Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

The Boy With The Magic Numbers

Written by

Sally Gardner

Published by

Orion Books

All text is copyright of the author

Please print off and read at your leisure.

1

The present that Dad had left for Billy Pickles was placed under the note that he had stuck to his barber's shop mirror. It said simply, "My number came up and it wasn't the right one. Sorry."

The present was a money-box shaped like the top half of a man. It had a large smiley face and its two hands were folded over its chubby tummy. Billy wondered where the money went in. He couldn't see a slot. It said on the box BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED.



Mum and Billy stood together in the gathering gloom of the barber's shop. They looked at the money-box for a long time, hoping that it might tell them why Dad had gone, and where.

Neither of them spoke and neither of them turned on the lights. They were both looking for clues in the darkness, but everything was just as it had always been. There were the barber's chairs standing in a row, the TV fish tank with its tropical fish swimming aimlessly round and round, the wall covered with framed pictures of Italy and Mighty Mamma.

It was Billy who noticed that Dad's favourite signed photograph was missing. When Mum saw the gap on the wall she let out a little gasp. Dad had taken with him the picture of his hero, the King of Swing, Mr Frank Sinatra.

Billy walked over to the CD player and turned it on. Immediately, Frank Sinatra

sang out loud and clear, full of energy and hope:

"New York, New York!"

"I think your dad's gone for good this time, Billy," Mum said softly, turning the music off.

Billy picked up his present and said, "Where do you put the money in?"

"I'm not sure, love," said Mum. "We'll have a proper look at it when we get home. I think we both need a nice cup of tea."



2

Dad's leaving had the same effect as a stone when it is thrown into a pond. The ripples in the water spread out, upsetting everything. Under the stairs, Mum discovered twenty-seven boxes of unopened bills. Before she could do anything about them, the bailiffs turned up and took away the car and the TV.

"Why are they doing that?" asked Billy.

"Your dad liked what he called a flutter on the horses. He bet more money than he had," said Mum. She sighed. "The bailiffs are taking away whatever's valuable so that they can get some of the money back again."

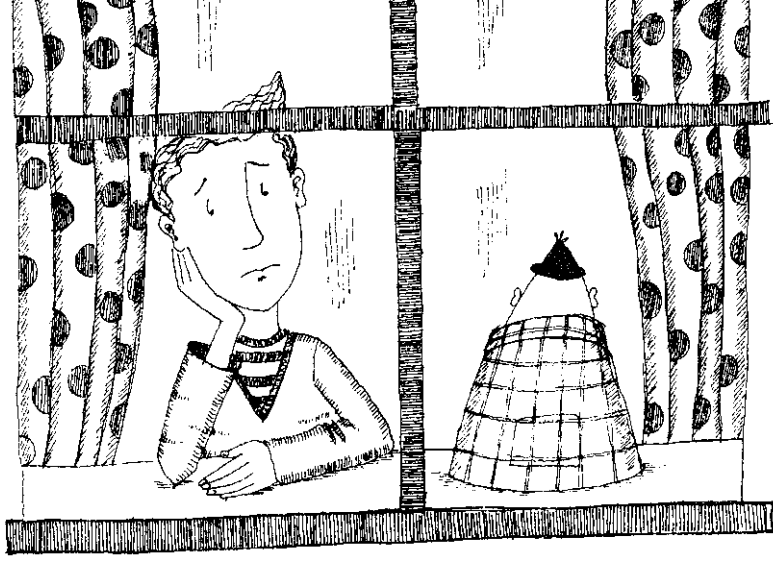
Over the next few months, nearly all the furniture disappeared and Billy and Mum had to put their little house on the market. They moved into rented rooms just above the barber's shop.

Mum was not going to be defeated. It wasn't the first time Dad had gone off without saying a word. But this time it had the feeling of being final. She left her job to take over Dad's barber's shop and put a new notice in the window. It said 'Lily's Unisex Haircuts'.

Dad's regular customers were disappointed not to have Tony cutting their hair and giving them the latest racing tips. They liked listening to Tony's tales. "He'll be back," they said, but when Mum told them just how much Dad owed they had nothing more to say.

Mum's lady customers weren't keen on having their hair done in a barber's chair, so keeping it all going took the roses out of Mum's cheeks.

Billy put the money-box on his window-sill. He would look at it, wondering what it would do if it worked. The instructions said it took Double B batteries and that it only



accepted American dimes. No one in their small town had ever heard of Double B batteries and Billy hadn't a penny, let alone a dime.

"Never mind, love," said Mum. "It was the thought that counted."

So Dad's thought stayed on Billy's window-sill, reminding him of all he had lost.



3

What Billy missed most about his dad was the stories he told of Italy and Mighty Mamma. Dad, who had been christened Antonio Piccoloni, had been the baby of the family. His older brother, Santo, had left home by the time he was born.

"You see, Billy," Dad would laugh, "I wanted Mamma all for myself."

His childhood was a golden time when he dreamed of owning a chain of barbers' shops all over the world. When he grew up, he came to England to make his dream come true. This was how he met Lily, Billy's mum, at a hairdressers' convention in Harrogate.

"The only beautiful woman outside Italy, so what could I do?" And as he said this, he would lift his shoulders and put on a sad face like a clown. "I had to stay and

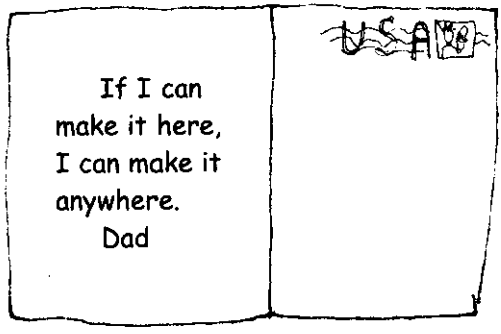
become Tony Pickles."

This always made Billy laugh.

"One day, Billy, when my number comes up, you and me are going to travel. We will visit Mighty Mamma and go see my brother Santo's ice cream café in New York. What you say?"

Billy couldn't wait. Although Dad had never been to New York, his stories of the city were better than fairy tales. New York, according to Dad, was like a magical castle built out of skyscrapers, where in the streets far below the yellow taxi dragons did battle. It was a place where a dreamer could become a king.

About a month after Dad had gone, a postcard arrived. It had a picture of the Statue of Liberty on it and it said



Mum stuck it in the gap where the picture of Frank Sinatra had been.

Billy tried not to think about his dad, but it was hard when there was so much he wanted to ask him. All the questions began with a why. Why did he go off like that without saying a word? Why had he left Mum? Why had he left everything in such a mess?

The trouble was, Billy didn't know how to get hold of Dad to ask him.

"New York's a big place, Billy," said Mum.

"He might be at Uncle Santo's," said Billy hopefully. Mum asked International Directory Enquiries for their help to find the number, but Santo's ice cream café in New York wasn't listed.

"Maybe he'll write soon," said Mum.

Paper kites, that's what Dad's stories were. No more than paper kites, blown away with the wind.

Billy now spent most of his time after

school helping Mum in the barber's shop. They were a team. Mum hadn't enough money to change it into a proper hairdressing salon, but at least the old customers hadn't left her, and because she was so good she soon had some new ones.

Dad's customers missed his horse-racing tips, but Mum had another trick up her sleeve. Her mother had taught her to read the future in the tea leaves. It was an art form, she told Billy.



Mum wasn't sure how good she was at it but the customers weren't complaining. There was now a steady flow of people coming and going all day.

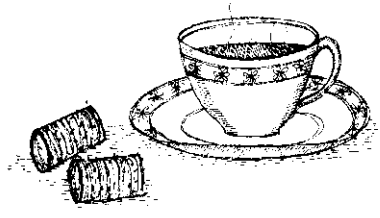
"Better make me look extra smart tonight, Lily," the ladies would say, "if you're right about that tall handsome man."

In the evening Billy would sit with Mum and neatly write down all the money she had made in a little cash book.

"Oh, Billy boy, you make those numbers look magical!" said Mum with pride.

Yet in spite of all Mum's hard work, they were unable to do more than keep their heads above water.

Mum had a little feeling that something was about to change. She'd seen it in the tea leaves. But neither she nor Billy could have imagined just how much, nor that it would have something to do with Mighty Mamma and the money-box.



4

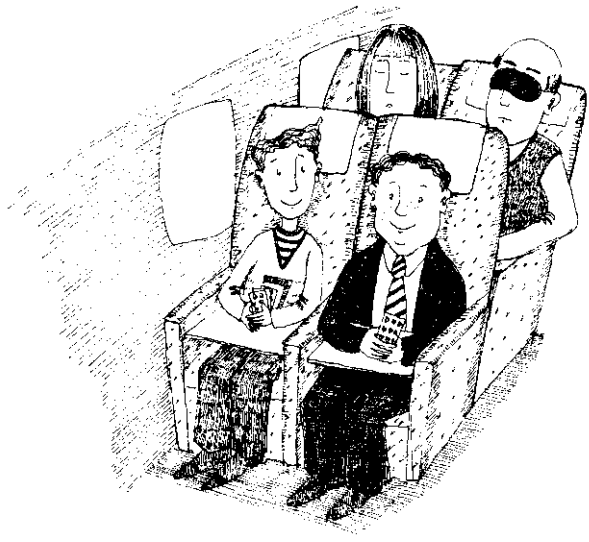
A letter from Dad had arrived at the beginning of the Easter holidays. In it was a small cheque for Mum and a ticket to New York for Billy. Dad wanted him to come out and stay so that he could meet Mighty Mamma. She was coming over from Italy for the seventieth birthday party that Uncle Santo was giving for her.

Billy was so excited. He had never travelled further than Lytham St Anne's. This would be an adventure.

"You won't be upset if I go, Mum?" said Billy, looking at his mum's pale face.

"No," said Mum. "I think it's a good idea if Dad answers all your why questions himself."

A week later Billy was sitting on a plane flying to the other side of the world, all by himself. He was seated next to a plump



boy about his own age, dressed in school uniform.

"Hi," said the boy. "I'm Walter Minks Junior."

"I'm Billy Pickles," said Billy, trying to figure out how you worked the video.

Walter leant over to help.

"Are you flying on your own too?" said Billy.

"Yes, I fly all the time. I go to boarding school in Sussex and come home to the States every holiday."

Billy and Walter got on well, and talking

and playing cards made the journey go by faster.

"Do you live in New York?" asked Billy.

"Yep. Nope. I spend half the holidays with my dad in New York and the other half with my mum in Hollywood," said Walter.

Billy showed him the address Dad had sent him.

"You're not that far away from my dad," said Walter. "Look, why don't I give you my number and I'll take yours, and maybe we can meet up?"

"I'd like that," said Billy.

An air steward saw the two boys through immigration and out into a wave of waiting people. It seemed to Billy that he had landed on another planet. Everything was whirling around him. He couldn't see Dad anywhere.

"Who's meeting you boys?" asked the steward.

"My driver," said Walter.

"My dad," said Billy with pride.

A very smart man stepped forward.

"That's him," said Walter. "Hope to see you again, Billy." And he faded into the crowd.

Billy stood there, feeling suddenly very alone and wondering where his dad could be. The steward said kindly, "Don't worry, Billy. The traffic out of New York can be bad. I'm sure your dad will be here soon."

"Billy!" Someone was shouting. "Billy!"

Billy looked round, but he couldn't see anyone he knew. Then the crowds parted and before him stood a small elderly lady not much taller than himself. She had a pretty face and dark brown eyes.

"Billy Pickles! Oh, how good to see you! I knew it was you. You look just like your nonno, my late husband Alfredo." She gave Billy two kisses on each cheek.

Billy looked startled.

"You don't know who I am? I am Mighty

Mamma, your nonna, your grandmother."

Billy had always imagined Mighty Mamma to be well mighty. Not tiny and frail. The only pictures he had ever seen of her were the photographs on Dad's shop wall, all taken when she was very young and beautiful. Although she wasn't at all how Billy had imagined her, he knew straight away he liked her.

"Excuse me," said the steward, "but Billy's dad is supposed to be meeting him."

Mighty Mamma huffed. "So? He couldn't make it. I am here." And she handed the steward a letter.



"OK, everything's in order," said the steward, reading the letter. "Are you going to be all right, Billy?"

Billy nodded and said, "Fine."

"Santo!" shouted Mighty Mamma. "Over here!"

Billy looked up to see a mountain of a man coming towards them with a trolley and a beaming face.

"Mighty Mamma, he looks just like Pappa," said Santo. "Forgive us, Billy. Nice to meet you." He held out a huge friendly hand. "And welcome to the Big Apple."

"Where's Dad?" asked Billy when they were all packed into a taxi.

"He's tied up in a meeting," said Santo quickly, giving the taxi driver instructions. "Take the Williamsburg Bridge please, not the tunnel."

Somehow, Billy got the feeling that neither Mighty Mamma nor Uncle Santo was too pleased with Dad.

5

Santo's apartment was small and cosy with lots of pictures on the walls, just like Dad's barber's shop. Billy was looking at them when the doorbell rang. Uncle Santo went to answer it. A lady walked into the lounge. She had bright pink hair and looked just like a piece of candyfloss on a stick.

