

29 Richie Clifford

Ever since she was a little girl Billy's Mum has been a dedicated fan of Richie Clifford. Richie Clifford, as you may know, and as Billy knows only too well, is someone who older people like his Mum call a 'Pop Star!' Mum has all of his records from when she was a girl and, every now and again, she will have a Richie Clifford night. Then she will play through her records, one by one, sitting on the couch with an album cover in her hands and a dreamy, sort of far away look on her face. Billy knows that on Richie nights it's no use trying to talk to Mum or ask her anything. She doesn't hear and she doesn't answer. The only thing that she can think of is her beloved Richie!

"We're all going on a happy holiday," Billy would hear coming from the stereo.

"No more worries for a week or two," as he quietly shut the front door.

"Fun and laughter on a happy holiday," would be ringing out as Billy slipped across the road to Mr. and Mrs. Green's house.

"No more worries for me or you," would waft across the road as Mr. Green opened the door.

"For a week or two," would echo across the street as Mr. Green said, "Oh it's...."

"Richie night," Billy would finish, as the door shut behind him.

Luckily though Richie nights didn't happen that often. Now and again Billy almost thought that Mum had forgotten all about Richie Clifford. But sooner or later all the old records would come out again. Billy soon came to realise that Richie Clifford would always be a part of their family and he would just have to learn to live with it.

This was alright, well just about tolerable anyway, until one Friday afternoon when Billy came home from school. He knew something was up as soon as he turned the corner into Bridge street because he could hear the strains of, you know who, wafting down the street. This was very strange and rather worrying. Richie records were never played at this time of day! When Billy got in the house he found Mum sitting on the floor with Richie blasting out of the stereo and a crumpled up newspaper in her hand. She had big tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Oh no!" thought Billy. "Richie has died!"

But then he looked at the news paper and read something even more shocking than this. It said:

Thursday 3rd July
Dripton Town Hall
Richie Clifford in Concert
Tickets on sale on Monday

Billy's heart sank, the third of July was three weeks away, three weeks of ... three weeks of... Richie! Billy imagined the concert, thousands of Mums all singing and screaming and crying and.... Well the rest doesn't bear thinking about!

Suddenly, Mum got up. It was as if she didn't even notice Billy. She dashed out of the room, grabbed her coat and went running off into town. Billy followed at a discreet distance. Mum headed straight for the Town Hall. As she turned the corner by the shoe shop, Mum suddenly found herself staring at a gigantic billboard poster of Richie with his slick hairstyle and shiny medallions. This was all too much for her. She let out an ear splitting scream and yelled "Richie!" at the very top of her voice. Billy was just about to die of embarrassment when, to his surprise, he heard that the scream was echoed by lots of other screams and lots of other shouts of, "Richie!" Billy was amazed to see that there was a group of about fifty Mums standing outside the Town Hall by the door that said: 'Box office.' Billy couldn't believe it. Even Mickey's Mum and Lisa's Mum were there. He stopped and stared. But as the whole group struck up singing, "We're all going on a happy holiday...." he decided it was time to go home. There was no doubt about it, Richie Mania had hit Driptown, and it seemed that every Mum for miles around was well and truly struck down by it.

Mum stayed in the queue all weekend. Billy's sister Amy took her pizza and chips and pleaded with her to come home. But her pleading fell on very deaf ears. By Monday morning the crowd at the Town Hall was so big that extra police had to be drafted in from Liverpudle to keep all the Mums and Grans, and even the odd Great-Gran, under control.

At Driptown Primary School on Monday morning the children were a sight to behold. School uniforms were unwashed and crumpled, lunch boxes were full of chocolate and crisps, and everyone was moaning about how their Mums had spent the whole weekend queuing for their concert tickets. All the children filed into the School Hall at the beginning of the day, but Mrs. Downer, the Head teacher, didn't turn up to take assembly. "Oh no, not Mrs. Downer as well," groaned Billy to himself. "This just can't be.... can't be happening!"

Mum got her ticket, a seat right in the front row, and the next few weeks were as bad, if not worse, than Billy had expected. Mum played Richie Clifford records all day and, it seemed to Billy, all night as well. Mrs. Downer took every opportunity to play as many Richie songs as possible at school; she even forced the school choir to learn a few as well.

Mum though got worse and worse. One day, for example, Billy came home from school to find that she had stuck an enormous poster of Richie Clifford in every window in the house, including Billy's room. His giant smile loomed over the whole of Bridge Street and indeed the whole of Driptown. From windows and billboards everywhere it beamed down on them. The local radio station, Driptown F. M., played nothing but Richie Clifford records for two whole weeks. Mum went about in a daze, dreaming of finding out that she had won Richie Clifford all wrapped up in cellophane and could keep him forever! There was no doubt about it; Richie Clifford was the only person on Mum's mind. Billy felt like he didn't even exist.

It was hardly surprising then that Mum didn't even notice when, during the week before the concert, a letter arrived for Billy. He took it up to his room to read. It was from Jimmy Johnson the Driptown United manager. As Billy read it he could hardly believe what it said:

Dear Billy,
The team has a few injuries at the moment,
so I need an extra player for the floodlit
Cup Tie against Chelpond on Thursday 3rd July.
After your brilliant game last time, we'd love
you to play again.
Let me know if you can make it.

Yours.

Jimmy.

P.S. Here's a free ticket for your Mum.

Billy went crashing down stairs, "Mum! Mum!" he shouted, "Mum..."
"We're all going on a happy holiday," sang Mum. "Later Billy, later," she added.
"But Mum, Mum ... I've been asked ..."
"No more worries for a ... Later Billy, later," said Mum again.
"But Mum ... Mum ... I've been asked to ..."
"Fun and laughter on a happy holiday ... Later Billy, I've got important things to do, you know." replied Mum.
"But Mum!" pleaded Billy.
"No more worries for me or you," sang Mum, "for a week or two."

After a while Billy gave up trying. He took the letter back upstairs, phoned Jimmy to say he could play, and kept quiet about the whole thing.
"Its no use trying to compete with Richie Mania," he said to himself. "Anyway, I'm sure Mum would far rather go and see Richie sing than see me play for Driptown."

Mum was so excited over the next few days as she got ready for the concert that she didn't notice that Billy washed and ironed his Driptown kit and specially polished his football boots. She didn't even notice that he had gone for a haircut without being nagged about it. When it came to Thursday, Billy slipped away at 6 o'clock while Mum was doing nothing but talking about Richie and singing Richie's songs.
"I hope she doesn't get her hands on him," thought Billy. "She'll probably eat him!"

Mum was about to leave when she realised that she didn't have any money with her. She rushed around the house looking for all the cash she could find. Amy didn't have any in her room so Mum rushed into Billy's room. She opened Billy's draw, the one marked: **'Top Seecrit, keep owt!'** and there staring straight at her was the letter. Mum froze as the words caught her eye. She read it twice to make sure she had got it right.
"Bi..... Bi... Bi... Billy, Pl..... pl.... pl.... playing for Dri.... Dri... Dri..... Driptown!" she stammered. "My Billy... my Billy... my Billy playing for Driptown... tonight!"

Mum picked up the ticket to the match, and then she rummaged through her pocket and took out the Richie Clifford ticket. She looked at one, then the other, then one, then the other, again and again.

"Wha.... wha.... wha... What shall I do?" she whined to herself. Then suddenly her eye was caught by the photo on Billy's table. It was his school photo taken last week; a photo of a smiling, blue-eyed, rather scruffy little boy with his tie all askew, and a dirty smudge on his left cheek. Mum looked at the photo, and then at the picture of Richie Clifford printed on the ticket. Richie was dressed in his shiny suit with his medallions and bangles and a very, very slick hairstyle. Mum looked at the photo of Billy again, and suddenly she knew exactly what she had to do.

The whistle blew and the game started. The play was fast and furious. There was everything to play for and everything to lose. Billy got the ball out on the left wing and started to dribble up the pitch. Suddenly, there was a great shout from the crowd, louder than everyone else put together, so loud the game almost stopped for a moment. "Come on Billy!" the voice said, a voice of course that Billy knew only too well, a voice that sent a tingle of excitement down Billy from his head to his toes. It was MUM!

It was a great game. Billy played for the full ninety minutes. He set up two good chances for Mick Boots and nearly scored once himself. In the end Driptown won 3-2, with a brilliant goal in the last few minutes scored by Mick from a corner taken by Billy. Jimmy Johnson was particularly pleased with Billy's playing.

That night, when Mum tucked Billy up in bed they didn't say very much, they didn't need to say very much really.

"That was a good game," said Mum.

"Yeah, thanks for coming Mum," said Billy.

"Night, night treasure," said Mum.

And that's just what Billy felt like, the most precious treasure in the entire world.

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