Can we at least get out of Arles first?' pleaded Dad.