

37 Skimming stones

Most of the time Billy is a fairly happy sort of boy. He quite enjoys life in Driptown. School is usually OK and life at home is quite fun really. Sometimes of course things go really well. Maybe Driptown United will win an important cup-tie or thrash Liverpuddle 4-0 or something like that. Christmas and birthdays are always fun, of course, and Billy loves playing his trumpet or getting a chance to show off his spectacular juggling skills.

But sometimes things don't go quite so well. In fact, sometimes it seems to Billy as if everything is going wrong, all at the same time and, no matter how hard he tries, there is nothing he can do to stop it. At times like these Billy often goes away on his own.

"The less people I see," he thinks, "the less can go wrong!"

One of Billy's favourite places to go when he feels like this is down by the canal at the end of Bridge Street, where he can sit quietly and watch the ducks swimming by. A little further along there is a bit of a bend in the canal. Billy has discovered that, if he stands in the right place, he can look down a long stretch of water. This makes it the ideal place for skimming stones. Billy has discovered that when you're feeling like the whole world is against you, there's nothing better than skimming stones to cheer you up a bit. He might get 1 skip, 2 skips, 3, 4, 5, even 6. The more skips he made, the better he would feel. His record was an amazing 12 skips! The stone went so far that it almost disappeared out of sight before the splash, splash, splash stopped. No matter what had happened, skimming stones down at the canal always brought a smile back to Billy's face.

One Saturday morning, Billy got up early. He had a busy day ahead of him. He had a shower and wanted to dry his hair, but the hair dryer was not in its usual place. Billy crept into Mum's bedroom and looked around. It wasn't there and Mum was still fast asleep. So he crept into his sisters room. The hair dryer was bound to be there somewhere. But, as he quietly rummaged through the mess that always covers his sister's bedroom floor, he managed to knock against her pile of CDs. Before he could stop them, they slid to the ground with a crash. As they fell over, one of them knocked against the play button on his sister's CD player. Suddenly, music came blasting out of the speakers and Amy woke up with a start.

Well, you can maybe imagine the row that ensued. Amy shouted at Billy for being in her room. Billy shouted at Amy about hiding the hair dryer. Amy called him a sissy for wanting to dry his hair. Billy called his sister a slob for keeping her room in such a mess. And then, of course, Mum woke up. When Billy's Mum has just woken up you soon know all about it! This is especially true when she has been dreaming all about her beloved Richie Clifford, or someone else like that,

Billy didn't have a leg to stand on. There he was in Amy's room. So he got the blame for the whole noisy incident. Poor Billy, Mum told him he would get no pocket money for two weeks. He stomped downstairs, it was only half past seven, and it was already turning out to be one of those days.

Billy was up early because he had to go round to his Grandpa's and return a book that Grandpa had borrowed for him from Liverpuddle Library. It was a very rare book about a juggler called The Great Ginelli, and no other library in the whole country had a copy. Grandpa was taking Gran to Liverpuddle for a shopping trip. They were leaving early and the book was due back that day. Billy rushed out to the shed and got out his bike. He was just about to leave; when he realised he had forgotten to put his jacket on and had no pockets to put the book in. He went to go back indoors but realised that he had slammed the door shut and hadn't got his key, it was in his jacket pocket inside the house. "I can't ring the bell and get Mum or Amy out of bed," he thought. "That'll get them in an even worse mood with me."

So he tucked the book under his arm and rode off on his bike. He was doing alright until he got to the top of Long Street. He was just turning out on to the Liverpuddle Road when suddenly a large lorry came speeding past. The wind from the lorry blew very hard and he started to wobble. He tightened his grip on the handlebars but he couldn't hold onto the book. It fell out from under his arm and landed in the road. He skidded to a halt but could only watch in horror as a car drove straight over the book leaving pages torn and crumpled and spread all over the ground. He quickly picked up what was left and, with his heart thumping, he carried on to Grandpa's

Well, I think you can guess what Grandpa said, can't you?

"Oh, Billy! What have you done? We'll have to pay for it, you know. Well, 'you'll' have to pay for it, and goodness knows how much they will want for it. It was the only copy in the country!"

Gran and Grandpa drove off and Billy felt terrible.

That afternoon there was a football match.

"I hope that'll cheer me up!" he thought.

Billy cycled to the ground and sat in his usual seat. It was a crucial cup-tie against a visiting team called Bottenham Coolspurs. But somehow Billy knew from the moment that the whistle blew that this game was not going to cheer him up at all. Driptown played dreadfully. Mick Boots, the striker, played like he had his bootlaces tied together. Pete Diver, the goalkeeper, was playing as if he had dived onto his head one too many times. Even worse, Billy Blockem, supposedly the greatest defender there has ever been, didn't seem as if he could have stopped a sleepy tortoise with treacle on his feet from scoring a goal.

The match ended with Mick and Billy colliding and bashing their heads together. Pete dived in completely the wrong direction as Robbie Rocket fired the ball into the back of the Driptown goal to make it 5-0 to Bottenham Coolspurs. Billy left the ground feeling ashamed that he was a Driptown fan.

He got on his bike to go home. But, as he got to the top of the road, his bike made a terrible clanking sound. Suddenly, the pedals became very stiff, and then they became very stuck. Billy looked down. His chain had broken and had jammed in the gears and around the pedals. He waggled and pulled and poked, but it was well and truly stuck.

"Oh bother!" said Billy in his most annoyed voice. "This is the worst, worst, worst day ever!"

He had to virtually carry his bike as he made his way home because the back wheel was completely jammed. Billy was going down Long Street, when he came to a large, very shiny car parked with its wheels on the pavement. It was Mr. Grimmer's BMW. Billy went to squeeze between the car and the fence. But just then a lady came along with a pushchair. Billy, being the polite boy that he always is, moved across as far as he could to make room. As he walked along though, he heard a strange sort of squeaking sound. It was a bit like Mr. Yellit scraping his finger nails down the blackboard to shut everyone in his class up! He had just got past the car when there was a great shout from behind.

"Hey, you boy, look what you've done!"

Billy turned round to see Mister Grimmer standing by his car looking extremely angry. Then Billy saw something that very nearly made his heart stop. Right along the side of the car was a massive scratch. It was a scratch that had been made by the pedal from his bike.

Billy didn't know what to do. For a second he froze. Then, before he knew it, he had picked up his bike and was running as fast as he could down Long Street. Luckily, Mr. Grimmer couldn't chase him. He had a gammy leg from fighting in the war or something.

"You'll have to pay for this!" he shouted after Billy. "It's no use running, I know where you live! I'll be round to see your Mum!"

Billy ran to the end of Long Street, dashed under the railway bridge, and skidded to a halt on the canal bank. He wandered along to his favourite spot and sat down.

"This is the worst day ever!" he thought. "Surely, it can't get any worse?"

Billy felt around and found a stone. It was perfect for skimming, round and smooth. He stood up, pulled back his arm, and threw it with all his might. He watched and counted. 1 skip, 2 skips, 3, 4, 5, 6; Billy expected the sound to stop. But to his amazement it carried on, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11. The stone was almost out of sight, when the 12th splash was followed by a loud noise. There was a clank, and then, "ouch!" Suddenly, a voice shouted: "Who threw that?"

Billy dived down into the long grass where he was sure no one could see him. He lay there very quietly. After a short while though there were footsteps along the canal bank; footsteps that stopped just where Billy was hiding.

"Er, hum, excuse me, sonny," said a voice. "Was that you who just threw that stone?"

Billy looked up and saw a rather kind looking man with a big smile and bushy beard.

'He's not a person who could ever get very angry,' he thought.

Billy sat up, "Err, yes. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit anyone," he said, "I was just, er...."

"You were just skimming stones," said the man.

"Yes ...!" said Billy, "just skim...." Billy's voice trailed away. He was amazed that the man didn't look angry at all. In fact, he looked quite excited for some reason.

"Well," said the man, "I don't think 'just' is the right word you know. Let me introduce myself. My name is Jeremy Jumpstone. I'm the captain of the Driptown Stone Skimming Club, and a member of the All England Stone Skimming Team. I've never seen a skim like that one. That was twelve skips, and it would have done more if it hadn't hit an oil drum in the water, bounced off and hit me on the head!"

Billy just stared at him, he didn't believe what he was hearing.

"Have another go, sonny," he said. "Show me what you can do!"

Without thinking Billy rummaged around for another stone. He found one, not quite as good as the other one, but good enough. Billy pulled back his arm and threw. 1 skip, 2 skips, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and then all went quiet.

"Brilliant! Brilliant!" shouted the man, almost falling off the bank and into the water in his excitement. "Brilliant sonny. You can join the Driptown team if you like. I'll even take you to the All England Trials in two weeks time, if your Mum will let you come!"

As Billy wandered home he thought:

"You know Billy, if all those bad things hadn't happened to you today you'd never have been down by the canal, and you'd never have been skimming stones, and you'd never have met Mr. Jumpstone, and you'd never have"

Well Billy has joined the Driptown Stone Skimming Club. He is also on the All England reserve list because he's a bit young yet. But what about all the other things that happened to Billy that day? You may well ask.

Well, Mum threw a mega wobbly at Amy about having such an untidy room and forgot all about stopping Billy's pocket money. Grandpa took the book back to the Library. But when he explained what had happened, they were very nice about it. They charged him two pounds and that was the end of it. Driptown United won their next game, 6-0 and Billy was again proud to be a fan. Mr. Green had Billy's bike fixed in no time at all. And what about Mr. Grimmer? Well, it turned out that he was a friend of Mr. Jumpstone and always went along to the Driptown Stone Skimming contests. When he saw Billy's amazing stone skimming he seemed to forget all about the scratch on his car and now Billy and Mr. Grimmer often have a friendly chat when Billy walks past his house.

"It just goes to show," thinks Billy every time he remembers that terrible day, "things can always get better!"

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