

The Postman

by Gareth Davey



December 17th

When William pulled the delivery van into Lawrence Walk, he thought it was like any other weekday in the Christmas build-up. Packages rocked from side to side in the back of his van and another mountain-load waited for him back in the depot. The sky was a fluffy white, like the chest of his border collie, Dancer, who was probably still asleep in William's bed. Three of the houses William had already delivered to that morning were heavily clad in twinkling LED lights that wrapped the branches of their trees. One even had a life-size Santa Clause sitting in the garden that William thought was too creepy to pass as festive.

'Christmas,' William said, as his van groaned to a stop in the cul-de-sac. 'Every bloody year.' He blew on his red-breasted knuckles and held them beneath the van's air conditioning for a moment, before reaching across to the passenger seat. It wasn't that William didn't like Christmas day – he loved Christmas morning, waking up at his parents, eating bacon sandwiches, taking it in turns to unwrap festive socks – it was everything the year built up to. Not to mention it was one of the only days when he didn't have to get up with the sun and deliver packages to bleary eyed home owners. He just really didn't like the build-up to the festive season – buying presents, wrapping presents. He could deliver packages alright, but he couldn't wrap them. At least he had Mary for that now.

'Every bloody year,' he said again. William was twenty-six, had the physique of a forty-year old, full-time dad, and had been a postman for three years. Every Christmas was the same; boxes upon boxes upon boxes piled up at the office, like castle walls built out of cardboard. Then there was at least a thousand letters to sort through, checking the addresses and the postcodes – more often than not at least thirty of them had been sorted wrong by one of the warehouse idiots. And then there was the cold.

William stepped from his van into the street and shuddered. Even with his black duffel coat on, the December air chilled his arms. His hair was short and styled into a sandy-brown quiff, but his hair did nothing to protect his ears from the bitter wind that whistled by the semi-detached houses in Lawrence Walk. He felt his earlobes grow numb, his nose grow cold and his knuckles turn a brighter pink as he swung his bag over his shoulder and started walking towards the houses.

He had a package to deliver for at least half of the street – and every house had at least three envelopes to be shoved through the letter box, most with the address scrawled on in scratchy writing. On several letters William had to squint to make out if it was a *three* or an *eight*, or if the *ones* were *sevens*. He wondered if he'd need to get some glasses soon – his Mum had started wearing spectacles by thirty, so he wouldn't have been surprised if he was to suffer the same fate.

Still, the job wasn't too hard. All William had to moan about was the cold – and the way the dog's bark rasped through the door of number nineteen when he rapped on the knocker. The owner's voice – a woman – grumbled at the dog and William heard a door open. He glanced around at the other houses as he waited, wrinkling his nose at the pile of bin-bags in the centre of the street. Lawrence Walk wasn't the nicest of places, even when the bin-bags didn't litter the paths. It didn't help that the houses were squashed together, like herds of cattle in a slaughterhouse, ready to be crunched into mince-meat.

William had always thought they had to be council houses; they were far too small for anyone to really *want* to buy, and the number of letters with a council stamp in the street was far greater than in most other streets he delivered to. The only decorated house was number fifteen, with tacky plastic lights outlining the window, and a red plaque on the front garden saying '*We want Santa*' in white italics.

William's thoughts were interrupted by the door opening. A young woman with a thick polish accent greeted him. Her blonde hair reached to the shoulder of her pink dressing gown.

‘Howdy,’ William said, forcing his cheeks into a smile and holding out the package. ‘Is it Miss Debronsky?’

‘Eet ees,’ she said, her face remaining stern. Behind her, the dog scratched at a door. The house smelt of stale cigarettes and wine. She took the package from his hand and tucked it under her arm. ‘Do I sign?’ she asked. William nodded, holding out his electronic device, the signature panel already loaded. Without glancing at him, Miss Debronsky scribbled her name onto the electronic pad.

‘Thanks very much,’ William said, maintaining his false grin. His cheeks were beginning to hurt. The dog barked, a low, gruff sound, and without saying a word, the polish woman closed the front door.

‘Right,’ William said, walking away from the woman’s door. ‘Tis the season.’ He was tempted to whistle as he walked up the path to number twenty-one, but his cracked lips puts him off blowing out a shrill festive tune. His thoughts drifted to Mary for a few moments, and the remark about future children when he was about to leave that morning, but he shook them off, reaching into his bag and pulling out the next package. Now wasn’t the time for those thoughts, although William was really struggling with the image of a six year old in his studio apartment.

He knocked on the white door and waited, tapping his foot on the cement. The street was completely empty, despite it almost being midday. It was better for William this way, though. He liked his job a lot more when the school-children were locked up in lessons, and not terrorising his footpaths.

Number twenty-one didn’t answer. William was expecting that; they never answered the door. Twenty-three was usually the same, but William knew he had to try anyway. If they were in, they could at least take number twenty-one’s, or he could take all of the back to the depot and post a ‘missed you’ card. Anyway, William always enjoyed walking by the bushy evergreens that loomed

at the end of twenty-three's drive. It was the way they always stayed the same dark green, as if it was always doused in shade. It belonged in a forest, William thought. Somewhere in the centre of a thick forest, housing a nest of chirping birds. It didn't belong in the cul-de-sac with too-small houses.

As William walked up twenty-three's pathway, he noticed a curtain twitch in the window. A small eye, the size of a penny, glanced out at him. William smiled, but the dark fabric fell back over the window as soon he made eye contact with the person. It wasn't until William pressed the doorbell in that he realised the eye must belong to a child. A child that was definitely old enough to be in school.

The front door to number twenty-three creaked open. William had to look down to see the dark-skinned boy who greeted him. His eyes were large, and the shade of leather. His hair was a field of short curls and his bottom lip stuck out like a rock on a river-bank. The boy wore a black jumper patterned with green snowflakes and a pair of brown chinos – the same colour as parcel paper.

'Hello Mister,' William said, smiling. 'Your Mummy or Daddy in?' The boy stared at William with his eyebrows crooked.

'No-one.' His voice was high-pitched, almost feminine. William had thought he was at least eight, from the size of him, but once the boy had spoken, he reckoned six. 'Dad went out. Went to get milk. Don't know where Mum is.'

'So you're here on your own?' William said. 'That's – you sure you're okay?'

'Got *Tom and Jerry*.'

'*Tom and Jerry* is great.'

'Jerry's a bell-end,' the boy said. His cheeks pricked up, and he laughed. His laugh was like sleigh bells. 'That's what Mummy says.'

William frowned. 'That's not very polite, not for a young lad like you.'

'Not young. I'm eighteen.'

'You're not,' William said. 'Whatever – can you – give this to your Dad?' He held out the package to the young boy. The boy took it in his hand, and glanced at the label.

'I *am* eighteen. Is this mine?'

'Not for you,' William said. His shoulders felt tight. 'It's for your Dad. Mr Okofore.'

'I'm Mr Okofore. Mr Louis Okofore.'

'You're Master Okofore. This is for David.'

'I'm Mr Okofore,' the boy insisted. 'The package is for me.' As he started to peel the corner of the parcel, William decided to leave number twenty-one's package with someone else.

'Your Dad will be mad at you if you open it,' William said. 'Maybe you won't get to watch *Tom and Jerry*.' That was a good line, William thought. Maybe he could handle kids after all.

'My Dad is never mad,' the boy – Louis – replied. He glanced down at the package quickly, but not fast enough. The tear trickled down Louis's cheek like dew from a leaf. It carved a wet-trail into his skin. 'Just sad,' the boy added in a quiet voice.

'I –' William started to say. After *I*, though, William was lost. The boy could be crying for any reason. Kids were like that. It was probably the *Tom and Jerry* thing. Despite not getting a signature for the electronic pad, William turned around. He began to walk down the path, hoping he'd hear the thump of a slammed door behind him.

The sound came when he was halfway down the drive. The evergreen looked more sinister all of a sudden, like a shadowy prison guard. He couldn't shake the image of the boy's tear from his mind, couldn't lift the weight that had settled on his stomach, like dust settling in an attic. He was just about to step off of the path when something tugged at his jacket.

William turned around slowly. The boy. Louis stood, his fingers wrapped around the navy fabric of William's shirt. His eyes seemed even bigger now, like stepping stones across a stream. Louis' dark knees were poking out through the ripped chino fabric.

'Mr Postman,' he said, his head tilted up, the nape of his neck exposed to the bitter breeze. 'Can you help me?'

'Listen kid – you've – oh crap.'

'Shouldn't say crap,' Louis said, but William was staring at the boy's house. The front door was closed.

'Can you – tell me you can open that from outside,' William said, pointing towards the door. Louis' mouth fell open, revealing a large gap where his front teeth should be.

'Don't know,' the boy said. He walked back up the drive and reached up for the door handle, but his small arms wouldn't reach.

'Jesus Christ,' William said beneath his breath. He followed the boy up the drive, reached for the door handle and tugged down, praying it would fall open, that the boy would return to the warmth of his house and that William could get on with the rest of his day. Deliver the rest of the packages, head back home, brew himself a warm cup of tea and watch Countdown on the Channel Four. Then cook up a Spaghetti Bolognaise for Mary, ready for when she came home about five o'clock.

The door handle wouldn't move.

'Locked, ain't it?' Louis says. 'Can't get back in.'

'No,' William says. He tried to hide the sigh that slipped from his chapped lips. 'No, you've managed to shut the damn thing.'

'Can't say damn.'

‘Can damn well say what I want,’ William said. He wanted to leave the boy there, hope that the Dad would return and let him back in. But the way Louis’ tear slipped down his cheek when he’d mentioned his father rooted William. ‘Sit down,’ William said. Louis crossed his legs and sat on the ground. William did the same, leaning his back against the door.

‘When will Dad come back?’ Louis said. William’s feels his stomach being wrung, like a dirty rag.

‘I – soon,’ William said. ‘Bloody hope so.’

‘Can’t say bloody,’ Louis says, a grin stretched across his face. William shook his head in response.

‘Bloody well can,’ he said, and Louis laughed.

‘I like you,’ Louis says. ‘Are you – is your name Pat?’

‘That’s me,’ William says. ‘Postman Pat. For God’s sake.’

‘And do you – do you know Santa?’

‘Quite well,’ William said, grinning, but Louis didn’t laugh as he expected him to. Instead, the young boy’s face clouded over. ‘What is it?’

‘Well it’s just – Santa didn’t write back this year.’

‘He’s very busy.’

‘Yes but he always writes back, and I really need his help,’ the boy says. His fingers tugged at strands of grass from the front lawn, plucking green flecks and dropping them back to the concrete. ‘And he won’t help me.’

‘What do you need his help with?’ William said. The boy looked up, chewing the inside of his cheek, his forehead wrinkled like a layer of pastry.

'I can't find my Mum,' Louis croaked. The words drifted to William on the breeze, settled in his joints like a brisk wind. He felt himself creak, an old tree in a storm, on the drive of number twenty-three. Felt his stomach wrung dry.

'Your Mum? Where is she?'

'She went out,' Louis said. 'A – a while ago.'

'Today?'

'No. Last week. Monday,' Louis said. 'I know it was Monday because I had music at school and she asked me how it was, even though she was tired, and I told her all about my tambourine breaking. I love playing tambourine – I'm really good. Mrs Murray thought it was my fault but it really wasn't. And then Mummy went out when I was in bed. Dad didn't let me come down the whole night.'

'She – has she not been back?' Louis shook his head.

'And I asked my Dad for her address, so I can go and see her. But he won't let me have it.'

'Well maybe there's a very good reason you can't see her?' William suggested, but the boy wasn't listening. Instead, his attention was focused on the thick tree at the end of the drive. They were silent for nearly a minute, before Louis spoke.

'The – Mummy was going to get me a Christmas present. A special one from Santa. And she said she was going give it to me at Christmas. Do you – do you have it?'

'I don't. I don't – I don't know where it is.'

'But you're a postman. You should know about post.'

'I only deliver the parcels,' William said. 'No idea what's in 'em.' Louis looked away from the tree, back to William. The postman felt numb. He wondered if Louis felt cold, but the boy wasn't shivering at all.

‘You’d know my Mummy’s. She said she was going to get me my own tambourine. She believed I didn’t break it in class. And I love tambourines.’

‘That’s – that’s good,’ William says. A dark shape appeared then, at the end of the drive. A shape that looked more like a scarecrow than a man, a scarf wrapped around the lower half of the face, a woollen hat pulled over his hair.

‘Louis,’ the man said, his voice deep, like a Harley Davidson revving down the motorway. ‘Louis what are you outside for?’ he said. He had a thick East-London accent. The young boy looked up at his father – they had the same large black eyes – and stepped towards his front door.

‘Dad – I got shut out. The – the postman said to come out.’

‘He did, did he? Well – well you should go back inside Louis. You must be freezing.’ The large man strode passed William as if he wasn’t there, unlocked the door and pushed it open. Louis scurried inside, his feet disappearing up the stairs as William watched. Then the large man turned face William. ‘Why was he out here?’

‘He – he followed me down the drive. Said he wanted help.’

‘With what?’ the man said. Now he was standing closer, William could see the bloodshot in his eyes. The skin under his eyes sagged in a dark shadow, and his face was creased, like a scrunched up paper bag. He smelt of coal.

‘With – with finding his Mum.’ William didn’t want for that to slip out, but once it had, he felt like he had no choice. ‘And you shouldn’t be stopping the boy from seeing her, you know. I know – whatever – you fell out but – but the boy deserves his Mum. I – my Dad walked out on my Mum and she still raised me so – so let her see him. It’ll be worth it, in the long run.’

A silence crept over the drive, like frost over a windshield. The man stared at William with his tired eyes, face frozen in an incriminating glare. William tried to hold the man’s glare, tried to stand up as tall as he could. The boy deserved his mother. He knew that. He also knew this was none

of his business. Somehow the boy had made this his business, though. When he asked for his help, he'd got William involved. Every boy deserved to see their Mum. Louis was no different. When the man spoke, his voice creaked like an old floor board.

'She – Louis' Mum – she – she –' a tear sprinkled across his cheek. Another, and another, and another. And then the man was blubbing on his own drive, his arms shaking, and his lip warbling. He moaned, a low noise that rippled William's bones. That shook his skull, pounded his brain, trembled his arms. 'She's dead,' the man said. And then, somehow, William's arm was round his shoulder, and the man wept into his jacket.

The man stopped crying. He stood up straight, arching his back, and even though his face was still wet with salty tears, he was a father again. Just like that he moved from his fresh widow to a loving father.

'I don't know how to tell him,' he said. 'And I won't. I can't do that to him. Not at Christmas. They all – every last damn one – they want me to break his heart. Crack it into a million pieces like a – like a damn egg –but I can't. How can you – how could I break the boy's heart. Now?' And then, the man walked back up his drive without looking back, stepping into his house, and slammed the front door. William felt the boy's eyes from the upstairs window, even as his feet dragged him back to the delivery van. He drove straight home, poured himself a shot of bourbon, and sat in the quiet of his living room.

December 23rd

David Okofere was beginning to wonder if the post would ever turn up again. He'd hated himself after weeping on the poor man's shoulder, had dragged himself inside and scrunched his fists into tight balls, striking himself in the thigh with bony knuckles. Nothing had landed on the welcome mat

in the following week – not even a festively packaged heating bill. In a way, David was glad. The funeral was on the 2nd January, and he was going to need some time to pay for that as well as covering the bills.

When Lynda died, it was sudden. He was watching some rubbish show – he can't even remember the name of it. He was staring at a screen instead of taking all the time he could to watch his beautiful wife's last steps – and she'd fallen. A thump on the living room floor, a glass knocked over on the white carpet. Red wine. The stain was still visible in the corner of the room, like a scar.

An aneurysm, and she was gone. Just like that. The love of his life. Lifeless.

David had told Louis that the noise of the paramedics taking his mother's body away was her leaving, moving on to another home. Like she'd decided to go, to leave them. He had no idea how to tell his son that the light of his life was gone. That it was just them. An innocent little boy, and a Dad too stupid, too vacant, to pay attention to his wife. Before it was too late.

Louis was beginning to understand he wouldn't see his Mother again. When they were eating dinner one night (beans on toast, a Dad special) Louis had looked up with a straight face and told his Dad he'd miss his Mum's macaroni cheese. He asked if his Dad could learn the recipe. When you were about to become a parent, nobody ever told you how to do this. How to answer these questions. David had nodded, but he couldn't hide the tremor of his bottom lip from his seven-year-old son.

When the doorbell rang on December 23rd David had thought it was Lynda's parents. They were worried about Louis – they'd said so on the phone – but agreed to let David tell him in his own time. The problem was, David couldn't even say it out loud when he was on his own. His wife. Dead.

‘Gone,’ he’d say. That was all he could usually muster. He glanced at the bare Christmas tree in the corner of the living room as he walked into the hallway. Lynda was going to decorate it. The box of decorations still sat, untouched, in the spare room.

David opened the door to a thick blanket of grey sky. There was nobody on the doorstep, though he could hear the chirping of a robin from somewhere in the street.

‘What the bloody – ‘ he stopped when he saw the present. On the doorstep, wrapped in shiny red paper, with a thin bow strung around the top, was a circular present. When David picked it up the present rattled, the sound of tiny metal symbols trickling against each other. There was a label.

Dear Louis,

I hope you’re being a good boy for your Dad. Your Mummy asked me to give this to you. She’s up here with me now, helping me deliver presents. She told me she loves you very much.

Merry Christmas,

Santa Clause.

‘Wassthat?’ Louis said, from the stairs behind him. David turned around slowly, rubbing the bristles of his chin with his fingers.

‘It’s a gift. From Santa. From your Mum. Her last – her last gift.’

‘Why is it her last gift?’ Louis said. David felt his whole body ache, but as he handed Louis the present, he knew it was time.

‘She has a new home. A beautiful home that we won’t see for a long time. Come on,’ David said, shutting the front door. ‘Let’s talk about it.’ As he led Louis into the living room, David thought he saw a flash of red from the road outside. A delivery van. The postman.