

The Man from Drury Lane – Tasbih

London wakes before the sun does. The fog comes first heavy and yellow, curling through the streets like breath from a sleeping giant. Then the bells begin: carriage wheels rattling, market women shouting, the hiss of steam from the baker's ovens, and somewhere among it all, my bell. "Ting-ting. Ting-ting." A pleasant sound, light and merry. It should bring comfort. It tells the city the muffin man has come. That's me. Or so they say.

Each morning, I rise in my narrow room above Drury Lane, strike a spark to the small stove, and warm the day's first batch. Muffins, crumpets, and the odd bit of stale bread I soften with milk to make seem fresh again. I wrap them in a clean white cloth, though my hands are never quite clean; flour clings, no matter how often I wash.

By half-past five, I'm on the street, the basket balanced on my arm, my bell ready to sing. I know every stone between here and Covent Garden. I know which doors open early, which streets smell before noon, which shopkeepers smile and which ones sneer. London is a grand thing from afar. All spires, smoke, and promise - but down here, beneath the horse muck and soot, it's only hunger that moves the people.

The mothers greet me first. They stretch out a penny, sometimes two, for something warm to fill their children before the long walk to workhouses and workshops. "God bless you, sir," they say. "The little ones do so love your muffins." I tip my cap, smile, and move on. I've learnt not to linger.

By seven, the theatres empty of their ghosts. Drury Lane holds its breath as the players' laughter fades, and the lamplighters douse the last of the street flames. Only the fog remains. Thick as pudding and twice as bitter. That's when the footsteps start. Always the same rhythm. Step. Step. Ting-ting. Sometimes behind me. Sometimes beside. Never ahead.

I've turned more times than I can count, peering into the haze. Nothing - only the long, wet street and the gas light glowing faintly through it. The city plays tricks when you walk it alone. One tenebrous morning in December of 1803, the fog was so dense it seemed to swallow sound. The bell's note vanished almost before it left my hand. Near the corner of Bow Street, I saw a boy - no more than nine, sitting on the steps of a boarding house, blue-lipped and trembling.

"Cold, are we?" I said softly. He nodded. I reached into my basket and gave him the smallest muffin. "Here, lad. Eat it while it's warm." He hesitated, then took it with shaking fingers. "Thank you, sir." I walked on. When I turned back, he was gone. Word travels fast in the markets. That evening, the women were whispering about a missing boy from Bow Street. "Disappeared in the fog," they said. "Nothing left but a bell sound, faint as a ghost's laugh." I said nothing.

There are hundreds of us muffin men in London. We sell warmth by the penny, moving through alleys before dawn. Few last long - the cold kills some; the drink kills others. You learn to keep your head down. Still, there are nights when I feel eyes on me, behind shutters, from darkened doorways, from children peeking round corners as their mothers hush them.

They know the rhyme, of course: *Do you know the muffin man, the muffin man, the muffin man...* It began as a jingle for the little ones, something bright to keep them from fear. Lately, though, it sounds different - lower, uneasy. As if the city itself were singing it to remind the children to stay indoors.

February brought a deep freeze. Ice sheathed the Thames; beggars froze in their rags. Still, I went out. Hunger doesn't stop for weather. At Long Acre I found a woman huddled in a doorway, her baby crying weakly against her chest. I offered her a muffin. She took it, eyes hollow, and asked if I might spare another for the child. I gave her two.

When I passed the same way next morning, the woman was gone. The baby too. But her shawl lay frozen to the step, stiff and rimed with frost. By spring, the rhyme was everywhere. Children sang it in skipping games; drunks muttered it as they staggered home. *Do you know the muffin man who lives in Drury Lane?*

They laughed when they said it to me, thinking it a harmless jest. I laughed too, though something inside me twisted. For I did live there. I had since the plague took my mother, since the workhouse spat me out to fend for myself. London had shaped me, kneaded me, baked me hard as any loaf. And like a loaf left too long in the oven, something inside had blackened.

One night, after selling the last of my muffins, I turned down an alley near Covent Garden. The fog hung thick as ever, but through it came a sound. Soft, familiar, almost sweet. A girl's voice. "Do you know the muffin man...?" I froze. The singing grew louder. Then a figure appeared. A girl in a thin shawl, her bare feet grey with soot.

She smiled when she saw me. "Sir, could I have a muffin? Just one? I've no money, but I can pay tomorrow." Her voice trembled. "Tomorrow," I said, "the fog will be worse. You'd best get home." "I've no home," she whispered. Something in me ached. I reached into the basket and handed her the muffin I had saved for myself. I wouldn't have needed it anyway.

The next morning, the constable found the alley empty save for crumbs and a single child's shoe. After that, the rhyme changed again. The children no longer sang it in daylight. They whispered it after dark, huddled close to their fires. *Do you know the muffin man who lives in Drury Lane? Yes, I know the muffin man - who comes when children stray.*

By summer, folk crossed the street when they heard my bell. Doors stayed shut. Mothers pulled their children inside. The muffins cooled faster each day. I told myself it was fear that made them cruel. The city breeds fear like mould. But sometimes, walking home through the fog, I catch my reflection in bakery windows; eyes hollow, face pale, mouth set in a line I barely recognise. Perhaps they see something I do not.

The police came once, asking questions about disappearances. I offered them tea and a muffin. They stayed only long enough to decline both. When they'd gone, I sat in silence, the bell heavy in my hand. I thought of the boy, the woman, the girl; of kindness, of hunger, of how easily one can become the other. London forgets the poor quickly. But the poor never forget London.

In the autumn of 1804, the frost returned. I still walked my route. Drury Lane to the Strand, past the market and back. The fog thickened until even the gas lamps were only dull smears of gold. That night, I heard footsteps again. Steady. Careful. Following. I stopped. So did they. I turned, and for the first time, someone was there. A child, perhaps twelve, standing in the mist. Thin. Pale. Watching me with eyes too old for his face.

"Are you the muffin man?" he asked. I nodded slowly. "I am." He stepped closer. "My sister... she bought a muffin from you. She never came home." The bell in my hand felt suddenly cold. "Perhaps she moved away," I said softly. "The city swallows many." He shook his head. "I heard the bell." The mist swirled between us. For a moment, it seemed the whole city was holding its breath. Then the boy turned and ran. I did not follow. I could not. My legs would not move. I only stood there, the bell dangling at my side, until the fog closed over him and I was alone again.

They stopped singing the rhyme after that. Or perhaps they sang it more quietly, behind closed doors. The city forgets quickly when it must. But some nights, when the wind shifts down Drury Lane, you can still hear it, soft, half-lost in the fog. *Do you know the muffin man...?*

I am older now. The bell sits silent beside my bed. My hands tremble too much to bake. I listen to the city outside. New voices, new wagons, new cries; and I wonder if they know whose footsteps they walk in.

Was I kind once? I think so. Did I mean harm? Never. Yet somehow, in trying to warm a cold city, I became colder than any of them.

Perhaps that is what London does: it bakes you until all that is left is crust. The fog thickens at the window. Somewhere, far away, a faint sound rings out. *Ting-ting. Ting-ting.* I smile. The city remembers after all.