

'Tibs the Post Office Cat'



by Olivia Armstrong

Sensory story transcript

Hello, I am Olivia. I tell stories. Stories that are big and stories that are small. You can listen quietly, or you can join in.

If you are going to join in there are some things you can use that might help you tell the story, ordinary things around the house that should be quite easy to find.

I am going to tell you what you will need. Pause the story and you and your grown-ups go on a quick treasure hunt and see if you can find them.

Don't worry if you don't have them all, whatever you have, there will still be plenty to join in with. Are you ready to write them down? Okay.

Number one, your favourite cuddly toy or something soft to touch.

Two, some torn up or shredded paper in a plastic bag.

Three, your favourite small snack (be careful not to eat it too soon!)

Four, a few drops of vinegar and a separate spoon of Bicarbonate of Soda.

Five, a handful of uncooked rice in a plastic bottle or container.

Six, this is quite a funny unusual one. A pair of rubber gloves with paper clips fastened onto the end.

Seven, fizzy water in a bottle, and a cup or glass.

And finally, very carefully, a tiny piece of sandpaper.

Go and gather those things now. Don't forget to pause the story.

Hello! You're back. Lay out your things beside you within easy reach. Your grown-up will help you keep them tidy.

One of my favourite places to tell stories is in the exciting Postal Museum in London. There are special stories to be found everywhere. And this story is a true story about one of the most unusual friends who came to work for the Post Office.

His story began a long time ago, before your time and even before mine, once upon a time in the 1950's in London. Let's imagine we are travelling back to that time and that place. Listen. What sounds might we hear?

[SOUNDS: raised voices chattering at a market and the sound of a clock bell chiming.]

Did you hear Big Ben chime? How many times? Listen again....

[SOUNDS: the clock bell chimes 3 times.]

One cold evening in November, fog was drifting slowly from the river. The rain had been falling and making glistening shining puddles.

Shall we make the sound of the rain? Find your **bottle filled with uncooked rice** and move it slowly for a few drops of rain or try moving it faster and see if you can make a real storm!

[SOUNDS: the sound of raindrops falling steadily.]

Can you hear that rain? Some folk would say it was raining cats and dogs!

But now the rain had stopped, and the skies were bright. It was Bonfire Night, fireworks whizzed and popped in bright, colourful explosions!

[SOUNDS: the sound of fireworks whistling and cracking.]

Children held sparklers and watched them fizzle. We can make that sound too, without a firework in sight. Take your **bicarbonate of soda** and add in a drop of **vinegar** and listen.

[SOUNDS: the sound of fizzing.]

Fizzling sparklers!

Old Mr Talbut was heading to work on his squeaking, rattling bicycle.

[SOUNDS: a squeaking bicycle wheel.]

Alf Talbut was a cleaner and worked in St. Martins Le Grand – the postal headquarters. Once, a very long time ago, every single letter sent from London began its journey there in that grand building of marble columns and a snaking spiral staircase.

But it had one big problem, or should I say, one small problem. Mice! They were everywhere. Licking letters, nibbling through paper, parcels and packages. Chewing sacks and stacks of cards. Feasting on food that folk often posted to one another in those days, slices of birthday cake or wedding cake, fancy chocolates, boxes of biscuits, even the posties' cheesy sandwiches!

Can you make a good mouse sound? Let's try. 3 little squeaks and 3 loud squeaks. Ready, go!

[SOUNDS: Olivia makes the sound of 3 quiet squeaks and 3 loud squeaks.]

But far worse, the mice even ate the money that was sent through the post. Thousands of pounds all shredded. And all those piles of paper made fine places to nest.

Shall we make the sound of the nesting mice? Find your **bag of paper** put your hand in and gently rustle your fingers through like a tiny mouse. Here we go!

[SOUNDS: the sound of rustling through paper.]

Mr Talbut would polish and dust and scrub-a-dub-dub everything, but he couldn't stop those mice. Once, not so long ago, he'd had two helpers – Minnie and Fluffy. Listen. I think we might hear them.

[SOUNDS: wild cats meowing.]

Two tough cats with sharp claws and quick as lightning, they had chased every single mouse from St Martins Le Grand. In fact, they had even been paid! They weren't the first cats to be paid by the post office. It had been going on for almost seventy years by then.

It all began when one postie wrote a letter to their boss, asking for a cat and some money to pay for its food and milk. They explained that a cat was not a pet but a fellow colleague and should be paid wages.

Luckily, the official Postmaster General, the big boss, agreed and no less than 3 cats were sent straight away to that postie along with a weekly allowance of 4-pence each.

After that, every post office wanted a marvellous mouse catching machine of its very own and the official headquarters at St. Martins Le Grand had had those two – Minnie and Fluffy.

But after many years of mouse chasing duties, they were rather tired and found it much nicer to snooze alongside the mice rather than chase them.

[SOUNDS: cats snoring gently.]

Eventually the two cats retired but as soon as they'd left, even more mice had returned! Scampering, chewing, squeaking, and nibbling!

[SOUNDS: mice scuttling and squeaking.]

What was Mr Talbut going to do? Luckily, he had a secret. That secret was small, fluffy, stripy with a little rough tongue.

Very, very carefully rub the **sandpaper** with your little finger. It feels like a cat's tongue. Be careful, it can be a little bit rough!

Mr Talbut's secret was that Fluffy had had a kitten before she left, a tiny weeny scrap of a thing and Mr Talbut had found it hiding alone in a cupboard in the café right in the basement of the building.

Now find your **soft toy**. Stroke its fur and choose whether you want to tickle its ear or rub its tummy. Imagine it is a little cat. Can you think of a good name for a cat? Why not call it out to me after 3? Are you ready? 1,2,3! Ohhh, I really like that one!

Mr Talbut called the kitten Tibs and sometimes if no one was listening, Tibby. But he couldn't take him home, he wasn't allowed pets in his flat.

So, he had been feeding Tibs in secret, smuggling in milk and scraps. He knew Tibs was a great mouser because there wasn't a single mouse down there in the basement where Tibs lived. But, he wasn't sure the Postal headquarters would want such a small cat.

As he arrived for work that bonfire night, he decided Tibs was big enough and was ready to go to work. And so, he presented Tibs to the boss and explained how he had already been busy catching all the mice in the cafe.

And, Tibs was given the job, and no longer had to hide. He was now an official member of staff and was paid 18-pence a week for his food and soft blanket.

He was the sweetest of cats. Gentle, peaceful until he saw a mouse! Then he would walk, stalk, every corner of every corridor, weaving in and around the posties' feet, paws chasing down the steps of that spiral staircase, under the sacks of post until the mouse had well and truly been caught!

This is a really fun and silly sound to make. I found out that **gloves with paper clips** attached sound like animal paws. So if you have some too, try out that sound with me. Are you ready? Let's have a chase!

[SOUNDS: animal paws and claws clicking on a hard surface.]

You were fast!

At breaktime when all the mice had disappeared, Tibs would softly pad his way down to the café to be fed treats from the posties' plates and then to have a little catnap on a sack of letters, before starting work once again.

[SOUNDS: cats snoring gently.]

Tibs grew and grew and grew. He was not a tiny kitten for very long, soon he was as heavy as a toddler. They thought he might be the biggest cat in all of London! He was a giant! With a giant heart.

He became the best friend of every postie in the country. They had all heard of him. His fame even spread to the nearby St Bart's Hospital, and nurses would organise special visits so the patients in the hospital could come in to pet him and be cheered up by this huge soft tabby bundle.

He was loved by everyone. I bet you would have loved him too.

But life was not such fun every day. Working cats like Tibs still had to fight for their wages, no matter how well loved they were.

One day in Westminster, by the London river, the politicians, the people in charge, had arrived at work to discuss one of the most serious issues of the day. The very important matter of cats' wages.

[SOUNDS: clock bells chime and a deep voice shouts 'order!']

"Mr. Speaker", shouted one politician, "are cats paid enough?" "Or too much!" Shouted back another. Back at postal HQ Mr Talbut and Tibs waited anxiously. Would Tibs be sacked and forced to leave?

After many hours, the big boss, the Postmaster General, finally agreed that cats should stay and even be paid a little more.

Tibs's job was safe for life. And every year after that his wages went up a little bit more, which was just as well because Tibs loved his food. Give a loud cheer for Tibs! Are you ready? Hip-hip! Hooray!

[SOUNDS: people shout 'hooray' and clap hands.]

Well after that day, Tibs's diary was always jam packed. In the summertime, he was even invited to the most glamorous event in the whole of London – a Cat and Film Stars Garden Party.

[SOUNDS: vintage music plays and the sound of cats meowing.]

Cameras flashed, cats meowed, crowds gathered round, glasses of champagne were raised, and teeny triangles of cucumber sandwiches were nibbled.

Have you still got your **snack**? Tuck in now. I wonder what you're having. An apple, a rice cake, maybe a chocolate biscuit!

Pour out your **fizzy water** and listen to the sparkling bubbles.

[SOUNDS: a drink pouring into a glass and the bubbles fizzing.]

But most people didn't bother to gaze at the fancy dresses of the film-stars, or they didn't look at the film stars' cats, they didn't ask for photographs or autographs. Instead, they all wanted a paw-print from Tibs because he was the star of the show. Tibs, the Post Office Cat!

Tibs was so famous, he was even photographed for a book of all the celebrity cats in London. For the photo, he was sat inside an old fashioned, bright red, Victorian pillar box, but the camera flashbulb popped and startled Tibs.

[SOUNDS: a camera flashbulb pops.]

And so, in a flash of fur, whoosh, he was away! The photographers had only managed to take one photo. It is rather blurry, and it is the only one we have of Tibs. Have you seen it?

They called him Tibs the Great. He was the Royal Mail's most famous and most loved cat. He worked hard. Every day for 14 years and he lived his nine lives to the full which all made him rather sleepy.

Find your soft toy again and hold it close. Sssh, let's creep away and leave Tibs dreaming, curled up on a big sack of letters. Maybe one of the letters is even for you? Sleep well Tibs.

[SOUNDS: cat snoring gently.]

End of story and transcript.