

The Send

by Dan Keeble

I am standing in Hopes' East London grocers, ten years tall. Two cawing crow trees, in 1950s black utility coats down to their ankles, tower over me like gothic cathedrals. They conceal paisley patterned wrap-over pinafores. Their trunks reach up to ash-grey canopies topped with war-poster head scarves. The dull-to-depression fluorescent shop light doesn't reach down to a sapling with a jute shopping bag and a *send* note from Ma.

Through nasal gossiping they are slandering the neighbourhood. *Doreen Prosser was at it again in the alleyway last night. I heard it wasn't kissing. What it was was concealed in a snorted mumble and a nodding glance to Mrs. Hope. She silently nudged them on while turning the handle of the Avery slicer. Today it is ham. Floppy pieces fall from the spinning blade without stopping. She collects every fourth slice in her other palm, folds it twice and stuffs it into her mouth. Her eyes are barely visible, buried behind shiny flushed cheeks. I am mesmerised by her dexterity and how her greasy lips resemble the animal she slices. Munching noisily on a mouthful of the pink gunge doesn't stop her talking. I think about Ma. *We don't have much, but we've got manners.* Mrs. Hope's attentive ear urges on the character assassinations. *Mrs. Dawson has new net curtains. I've no idea why that's, Hmm, or why they all sniffed on the intake hearing, Jenny Bartlett has a new lodger.**

They ignore my presence. Patience stretches into a long wait if Joe isn't serving. Joe Hope has no time for tittle-tattle. Fearful, I stand rigid and motionless, and I want to pee. It is getting desperate. The smell of lavender talcum powder is nauseating. I tighten my grip on the note and coins. A few locals peer through the door glass, checking to see if Joe is serving before daring to enter. Only the regular muck spreaders and kids on a *send* would chance it otherwise.

Joe enters from the back room. I feel rescued, as any kid would. A funny quip. His trick with a coin. The way he side-steps Mrs. Hope's demeaning remarks with a joke and a grin. Nobody knows if Mrs. Hope has a name. But they all know it was

she who wrote *no tick* on the clock.

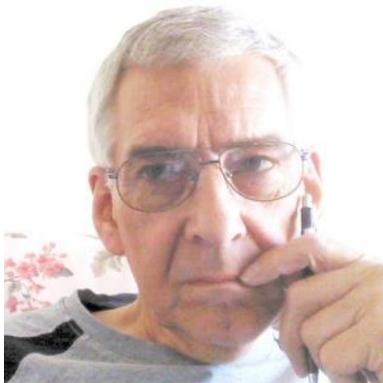
Joe has a strange look about him. His face and shoulders are drooping.

'The king has died,' he says. 'It was on the wireless.'

The harridans gasp. They sniffle unnoticeable tears into white handkerchiefs fumbled from the pit depths of coal black pockets. Unperturbed, Mrs. Hope carries on turning the handle. Another fourth slice is folded into her mouth.

I search everyone's faces, terrified. I don't know how I am supposed to react. So I cry too. Only half my tears come from the release of tension after standing for twenty minutes and needing a pee.

All adult noise stops. Four faces peer down at me in bewilderment. I flee from the shop. My pants are wet. I run past the Odeon cinema poster outside advertising *Quo Vadis* starring Peter Ustinov, wondering if it will now have to be cancelled.



Dan Keeble hails from the furthest point East in the UK. He has enjoyed many successes with online and print publications of poetry, short stories, humour, and more serious articles. He writes a monthly column for a county magazine, and has appeared in *Fiction on the Web*, *Everyday Fiction*, *Turnpike Magazine*, *Scribble*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Agape Review*, and many others, on a sixty year writing journey to a stubby pencil.