The post office was pokey and dusty; rough wooden shelves laden with stationery of all kinds threatened to topple over onto the unsuspecting customer. Boxes were piled halfway up to the ceiling and a pair of scales looked to be straight out of a museum. As he gingerly entered through a heavy door, Tom thought the place summed up the whole village.

Behind a glass partition at the counter, a plump, middle aged woman in a loudly patterned dress, with wild, straggly black hair and precarious looking yellow earrings was grappling with piles of letters, trying to balance them on a narrow table and huffing in exasperation as one fell onto the floor just as she’d arranged a pile. Tom tapped on the window.

The woman looked up resembling, thought Tom, a startled buffalo.

“Hi” he said brightly waving the letters “I’ve brought these back cos they were wrongly addressed.”

She sighed audibly and waddled across gesturing Tom to leave them on the counter. Only when he’d put them down did she pull up the rather stiff partition and grab the small pile with a chubby hand, pulling an expression of disgust as bits of soil fell out when she unfolded the larger envelope.

She picked them up, sifting through them “And you are…” she said in a clear and rather imperious voice.

“Er, Tom Allenby. Well, my Dad’s the house owner. We moved into Cross Farm Lane yesterday. My Dad is Doctor Neil Allenby.”

She looked startled again “Dr Allenby? How nice to have a doctor in the village”

“Yeah; Mum’s the new GP here as well”

Her eyes widened “Well, these are all addressed to Mr and Mrs Oliphant aren’t they?”

Tom frowned at her; “Yeah, *that’s* why I brought them in.”

“Your parents don’t have a forwarding address then?”

Tom shook his head.

“Mmm, oh well, I suppose I’ll have to return them though I have no idea where they moved to.”

“Did you know them then, what were they like?” asked Tom leaning on the counter.

“Don’t slouch,” she said irritably, placing the letters in a large basket, “Yes I knew the Oliphants. *They* went into town to buy their stationery of course. Not good enough for them here.” She harrumphed and fixed Tom with a hard stare; “I hope your parents will be using the facilities?”

Tom nodded feebly, “Er, yeah probably. Mum will anyway; Dad’s working in town. He’s a surgeon you know.”

Suddenly she looked impressed, “A surgeon; how lovely!” she stared at him directly, making him feel rather uncomfortable, “I’m Jenny Murgatroyd, by the way, head postmistress of Westbridge”

She made this announcement with quite a flourish and Tom looked at her sideways as if doubting her sanity.

“Erm, that’s good” he said, edging towards the door.

With that she returned to her counter and began sorting some letters. Sorting is only a rough way of describing her method of throwing a bunch of mail into a wire basket, which seemed to be attached to a dynamo. Then, as Tom watched fascinated, one hand on the door handle in case he had to make a swift exit, she flipped a switch and the letters slipped under a pad and then started to fly out of the basket landing in various baskets. She grinned at him; “The economy class letter sorter. Only £4.99 you know!”

*Uh oh* thought Tom, *she’s a nutter*