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The Postcard

Written by Fern Britton

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Fern Britton

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER



The
Postcard

Fern
Britton
The
Postcard



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Penny Leighton didn't feel right. She hadn't been feeling right for a long time now. She couldn't remember how long it had been since she *had* felt right.

She was lying in her big marital bed. The Cornish winter sun had not yet risen and she could see the dark sky through a crack in her exuberant poppy curtains. She'd thought them so cheerful when she'd bought them. She looked at them now and closed her eyes.

She had to get up. She had an important call to take at eleven o'clock. She opened her eyes and squinted at her phone. Ten to seven.

'Morning, my love.' Simon stirred and reached under the duvet to put his hand around her waist. 'How did you sleep?'

She closed her eyes. 'Hm.'

'Is that a hm of yes or a hm of no?'

'Hm.'

'Did Jenna wake up?'

Her look said it all.

'Oh dear. Why won't you wake me? I'm more than happy to see to her.'

'Then why don't you?'

'I don't hear her.'

'There doesn't seem any point in us both being awake then.'

Simon thought better than to reply. Penny had not been herself recently, quick to criticize, withdrawn and moody. He'd felt the sharp side of her tongue too often of late. He decided to make some coffee and bring it up to her but the act of shifting the duvet, even slightly, caused her grievance. 'Why do you always pull the bedding off me?' She pulled the duvet tight around her chin. 'It is winter, you know.'

'I didn't mean to. Coffee?'

Penny knew she'd been unkind and rolled over to face him as he sat on the edge of the bed, back towards her, slipping on his T-shirt from the day before. She reached out and stroked the side of his hip. 'I'm sorry. Just a bit tired. I'd love some coffee, thank you.' He stood up and she let her arm fall back onto the sheets.

She said, 'I do love you, you know.'

He ran his hands over his bald head and picked his glasses up from the bedside table. 'I know. I love you too.' He smiled at her and, putting a knee onto the mattress, leant over to kiss her. She put her hands on either side of his face and returned the gentle kiss. 'Coffee, tea or me?' she smiled. From across the landing came the grizzly morning cry of their daughter, 'Mumma? Dadda?'

'Shit!' groaned Penny.

Simon eased himself back off the bed. 'I'll get her. Stay there and I'll bring you your coffee.'

Penny had her coffee in the luxurious silence of her peaceful bed. Winter in Cornwall held a quiet all of its own. No tractors would be out until the sun came up. No bird would be stirring in its nest and no parishioners would be beating their way up the vicarage path to give Simon another burden of responsibility. Finishing her

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coffee she stretched and wriggled back down into the warmth of her covers. She'd wait five minutes, just three hundred tiny seconds, she said to herself, and then she'd feel strong enough to get up and face the day.

Unable to put off the inevitable any longer, Penny tore herself out of bed and stared into the bathroom mirror. First she examined the two spots on her chin and then the circles under her eyes. She stood sideways and lifted her nightie to see her pale and wobbly tummy. She'd seen fewer pleats in the curtains of the local cinema. Whose stomach *was* this? She wanted her own returned. The firm and rounded one that she'd taken for granted for all those pre-baby years. Dropping her nightie and shrugging on her dressing gown, which still smelt of Marmite even after a wash and half a day hanging on the line in the sun, she slopped down to the kitchen.

Jenna was in her high chair and Simon was attempting to spoon porridge into her. 'That's good, isn't it?' he said encouragingly.

Jenna opened her mouth and grinned. Pushing her tongue out, she allowed the cereal to ooze down her chin. Simon spooned it back in.

It came out again, and before Simon could catch it Jenna had put her hands into it and rubbed it into her face and hair.

'Would you like a banana, then?' he asked, reaching for a baby wipe.

Jenna shook her head. She had just turned one. 'Mumma.'

'Mummy's a bit tired,' said Simon.

Penny sat at the table. 'Too right Mummy's tired.'

'Get this down you.' Simon passed her a fresh cup of

coffee. 'A caffeine hit should make everything look better. By the way, I've emptied the dishwasher for you.'

Penny gave him a cold stare, suddenly irritated again. 'You've emptied the dishwasher for me? Why for me? Because it's my job, is it? The woman's job is to empty the dishwasher? Is that it?'

'Oh Penny, you know what I meant. It's a figure of speech. Like when you tell me you've done my ironing for me.'

'Well, that *is* for you. It's yours. Do you ever do the ironing for me?'

Simon took his glasses off and began polishing them. 'You know what I mean.'

Penny picked up Jenna's breakfast bowl. 'Come on then, monster, have your porridge.'

Jenna obligingly opened her mouth and tucked in.

Simon, returning his glasses to his face, tried a cheerful smile. 'Good girl, Jenna, you wouldn't do that for Daddy, would you?'

'Why do you refer to yourself in the third person?' asked Penny. 'Don't say Daddy, say me.'

'It's just a fig—'

'A figure of speech.' Penny popped the last spoonful into Jenna's mouth. 'Everything is a figure of speech to you, isn't it? Pass me the wet wipes.'

She expertly mopped Jenna's face and hands, hoping that Simon felt inadequate watching just how deftly she did it, then lifted her from the high chair and handed her to her father.

'I'm just going for a shower,' she said.

He looked anxious. 'How long will you be?'

'As long as it takes.'

He looked at the kitchen clock.

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‘Well, I can give you ten minutes then I have to go.’

‘You can *give* me ten minutes? How very generous.’ Penny went to leave the kitchen.

‘Sarcasm does not become you,’ Simon blurted.

‘That wasn’t sarcasm,’ she threw over her shoulder. ‘Sarcasm takes energy and wit and I am too tired for either.’

Walking up the stairs was an effort. Her body was not responding to the caffeine. Everything was an effort nowadays. She looked forward to nothing, she laughed at nothing, her brain felt nothing. Nothing but an emptiness that – and may God forgive her – even Jenna’s dear face couldn’t always fill.

She turned on the shower, stripped off her night-clothes, stood under the hot water and cried.

The morning crept on. By ten thirty Penny had Jenna washed and changed and back in her cot for her morning sleep.

Simon had gone off to his parish meeting about the upcoming Nativity service, complaining that he’d be late, and porridge bowls still sat in the sink under cold and lumpy water.

Penny was in her room dragging a comb through her newly washed hair. She badly needed a cut and a colour, but trying to find a couple of hours when someone could mind Jenna was hard. She stared for the second time that day at her reflection. God, she’d aged. Crow’s feet, jowls, a liver spot by her eyebrow . . . She’d had Jenna when she was well into her forties and it had been the hardest thing she’d ever done. Harder even than leaving her life in London.

In London she had been somebody: a busy, single,

career woman; an award-winning television producer with her own production company, Penny Leighton Productions.

Now she hardly knew who she was. Again she felt guilty at how horrible she'd been to Simon. Taking a deep breath she slapped on a little mascara and lip gloss and vowed to present him with steak and a bottle of wine for supper.

She got downstairs and into her study two minutes before the phone rang on the dot of eleven. Penny took a deep breath and plastered on a cheery persona.

'Good morning, Jack.'

'Hello, Penny, how is life at the vicarage treating you?'

Jack Bradbury was playing his usual game of feigned bonhomie. He laughed. 'I still can't believe you're a vicar's wife.'

'And a mother,' she played along.

'And a mother. Good God, who'd have thought it. How is the son and heir?'

'The *daughter* and heir is doing very well, thank you.'

'Ah yes, Jenny, isn't it?'

'Jenna.'

'Jenna . . . of course.'

The niceties were achieved.

'So, Penny . . . ' She imagined Jack leaning back in his ergonomic chair and admiring his manicured hands. 'We want more Mr Tibbs on Channel 7.'

'That's good news. So do I.' Penny reached for a wet wipe and rubbed at something sticky on the screen of her computer. Jenna had been gumming it yesterday.

'So, you've got hold of old Mave, have you?' asked Jack.

'I emailed her yesterday,' said Penny.

'And how did she reply?'

‘She hasn’t yet. The ship is somewhere in the Pacific heading to or from the Panama Canal, I can’t remember which.’

Jack sounded impatient. ‘Does she spend her entire bloody life on a cruise? Does she never get off?’

‘She likes it.’

‘I’d like it more if she wrote some more Mr bloody Tibbs scripts in between ordering another gin and tonic.’

‘I’ll try to get her again today.’ Penny wiped her forehead with a clammy palm. She wasn’t used to being on the back foot.

‘Tell her that Channel 7 wants another six eps, pronto, plus a Christmas special. I want to start shooting the series in the summer, ready to air in the New Year.’

‘I *have* told her that and I’m sure she wants the same.’

‘I’m not fanning around on this for ever, Penny. David Cunningham’s agent has already been on the blower. Needs to know if David will be playing Mr Tibbs again or he’ll sign him up to a new Danish drama. And he’s asking for more money.’

‘I want to talk to you about budget—’

‘You bring me old Mave and then we’ll talk money.’

‘Deal. I’ll let you know as soon as I get hold of her.’

‘Phone me asap.’ He hung up before she said goodbye.

Old Mave was Mavis Crewe, an eighty-something powerhouse who had created her most famous character, Mr Tibbs, back in the late 1950s. Penny had snapped up the screen rights to the books for peanuts and the stories of the crime-solving bank manager and his sidekick secretary, Nancy Trumpet, had become the most watched period drama serial of the past three years.

Penny’s problem was that she had now filmed all the

books and needed Mavis to write some more. But Mavis, a law unto herself, was enjoying spending her unexpected new income by constantly circumnavigating the globe.

Penny rubbed a hand over her chin and found two or three fresh spiky hairs. She'd had no time to get them waxed and, right now, had no energy to go upstairs and locate her long-missing tweezers.

She pushed her laptop away and laid her head on the leather-topped desk. 'I'm so tired . . .' she said to no one, and jumped when her computer replied with a trill. An email.

TO: PennyLeighton@tlx.com
FROM: MavisCrewe@sga.com
SUBJECT: Mr Tibbs

Dear Penny,

How simply thrilling that Mr Tibbs is wanted so badly by Channel 7 and the charming Jack Bradbury. It really is such a joy to know that one's lifework has a fresh impact on the next generation of viewing public.

Another six stories, *and* a Christmas special? But my dear, that is simply not possible.

I wrote those stories years ago as a young widow in order to feed my family. Mr Tibbs has done his job, I'd say and I don't have the patience to think up more adventures for him.

Can you not simply repeat the old ones?

Yesterday we went through the Panama Canal. Absolutely extraordinary. Very wide in parts and very narrow in others. We are now sailing

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in the Pacific and stopping off at Costa Rica tomorrow. Why don't you drop everything and join me for a few weeks? Enjoy our spoils from dear Mr Tibbs.

With great affection,
Mavis Crewe CBE

Penny couldn't move. She read the email again and broke into a cold sweat. No more Mr Tibbs? Put out repeats? Go and join her on a cruise? Did the woman have no idea that so many people's careers were hanging in the balance because she couldn't be arsed to write a half-baked whimsy about a fictional bloke who solved the mystery of a missing back-door key? Anger and frustration coursed through her. She pressed reply and started to type.

TO: MavisCrewe@sga.com
FROM: PennyLeighton@tlx.com
SUBJECT: Mr Tibbs

Dear Mavis,

If we have no more bloody scripts there is no more Mr Tibbs. Do you want to throw away all that you've achieved? I certainly am not going to let you. The end of Mr Tibbs would mean the end of your cruising and the end of me. PLEASE write SOMETHING! And if you won't do that, I shall have to find someone else to write Mr Tibbs for me, with or without your help.

Penny

She hovered over the send icon. No, she needed time to think. She couldn't afford to fall out with Mavis. She must sweet-talk her round. She pressed delete and began again.

Dear Mavis,

How lovely to hear from you and what a fabulous time you must be having!

I respect your wishes to put Mr Tibbs 'to bed' as it were. He has indeed served you well and given much pleasure to our viewers.

Which brings me to a difficult question. If you won't write the next six episodes and a Christmas special, someone else will have to. Before I find that special someone, do you have anyone you would prefer to pick up your nib? Someone whose writing you admire and that you feel could imitate your style?

No one could be as good as you, of course, but this could be an exciting new future for the Mr Tibbs' franchise as I'm certain you agree.

With all my very best wishes - and have a tequila for me!

Penny xxx

She read it through once and pressed send.

'Right,' she said to the empty room. 'The office is now shut for the day'. She switched off the computer and threw her iPhone into the desk drawer. 'I am going to eat cake.'

*

Jenna always woke from her morning nap at about twelve thirty, so Penny had some fruit cake with a milky cup of coffee and flicked through a magazine, all the while feeling a creeping anxiety about how Mavis would react to the email. Mavis was no pushover and would recognize Penny's bluffing for what it was. She was beginning to regret sending it. But what was the worst that could happen? Mavis refusing point-blank to write anything? So what. Penny would do as she threatened, find a new writer, pay them a quarter of Mavis's fee, and stuff her.

She heard Jenna's little voice calling from her cot upstairs.

'Coming, darling!' responded Penny, and she put all thought of Mavis out of her head.

Penny loved Jenna with a fierceness that was almost as big as the fear she had that she was not good enough to be her mother. She would gladly die for her, but the endless hours of playing peekaboo and looking repetitively at the same old picture books, pointing out the spider or the mouse or the fairy, was killing her. There were days when she couldn't wait to put Jenna to bed and then, while she was sleeping, would be riven with the horror of not being good enough.

Repetitive.

Exhausting.

Mind-numbing.

Frightening.

Nerve-shredding.

She watched in envy as the young mums in Pendruggan appeared to revel in picnics on the village green,

swimming lessons, tumble tots, musical games and the endless coffee mornings with other women trading their inane chatter.

Penny had been invited to one once. As vicar's wife she tried to do the right thing, but the amount of snot and sick and stinking nappies – not to mention stories of leaking breastpads and painful episiotomies – really wasn't her thing.

The truth was she missed work when she was with Jenna, and she missed Jenna when she was at work. Her love for Jenna was overwhelming, so big that it was impossible to connect with it, but . . .

She missed an organized diary, a clear office with regular coffee, and power lunches.

She missed flying to LA. She missed being in control of her life.

And she missed her London flat.

She had kept it on when she married Simon, telling him that it would always be useful, a bolthole for both of them, although neither of them had been there since Jenna was born.

But Jenna was here now. Here to stay. How could Penny be lonely with this beautiful, perfect, loving little girl who depended on her for everything? Penny looked at her daughter, sitting in her pram, ready for a trip to Queenie's village shop, just for something to do. She bent down and tucked the chubby little legs under the blanket. 'It's cold outside.' Jenna lay back and smiled. 'I love you, Jenna,' said Penny. Tears pricked her eyes. She angrily wiped one away as it escaped down her cheek.

'Mumma,' said Jenna. She held her hands out to Penny. 'Mumma?'

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‘I’m fine. I’m fine, darling,’ Penny said with a tight throat. She found a tissue in her coat pocket and wiped her face. ‘Now then!’ She stretched her mouth into its trademark grin. ‘Let’s go and see Queenie, shall we? She might have some Christmas cards for us to buy.’

‘Ello, me duck.’ The indomitable Queenie was sitting behind her ancient counter opening a box of springy, multicoloured tinsel. ‘Ere, ’ave you ’eard the latest?’

‘Nope,’ said Penny. ‘It’d better be good because I’m starved of news. Jenna’s not too good a raconteur yet.’

‘Ah, she’s beautiful. Wait till she does start talkin’ – then you’ll want ’er to shut up. Give ’er ’ere. And pull up a chair. You look wiped out.’

Penny sank gratefully into one of the three tatty armchairs that had appeared recently in the shop. Queenie liked a chat and most of her customers enjoyed a sit down.

‘This chair’s very comfortable,’ sighed Penny, sinking into the feather seat.

‘Ain’t it? Simple Tony got them for me over St Eval. Someone was chucking them out.’ Queenie sat down with Jenna on her lap and Jenna reached up to pull at the rope of pink tinsel Queenie had thrown round her shoulders. ‘Real pretty that is, darling, ain’t it? When you’re a big girl you can come in ’ere and ’elp me get all this stuff out.’

Jenna crammed a thumb in her mouth and sucked it ruminatively.

Penny shut her eyes and enjoyed the peace. ‘Tell me the gossip then, Queenie.’

‘Well, you know Marguerite Cottage what’s just behind the vicarage?’

‘Oh God, yes. The builders have been making a racket for months.’

‘Well, I had the estate agent in here the other day. Come in for her fags. Silk Cut. Not proper fags at all but that’s what she wanted. Anyway, I asks her, “Oh, who’s buyin’ Marguerite, then?” and she says, “It’s been let for a year by two fellas from up country.” I says, “Well, good luck to ’em if they’re ’appy together.” And she says, “One of them is a doctor and the other an artist.” So I says, “Stands to reason. These gay boys are very arty and nice-natured.” And she says, “They’ve got dogs, too.” And I turn round and say, “Well, they always ’ave dogs.” And she turns round and says—’

Queenie stopped mid-flow and looked at Penny. ‘Oi, Penny, ’ave you fallen asleep?’