

Dear Jon and co,

The cottage was down a narrow lane hemmed in by ancient dry stone walls. It was built in 1641 to house weavers who worked their looms in the half-light and slept beneath rafters slung with the fetid woollen hides of sheep and alpacas. Its frontage was covered with a thick Virginia creeper whose waxy leaves would turn a fire-red colour that first autumn. The postman had delivered our mail several times before he stopped on the doorstep one day with a stack of jiffy bags in his hand and, with one eyebrow raised, said, “What is all this stuff?” His accent was not that of a local and his trimmed beard suggested an artistic bent. I explained that it was mainly CDs and books that I had been sent for review.

‘What type of music?’ he wondered.

‘All sorts. Mainly guitar music. Rock.’

‘I hate rock music. *Hate it*. Now jazz, however...’

Soon I was conversing each day on the doorstep with Alan. He liked critical theory, jazz – especially Scandinavian contemporary jazz – and painting. He told me that once a year he and his girlfriend go to Newcastle and then take a ferry to Norway, where they spend a fortnight cycling through forests, sleeping in a tent and living off nuts and nips of whisky. Occasionally, if their budget will allow, Alan treats them to a café meal.

Alan did a PhD in the cinematic output of Hitchcock and is officially a qualified Doctor of Horror. After three days as a trainee teacher he walked out and enrolled at the post office instead. He’s well into his fifties now and has been

walking the cobbles, lanes, ginnels and streets that are slick with Pennine rain for years now. Decades. He also knows exactly how many days he has left until retirement.

‘How’s it going Alan?’ I ask.

‘Only one thousand four hundred and thirty one days until retirement.’

Or:

‘What’s new Alan?’

‘Only one thousand one hundred and seventeen days and –’ (here he checks his watch) ‘– three hours until retirement. I’m surrounded by idiots.’

Or:

‘Winter’s coming in cold.’

‘Yes. And only eight hundred days to go exactly. This job is killing me.’

Six years I have known Alan and not once has he been unable to tell me how many days of stuffing soggy parcels through the letterboxes of the valley he has left until retirement.

He has no television or internet or mobile phone. He lives in a house in the woods down the hill from Ted Hughes’s old place. His water comes from a storage tank and in the big freeze of winter 2010 his supply froze completely so he took to bathing in the river instead. I lent him *Post Office* by Charles Bukowski.

‘What did you think?’

‘It was amusing in places,’ he sniffed. ‘But generally speaking, a minor work.’

When he is not working, Alan is an avid attendee of the local cinema. He sends me six page letters critiquing each new release. When he ascertained that I am a writer I gave him a signed copy of one of my novels. A week later he returned it,

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shaking his head: 'I won't be needing this.' He prefers Žižek. But his primary passion is painting. Recently he has been preoccupied with attempting to capture 'the spirit of jazz' on canvas. Imagine what that looks like. He does landscapes too. A fantastic oil painting of the post-war prefabs across the valley adorns our living room wall.

I saw him the other day, doing his round.

'What have you been up to, Alan?'

'Only four hundred and forty days until I retire. Just over a year of this fucker left to go!'

All the best,  
Benjamin Myers<sup>1</sup>

"It was amusing in places," he sniffed. "But generally speaking a minor work."  
When he is not working Alan is an ~~am~~ avid

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Myers' novels include *Pig Iron*, and *Beastings*, which recently won the 2015 Portico Prize. He has also published poetry and journalism. He lives in the Upper Calder Valley, West Yorkshire, where he spends a lot of time just wandering about and watching.

He has written to us about Alan the Postman before, and we hope he does so again. One day, we hope to perhaps feature a letter from Alan himself. Perhaps we will need to wait for another four hundred and forty days.