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## *Dear Granny Smith*

The world doesn't seem to be made for human beings any more. There doesn't seem to be any room for us. We all have this fantastic new technology: all these computers and mobile phones and Sat Navs and the rest. It's supposed to help us to communicate with one another and to get around the planet without getting lost, but if you ask me no one communicates properly any more, no

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one gets to know each other, not even their own neighbour, and when it comes to where we are going, the human race is completely lost. No one knows which direction to turn.

I am writing this letter on the day of the national post strike.

I've been on strike a lot lately. There have been many days when the mail didn't come. To be honest, I don't even know if I know what it was all about. I mean, I know why I went on strike. I know why I voted for it. But I'm not really sure that the Union had the same set of reasons as me, and I'm not sure, by the time it's all over, whether anything will really have changed.

But I want to tell you why I chose to go on strike.

It wasn't about pay. I'm underpaid. I could do with some more pay. Fortunately I have no responsibilities any more. This

isn't true of most of my work mates. Many of them have young families. It's very hard for them, working so hard for so little reward, being so tired at the end of the day that they can't even enjoy their home life properly. But it wasn't about pay for any of us. It was about the future.

It was about the future of public service.

Does that seem like an old-fashioned phrase to you – "public service" – a bit out of place in our modern world?

It's not a term that the managers use any more.

They talk about "products".

That term always puzzles me. What products? We deliver the mail, don't we? We stick letters through letter boxes.

I was talking to one of the guys a few weeks ago. We were chatting about when we had first started out as postmen. He'd

been on an induction course over in the main office in the nearby city. This must have been a few years back, since no one goes on induction courses any more. He said they had been asked a particular question by the man running the course.

"What does the Royal Mail deliver?" he had asked.

There were about twenty people in the room. They all had to write down a list.

Letters. Bills. Packages. Postcards. Birthday cards. Magazines. Christmas cards. Presents. Books. DVDs. You name it. I'm sure you could make up a list of your own.

Then the guy running the course went round and asked everyone what was on their list, and everyone read out from their list, and every time someone added a new item, he put it onto his own list on the white board at the end

of the room. It got to be a pretty long list in the end.

And then, when everyone was satisfied with the list they had collectively made, the guy said, "But you've missed something out."

Everyone looked at each other then, wondering what it was they had missed out.

"You want to know what you've missed?" he said.

"Yes," they said.

"It's advertising."

See. That's what we deliver the most of. Not letters, or cards or presents. Not bank statements or credit card statements. Not even bills. Advertising. That's what makes up the bulk of the mail. The stuff everyone gets but nobody reads. That's what our "products" are: cheaper and cheaper ways to shovel more and more advertising

through your letter box. Stuff you never asked for. Stuff you never needed. Stuff which gets delivered anyway whether you asked for it or not.

Stuff.

We stuff your letter box with stuff. We stuff it through your letter box and then you stuff it into the bin. You say "Get stuffed!" Then the bin men come round and they stuff it into a hole in the ground; or, if you're really lucky, it gets "recycled", which means it gets made into more stuff before it finally gets stuffed into the ground; or sometimes it gets stuffed into a container and delivered to some Third World country, where it gets stuffed into a hole in the ground.

It ends up in the ground in the end.

So you ask me why I went on strike and I could say, "It's so I don't have to deliver quite so much stuff."

But you ask the Union, and they will say,

"That stuff pays your wages." Interestingly enough, that's what the managers say too.

See? I'm not sure my strike was for the same reasons as my Union.

I went on strike for more time and less stuff and for a return to public service.

That seems to me to be the recipe for a happy life.

What follows is my letter to you, Granny Smith. My letter of apology for everything that has gone wrong with the Royal Mail.