

20 The girl next door

For as long as he could remember, one of Billy's next door neighbours had been Mrs. Palmer. Mrs Palmer was very old and she lived on her own. In the summer Billy would sometimes see her very slowly and carefully making her way down the garden with her walking frame. She seemed to Billy to take an absolute age. Then just as slowly she would make her way back again. Now and again Mum would pop in to see if she was alright. But apart from that, Billy never really saw or heard much of Mrs. Palmer at all.

One day when he came home from school Billy was surprised to find a large van parked outside his house. At first, from the top of the road, it looked as if men were taking furniture out of his house and putting it in the van. He was about to run down the road shouting, "stop, stop!" when he suddenly realised that it wasn't his house at all, but Mrs. Palmer's house.

"What's happening next door?" he asked when he got home.

"Oh Mrs. Palmer is moving into a little flat. That old house is far too big for her to manage at her age," said Mum.

"Does that mean we'll have some new neighbours?" he asked.

"Probably," replied Mum.

"Who?" he asked.

"We'll have to wait and see," replied Mum.

For what seemed like ages to Billy the house next door was empty. He often day dreamed about who might move in.

"I hope it's a boy my age," he thought. "Someone who likes football! Then we could knock down the garden fence and turn the gardens into one big football pitch."

He day dreamed that a famous person might move in. One of the Dripton United players or maybe even Mick Muscle the champion wrestler!

But the house stayed empty. That is until one Saturday morning when, at 7 o'clock, Billy was woken up by a great squeaking and clattering sound outside. He peeped out of his window to see a very large van parked right outside his house with: 'Mr Packit and Sons, House Removals and Storage,' written on the side. Three men quickly jumped out of the cab and in no time at all they were carrying all sorts of things out from the back of the van and into the house next door. Billy watched as tables and chairs, beds and wardrobes, sofas and lots and lots of boxes were carried in.

He was very interested, so he got dressed and went out to the corner shop to buy his comic, 'Mercury Man,' of course. He wandered back down the road very slowly but there didn't seem to be anyone else around except the removal men. So he went back inside and read his comic. But somehow he couldn't concentrate. He kept imagining who might possibly be moving in and he kept imagining that wonderful football pitch that the two gardens would make if they were put together.

After a while he wandered out into the garden and started kicking his football about. Suddenly though, he heard voices from the other side of the fence. He stopped and listened. Yes, there they were again, definitely voices. He quietly crept along the garden to the point where there was a bit of a hole in the fence. He began to peer through into next door. He was being so quiet and concentrating so hard that he didn't notice when

three heads popped up over the top of the fence a bit further down the garden. He didn't notice anything until there was a sudden shout: "What yer doing?"

He almost fell over backwards in surprise. He looked toward the voices and there, peering over the fence, were three faces. Three faces that... that belonged to... that belonged to... girls!

"What's yer name?" asked one of the girls.

"Err, B, B, Billy," he stammered in surprise.

"We're your new neighbours," said the girl. "I'm Sally,"

"And I'm Sandy," said the girl next to her.

"And I'm Sammy," said the third girl.

Just then there was a shout from the house next door and the three girls quickly disappeared and went inside. Billy just stood there for a moment. He didn't know what to think. "Three girls?" he said to himself quietly, "three ... girls?"

On Monday morning Billy set out for school as usual. But as he walked down Long Street he became aware of a chattering noise behind him. He glanced back over his shoulder and was somewhat dismayed to see that it was the three girls from next door following him.

"Hello Billy," called Sally.

"Err hello," he replied sheepishly.

They ran to catch up with him and Billy walked along with them hoping desperately that he wouldn't meet any of his friends on the way.

He went to his class room and Miss Roberts was just calling the register when Mrs. Downer came in with Sally from next door.

"Children," she said, "here is a new member of your class. This is Sally, Sally Sutcliffe."

Then she looked straight at Billy and said: "I think Sally lives near you Billy. Maybe she can sit near you in class as well and you can show her around the school."

The chair on Billy's left was empty and Sally was ushered to the place. Billy and Sally sat next to each other all day but didn't say a word to each other. Every time Billy thought of something to say it suddenly seemed stupid. At break time and lunchtime Billy saw that Sally was standing all alone in the playground. Something inside him wanted to go up to her and say hello, but he felt very silly. Anyway Mickey kept dragging him off to play football. As he walked home at the end of the day he half hoped, much to his surprise, that he might meet Sally on the way, but he didn't.

When he got home he went out into the garden and started kicking his football around. Then slowly he became aware of someone watching him. He took a very quick glance around and saw that it was Sally just peering over the garden fence. He started to feel a bit nervous. In fact, for some reason that he didn't really understand, he started to get all flustered.

"I'll show her what a good shot I am," he thought. So he lined up a spectacular shot at the goal he had painted on the side of the garden shed. He took his run up. He could feel Sally's eyes burning into him. He went to kick the ball, but oh no, he mistimed it completely. The ball went flying off in completely the wrong direction! It flew over the fence on the other side of Billy's garden and there was a great smashing sound as the ball crashed through the roof of Mr. Brown's greenhouse. Billy froze, and he was sure that he heard a little chuckle from behind him.

"Oh no," he thought, "she thinks I'm.. I'm ... I'm stupid!"

The next day when Billy got home from school it was very hot.

"Can I have an ice cream Mum?" he asked.

"There are cones in the cupboard and ice cream in the freezer," said Mum. "You can make yourself one."

He got a cone and heaped it high with ice cream; so high that it was very precariously balanced. Then he went out into the garden. He gave the ice cream a few licks, and then he had that strange feeling that he was being watched again. He glanced round and again there was Sally peeping over the garden fence.

He took a deep breath. He decided to play it very cool and go and talk to her. He turned and walked towards her. "Hel..." he started to say, but he had forgotten to look where he was going. His foot hit a line of bricks that separated the edge of the flowerbed from the grass. He toppled forward and as he threw his arm up to catch himself the ice cream from his cone suddenly went flying through the air. Sally saw it coming but it was moving so fast that there was nothing she could do before it landed with a very, very messy splat on her shoulder. Then it slowly started running down the back and front of her school dress. Billy was lying face down in the flowerbed and, as he picked himself up, he could hardly believe what he saw! He went the brightest brightest red he had ever gone. He opened his mouth to speak but instead found himself running as fast as he could back into the house.

"Oh no," he thought, "Oh no! Now she'll really hate me for ever!"

Billy thought hard about what he could possibly do to impress Sally. Suddenly a thought hit him.

"I know," he said, "I could juggle!"

He raced around the house looking for his juggling balls. He ransacked his bedroom but he couldn't find them. He searched in the living room but they weren't there either. He looked everywhere but he just couldn't find them. He had just rushed into the kitchen to look when something caught his eye. Sitting on the kitchen table was a box, a box with some writing on it: '6 farm fresh eggs.'

When Billy looks back on that moment now he realises how silly his decision was. But for some reason he said to himself: "I'll juggle with those. That will be impressive!" And in no time at all he found himself out in the garden opening the box of eggs.

Once again Billy could feel Sally's eyes watching him. He started juggling. One egg, two eggs, three, four, five.... He was just about to throw the sixth egg in when suddenly there was a great shout from behind him:

"Billy! What are you doing!"

Suddenly reality hit him with the full force of a hurricane. What was he doing? He was, he was, was standing in his garden juggling with six eggs?

That's the moment at which things started to go horribly wrong. One egg went flying off and landed, splat, on the shed roof. A second shot off over next doors fence whistling past Sally's ear. Another shot behind Billy and landed, splat, right on his Mum's head. And yet another went straight up in the air and came crashing down on Billy.

"Billy!" yelled Mum at the top of her voice.

For a moment Billy was frozen to the spot. But then somehow, with all the dignity he could muster, he turned and walked back into his house. Mum was speechless.

Ten minutes later, after Billy had got cleaned up, the telephone rang. Billy answered: "Err, hello," he said.

"Hello Billy, its Sally from next door here."

Billy swallowed hard, "Err... ye ye ye yes...." he stammered.

"I was wondering," said Sally, "if you would like to come and watch TV for a while."

Billy can't remember what he said next, but two minutes later he and Sally were sitting together watching TV, and they have been good friends ever since. Billy even admits at times that Sally is pretty good at football. He's even tried to teach her to juggle, although not with eggs!

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