

Sue Taylor

ROBERT, THE POSTMAN

Robert sat on the park bench watching the children play. He admired the healthy bodies hanging upside down on the monkey bar, the fun and excitement of the children working themselves up higher and higher on the swings. He liked to see their lithe bodies contort as they clambered over the playground equipment. Not that he thought of them as lithe. The word "lithe" was not in Robert's vocabulary. He didn't try to describe them. He simply enjoyed watching them. He particularly savoured their brown, naked limbs. He took pleasure in their happy innocent bickering. That was what it was. It was the innocence that attracted him.

One very pretty little girl was hanging upside down on the monkey bars. Her dress hung over her head, revealing frilly pink panties. She righted herself and looked in Robert's direction. He beckoned her over, feeling in his pocket for the lollies he always brought with him. Fizzy fruit sticks he had today. She would like that.

She approached him shyly. She was most attractive with shoulder length blonde hair and ingenuous blue eyes. She was dressed more appropriately for a birthday party than for the playground. She wore a pink summer dress with short sleeves and a very full skirt. Her arms and legs had a healthy natural tan that Robert loved.

"I'm not allowed to talk to strangers," she announced with pride.

"I'm not a stranger," said Robert, offering her a lolly.

She snatched it eagerly and devoted her full attention to unwrapping it. "Come and sit down," Robert invited, patting the seat beside him. "My name's Robert. What's yours?"

"Crystal."

"Crystal. What a pretty name! A pretty name for a pretty girl."

It was a perfect name, thought Robert. It was a young and innocent name. A perfect gem.

He looked at her, the pure innocent gem beside him, sucking her fizzy fruit stick. He wanted to touch her leg. To feel her firm young flesh in his big rough hand. Would she run away?

Robert sat there, considering whether or not the little girl would let him touch her without running away, when an anxious female voice screeched at them from the direction of the car park.

"Crys-tal! Come here this instant."

Obediently, Crystal hopped off the bench, and hurried to answer the summons. After a few steps she stopped and turned and smiled at Robert.

"Goodbye," she said and ran off to her mother, who, instead of appreciating her daughter's instant obedience, seemed to be angrily reprimanding her for something.

Robert's mood was spoiled. He had watched the children enough for one day. Slowly he walked home, down the even side of Park Street. Crystal is a lovely name, he thought to himself. He turned into Victoria Street. Crystal is a very pretty little girl, he told himself.

As soon as he arrived home, he turned the television on. He liked television. He would sit in front of it for hours, watching whatever came on.

Robert lived alone and found television wonderful company. Every evening he heated a TV dinner in the microwave and ate it on his lap in front of the television. That particular evening, the peas were hard, so he didn't eat them. He was pleased his mother wasn't there to tell him he must eat his vegetables. Sometimes he missed his mother. He would have liked to have told her about Crystal. About her pretty blue eyes and lovely brown legs. But most of the time he was very pleased that his mother was no longer there. Everyone had been very nice to him when she died. Especially the police. They had asked him a lot of questions and they kept on asking the same questions over and over again. Robert thought that they must have had very bad memories. But they had been very nice about it all.

On Sunday Robert usually had a day out. In summer he went to the beach. In winter he went to football. If it was raining he very happily spent the day at home watching television.

The day after he met Crystal was a beautifully sunny summer Sunday, so he went to the beach. He walked to the tram stop and caught the light rail to St Kilda. Even though it was very warm, Robert didn't swim. He never did. He

walked along the promenade watching the people enjoying themselves. Getting pleasure from their pleasure. He rarely walked onto the beach. He didn't like the sand. He didn't like it in his shoes or on his clothes. It never occurred to him to take his shoes off.

He saw a little girl who reminded him of Crystal and he stood watching her build a sand castle until her father came and asked him what he wanted. Robert explained that he didn't want anything, but the man seemed angry about something, so Robert walked on.

Robert's life followed a routine pattern. Every morning, 365 days of the year, he got up at seven o'clock. He showered and shaved and dressed. He ate a bowl of cornflakes for breakfast, then, on weekdays he rode his bicycle to work, arriving at eight o'clock precisely. The mail was all sorted for him and he put it carefully into his bags, all in the right order. First he filled the bag on his handlebars, then the left pannier bag, then the right pannier bag. In the morning, he delivered down the odd side of Main Street, along the odd side of Thomas Street, then the odd side of Wellington Street and the even side of Thomas Street, then back to the post office, buying his lunch from Mrs Austin on the way. Lunch was a meat pie with sauce, followed by a sweet, milky cup of tea. The post office provided the tea. Robert's afternoon round was both sides of The Avenue, the odd side of Station Street, both sides of Bedford Street, then both sides of William Street. At about number 177 Station Street, he'd see the 3.05 train to Melbourne. Once he'd got as far as 239 before he saw the train. On two occasions he had never seen it at all.

On Saturdays Robert did his chores, then rewarded himself with a trip to the playground. He did his washing and cleaning and shopping. He bought himself a ham roll for lunch at the delicatessen next to the supermarket. Only when he had vacuumed and dusted, just as his mother had taught him, and all his washing and shopping were neatly put away with everything in its right place, would he allow himself to think about visiting the park. If it rained he didn't go, not because he might get wet, but because he knew there'd be nobody there in the rain.

Robert knew that he had a very important job. He delivered all sorts of vital mail. If the mail wasn't delivered, society would grind to a halt. If orders didn't get through, goods would not be delivered. If cheques were not paid, businesses would go broke. He enabled people to keep in touch. He promulgated information, helped to celebrate birthdays, facilitated love affairs. He brought a smile to people's lips when they were greeted with a surprise in the letter box. Yes, Robert knew he was important.

Robert was very proud that he knew the name of the occupant of every house and every business along his route. But not the people who lived in flats. He was no good on the itinerant. He needed stability, routine. He felt secure when things were ordered. Once Mrs Austin had run out of meat pies and he didn't know what to do. He just stood there, blankly incomprehensive, until she decided for him that he would have a pasty instead. He felt uneasy all afternoon. Mrs Austin made sure that never happened again. He wished he knew Crystal's second name. He wondered where she lived. Did she live on his route? Would he deliver her birthday cards? Or Christmas presents from far distant relations? He started noticing when a child had a birthday, when there was more than one card-sized envelope for the same address. He looked hopefully at the addressee, wishing it was a girl with the initial "C." It never was. There were two boys with the initial "C," but no girls. Once there was a girl with the initial "E" which looked a bit like a "C," but it wasn't.

One morning in Main Street, Robert saw a girl who looked like Crystal going into the dentist's. He'd wanted to wait for her to come out, to see whether or not it was Crystal. But of course he couldn't. He had his round to do. He made all his deliveries as quickly as he could and got back to Main Street much earlier than usual. He dawdled in front of the dentist's, using all the time he had saved, but the only person who came out was a middle-aged man. It probably hadn't been Crystal anyway.

One afternoon in Station Street, Robert saw a toddler on a toy plastic tricycle speeding down the hill in The Avenue towards Station Street. Robert could hear a car behind him coming along Station Street towards The Avenue and the toddler. A collision seemed inevitable. There was no time to think, but thinking was never Robert's forte. Instinctively, he rode his bicycle off the footpath into the path of the car, forcing it to brake and swerve. Robert rode on, intercepting the tricycle in Station Street and damaging several spokes in his front wheel.

An hysterical woman ran down The Avenue and picked up the child.

"Bobbie! Bobbie! Are you hurt?"

The driver of the car swore at Robert and drove off.

The woman, persuaded that the child was unharmed, recovered herself and thanked Robert profusely. Some neighbours gathered and the toddler's mother enthusiastically described Robert's heroic act. Someone saw fit to inform the local paper, and the story was printed on the front page, with a large photo of Robert in his uniform, holding the rescued toddler.

Robert was an instant local hero, which he found quite confusing. He knew he was very important, because he had an essential job. He understood people respecting his uniform. Not everyone wore a uniform. But anyone would have rescued a toddler about to collide with a car. He just happened to be there. He did not expect to have a fuss made over him for that. Nevertheless, a fuss was made over him. Mrs Austin gave him a free pie every day for a week. Even the girl in the supermarket recognised him and said how brave he was. People he'd never seen before made a point of waiting for him at their letter boxes. They wanted to talk to the hero postman. Names he knew well, now had faces to go with them. Mr Smith of 147 Wellington Street was bald and stooped; Mrs Hill of 62 Thomas Street was grey-haired, motherly, wearing an apron; young Mrs Sykes ("call me Annie, dear") of 15 The Avenue was a redhead with large breasts, and very friendly.

Robert found the attention embarrassing and the praise unjustified. It made him feel guilty. He was pleased when life got back to normal.

Every Saturday, he looked for Crystal at the playground. Every Saturday, he was disappointed. Then, one fine afternoon, he saw a girl, about Crystal's size, with Crystal's lovely blonde hair and beautiful brown limbs. It must be Crystal, Robert thought. She was playing on the monkey bars, just as Crystal had. But when she looked at him, he saw that it wasn't Crystal. He was angry. How dare she pretend to be Crystal. He beckoned her over, and held out his small white paper bag of snakes for her to select her favourite colour. She chose green. This little girl had brown eyes, not the beautiful blue that Crystal had. Robert thought that she should be punished. She should not pretend to be Crystal. That wasn't nice.

The next day it rained, so Robert didn't go to the beach. He got up at the normal time, had his bowl of cornflakes and turned the television on. He watched the golf for an hour or so. Then there was a knock at the front door and Robert got up to answer it. He recognised the policeman in his uniform.

"Good morning, Robert," said the policeman, shaking the worst of the rain off his umbrella.

"Hello," said Robert, with a welcoming smile. "Come in."

The policeman left the umbrella by the front door and followed Robert into the lounge.

"I'm watching the golf," explained Robert.

"Can we turn it off for a minute?"

Robert did as he was asked. His mother had tried to teach him to respect the police and he did. The truth was that Robert respected anyone in uniform.

"You were very brave rescuing that young toddler in Station Street."

"His name was Robert. The same as me. His mother called him 'Bobbie'."

Robert thought that this was the most interesting aspect of the incident. The policeman looked at Robert, and, like most people, didn't know what to make of him. He decided to come to the point.

"Did you go to the park yesterday, Robert?"

"Yes. I always go to the park on a Saturday."

The policeman showed him a photograph of a little girl. She was blonde with brown eyes and was smiling into the camera very happily. It looked a bit like the little girl who had pretended to be Crystal yesterday.

"Do you know this girl, Robert?" asked the policeman.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"You've never seen her? Or talked to her?"

"No."

"Will you take me to the park? Show me where you were yesterday?"

"It's raining."

"Yes, I know. But you've got a coat."

"I've got a coat with a cape."

Robert was very proud of his coat with a cape. He was able to ride his bike in the rain with the cape over his bag of letters keeping them quite dry. He knew

he was skilled at delivering dry mail in the rain. Some of the other postmen, men who were much smarter than he was, couldn't deliver dry mail in the rain. He knew. He'd heard the complaints. No one complained about Robert's mail being wet. The cape showed how very important he was. Robert went and got his coat out of the hall cupboard, and returned to the lounge with it on, smiling with pride at his coat with a cape.

"Now we can go out in the rain," he announced.

Together they walked down the odd side of Victoria Street into Park Street and along to the playground in the park. Robert sat on his bench.

"This is where I sit," he said.

"Is this where you sat yesterday?"

"This is where I always sit."

"Who was here yesterday?"

Robert thought hard.

"There was a little boy with his mother. She pushed him on the bub's swing. Then they left. There were three other children. Two boys and a girl. One of the boys had his arm in a sling. He stayed on the slide."

"Tell me about the girl, Robert."

"She was blonde but she wasn't Crystal."

"Who's Crystal?"

"Crystal's my friend."

"Where did you meet her?"

"Here."

"Was she here yesterday?"

"No. She hasn't been here for a long time."

"Tell me about the girl who was here yesterday."

"There's nothing to tell."

"Did you talk to her?"

"No. I told you. She wasn't Crystal."

"How long were you here for?"

"Same as usual."

"How long is that?"

"Forty-five minutes. I leave at a quarter to five so I can be home in time for 'Touched by an Angel'."

"And did you get home in time yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about yesterday's episode of 'Touched by an Angel'."

"I can't. The phone rang and I missed it."

"Who was on the phone?"

"I don't know. A woman. She asked me all about what sort of car I wanted to buy."

The policeman could not see any point in continuing his questioning.

"Now show me which way you go home."

"There's only one way."

Robert led the policeman up the even side of Park Street and into Victoria Street, up the even side of course, and home.

The policeman had the same uneasy feeling he'd had when Robert's mother died, but he had absolutely no evidence. This time he didn't even have a body.

"If you remember anything about that little girl, I want you to come straight down to the police station and tell me. This is very important. Do you understand, Robert?"

"Yes."

The policeman left and Robert returned to the television. The golf was finished, but it didn't matter, he could watch Rex Hunt. Every time Rex said "yibberdi yabbita," Robert said it too, and then laughed.

Over the following weeks, Robert continued to look out for Crystal. He examined all the birthday cards to see who they were for. But they were never addressed to Crystal anything.

Every Saturday afternoon, Robert visited the playground with his small white paper bag of lollies. For weeks, although the weather was warm and sunny, there were no children. No children at all. Robert couldn't understand it. There were always children at the playground on sunny days. After a couple of months, the children started to return, but there was always an adult with them and Robert never had an opportunity to speak with them. He didn't mind. He just liked to watch them play. He ate the lollies himself and waited for the day when Crystal would return.

Sometimes he'd see the police cruise past and he'd wave to his friends in uniform. They always waved back because they knew who he was. He was Robert, the postman, and he was important. When Crystal came back, she'd see how important he was, with the policemen waving hello. She was bound to be impressed.