

Stories for Children Young and Old

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Sample Story

6) The Postman

I am a Postman. During the war, we had little to do as people had lost confidence in the postal system. After the war, things were going back to normal, so we resumed our duties carrying letters and parcels to all sorts of addresses in Beirut. The work was easy if you liked walking. You got to know all the addresses in town especially when you had to deliver a letter with a puzzle for an address: the third floor of the building with the Pepsi Cola billboard next to the Italian restaurant. Sometimes, only a name was written on the envelope and a vague area. That meant asking a lot of people nosy questions. Some would not answer until I showed them the letter. Some would offer to walk up with me because they wished to know what the letter was all about. On my lucky days, all I had to deliver would be letters. The difficult days were when I would be given a heavy bag full of parcels. I never knew what was in those parcels but then with time, I could guess with ease: food, books, photos, one time, a toilet cover.

One day, I had to deliver five large sized envelopes to a man on the 7th floor overlooking the sea. I rang the bell and he opened the door very promptly, snatched the envelopes from my hand, flipped through them quickly and closed the door, all in a matter of seconds. I hated half finished stories but I could not very well go back and ask him what this was all about. I went down the stairs instead of using the lift to give myself time to think about this incident. Next morning, I was overjoyed to find 10 more envelopes, all to that same address. I quickly went up to the 7th floor and rang the door with a large smile on my face. I had hoped that my body language would make him more friendly and that he would tell me why he was behaving that way. Nothing doing! He snatched the envelopes, flipped through them quickly and slammed the door. This went on for a few days, the number of envelopes received per day steadily increasing. There was nothing on the envelopes that betrayed their content. They all had the same address: name, flat, building, street and area. One day, I noticed one envelope that revealed to me a clue that could get me to know what was going on. It said, "In answer to your ad in An-Nahar". I wasted no time. I took a day off and went to the newspaper offices where a cousin worked. She led me to the archives of the paper. I worked out the approximate date of the ad and looked for it. Nothing. So I started going backwards, one week, two weeks. Then I remembered that the content of each enveloped weighed like it must have had 10 or 12 pages. So, these pages would take time to prepare. I went back one month and there it was, a glorious

ad, glorious because I found it not because of its shape. In fact, it was a pretty miserable design. The ad was for a short story contest. The man had announced that he would be reviewing the stories submitted to him and would give a prize to the best entry. There was a deadline and it was three days from today. So, there was a chance to see him again. Next morning, sure enough, there were four envelopes. I gave them to him with the usual smile on my face. He flipped through them again. This time, he stopped a little and I swore I could see a little smile on his face. He slammed the door. By this time, I was in the habit of examining every envelope for clues. I noticed that the handwriting on the address of the envelope he paused at was the same as the writing of his name on the bell. Why would he write a letter to himself? I was soon to know. Next morning, another batch of seven envelopes arrived. I rang the bell but he would not answer. Several times and still no answer. I went downstairs and the concierge informed me that the occupant had not left the flat. I was miserable. I had been dangled deeper into the story than on the first day and still, I was cut short.

One week later, I had no more letters to distribute and so I was given some work to do at the counter. In comes the man carrying 100 letters in his hand. He had received 101 envelopes and here were 100, so was the 101st the winner? Why did he not write the winner? I could not take it any more, so as he was paying me, I shot a straight question at him: who won the contest, I asked? He answered: I did!

On another occasion, in the middle of the civil war, this letter was received from Dubai. It had taken 4 weeks to reach our offices. We were all anxious to get letters to their recipients since we knew that most of them were either sending money or asking for money. Because of the fighting all around us, it was often difficult to get the letters delivered in time or at all. We would try everything. Sometimes we walked across the green line and gave a bag to our counterparts from the other side of town. At others, we would phone the person and they would come in to the post office. Many letters were left behind without anyone collecting them.

One letter was unique. The sender must have known that his brother was not in town but in the mountains so it would have been impossible to get the letter to him. So, he wrote a telephone number on the envelope. That's all. Of course, it was not always easy to get a connection, but we tried. Nothing. I decided to follow this up myself and took the letter home with me. At night, it was easier to get a connection because all the offices were off. I tried to call

several times but was not lucky. One day, I got his mother on the line and she said he was away. I asked her to tell him to call me saying I had a letter from his brother. She was worried so she said, how can we get it, where are you? It took a while exploring different ways and routes only to find out that there was no way we could get the letter to them nor could they come to pick it up. There was a lull in the conversation and I knew she was working on something. Then she said, can you open it and read it? It was not done. We did not have the right to do that, but then the whole war did not have the right to do this to her and her sons. So, I felt weak and obliged. I went to the kitchen and got a knife and opened the letter. A few hundred US dollar bills fell out, five of them. I told her so and she was pleased. My reaction was still the same: how to get the money to her? She did not care about the money, what was in the letter she asked? I started reading it. "Dear Nabil, I hope you are all fine. I am writing this to you because I am worried about your behavior, you asshole . . ." I stopped, obviously, embarrassed for having pronounced that word. There was a silence and she said, "Read on". I did. "Here I am, in the gulf, working my ass off so you can continue your education and all you can do is run around with cheap women . . ." I stopped again, and after another silence, she said, go on. I went on. "Here I am sending you money and bothering several people to get the letter to the post office and all you can think of is your own pleasure." I could not read anymore. There was another silence. I felt it heavy. I did not want to ask anything anymore and she did not have the courage to say continue. I looked quickly down the letter to find out more and more about this younger brother who had wild ways. Then she said, "Please keep the money," and hung up. I called again and there was no answer. I tried the number several times and still no answer. A few days later, I called and got the younger brother. He was full of abuse. He screamed and shouted demanding the money, so I said, I sent it to your mother, didn't she tell you? He hung up and I never heard from him again. We gave the money to the man who used to bring us the letters from the other side of the town.

One of the most demanding tasks for a postman is to get the mail to a house that has a dog. Many houses in Beirut have gardens and some of them have a dog tied to a tree. Those are my worst fears. Each time I get a letter to deliver to such a house, my first reaction is: I hope it is heavy enough to fling from the gate to the front door. This way, I would avoid the dog. But no, many letters had to be delivered which were too light to fling. I tried all sorts of tricks. One time, I got the dog a full hamburger to distract him. He managed to munch it all by the time I had delivered the letter and was on my way out. He almost bit

my trouser leg. Another time, I wore a very thick pair of trousers over another one hoping that if he actually bit me, it would not hurt. That dog was cleverer than me. He just stood in front of the door to the house and would not let me deliver the letter. As I reached to drop it, he would jump up to snap at my hands. I even borrowed my cousin's Doberman hoping they will have a good fight while I delivered the letter. That did not work. The Doberman was ferocious but recognized the territory of the garden dog and respectfully refused to enter the garden. I was not the only postman facing these problems. Everyone in the office knew this risk and had not thought of any bright solution. One day, we all sat down and hoped to think of something final. I had been reading a book on aroma therapy and thought that some smell must have an effect on the dogs. We went around the town and bought all sorts of essences: marjoram, ginger, amber and even cat piss essence. We got all sorts of reactions from the dogs but none were suitable. We were looking for the smell that would make them cower and run away. One postman always sat in at our meetings and said nothing. Finally, I asked him: how come you never join in the discussion? He said, because I never have any trouble with dogs. He had terrible body odor and we all assumed that the dogs hated that. We were not about to solve our problem this way. I decided to follow him and find out. I tracked his route without letting him know. He went into a garden with one of the meanest dogs in the area. Suddenly, I saw him bite the letter between his teeth, take a sausage from his pocket and throw it behind the dog. The dog immediately turned around and went for the sausage. Like lightning, the postman grabbed the two hind paws of the dog and lifted them high up in the air as you would a wheelbarrow. The postman pushed the dog forward and since there was nothing he could do, the dog simply advanced on his front paws. He tried hard to move his head to the right and to the left to bite the postman but the postman was too far behind to be reached. When they got to the door, the postman spat the letter out of his mouth. Now what was he going to do? He could not turn the dog around as he would have problems leaving the dog at the gate. So, he simply traced his steps backwards, pulling the dog as he did so. He got out of the gate and let the dog loose. We never had trouble with dogs again.