

# A Rubbish Christmas

By Olivia Goldson-Truman

A kraft-brown envelope with a beautifully written address falls through the letterbox. Willow had been waiting for her letter from Mahia for what seemed like years. They'd become pen pals through their English project at school and loved writing to each other about their forests and wild animals.

Willow wrote about the rolling green hills of North Wales where she lived and how her house was halfway up the mountains with views of the ocean and the wind farms in the distance. The long winding road through the valleys reminds her of the snake tracks she saw in the sand on Safari once - winding and bending with such precision. She loved the shapes of nature and how everything made sense. Like the veins on the leaves and the intricate details and patterns of fresh snowflakes. The way ants march one behind the other and how bees use the sun to find their way back home.

On her last beach trip, Willow found a small blue tile fragment buried in the sand. She was convinced it was the loot from a sunken pirate ship. The intricate blue pattern was like the map to find other long-lost treasures. She wanted to send it to Mahia because something so beautiful should be shared with friends.

After reading her letter about Mahia's recent trip to the big city, she saw huge skyscrapers taller than Jack's Beanstalk looming over her. Willow quickly penned a quick reply about the magical pirate ship and asked Mahia to help find the rest of the treasure. She stuffed it in the blue and white tile and sealed it with tape. She scribbled the address down as best she could and ran to her mum for a stamp. On their way to the shops, they could post the letter and Willow and Mahia could begin their next adventure as soon as possible. Willow didn't want to waste any time in case some other naughty pirates found the rest of the map before they could, or worse still, find all the treasure and keep it for themselves.

A few weeks passed, and with each day and postal delivery, Willow was increasingly apprehensive. Had the pirates found the treasure yet? Or where was the rest of the map? She'd returned to the beach several times but hadn't seen another piece. She hoped that Mahia could unlock some of the mystery and maybe even give her an idea of where to look.

The next day, eagerly anticipating her letter's arrival, Willow looked out the window for the familiar red van. As soon as she saw it coming around the corner, she raced out the door and down the pathway to the gate. Crossing her fingers behind her back, she watched to see where the postman would go next.

"Nothing for you today, I'm afraid." Said the postman kindly.

"Are you sure?" Said Willow.

"I'll check again on my way back down, but I've not seen anything with your name on it this morning."

Willow uncrossed her fingers and slumped down on the steps leading up to her house. It had been so long since she received a letter from Malaysia, and she was worried that the treasure had already gone.

Just then, she could hear the familiar sound of her garden gate creaking open. Peering up from under her scowl, she saw the postman bounding up the path.

“Must have missed it when I checked the mail this morning. I found it in the pile of letters for Mr Hughes. It says, please deliver with urgency to Ms Willow Griffiths.” The postman said excitedly.

Hearing her name, Willow scrambled to her feet and snatched the letter from the postman's hand. Remembering her manners, she smiled and said, “Sorry for snatching. It’s an important letter that will help me find some treasure. Thank you, Mr Postman. Have a nice day!”

Eager to see what Mahia had suggested, she tore open the letter and missed the blue piece of plastic flying out of the envelope.

She plonked back down on the steps and skimmed the letter so no more time was wasted. The smile on her face dissipated as she read. Mahia hadn’t found the map. Or the treasure. It was quite the opposite. Mahia’s story explained how the lush forest surrounding Mahia’s house has burnt down. Someone had dumped some illegal rubbish amongst the trees, and it caught fire. The fire spread so quickly that Mahia almost lost her house as well. They had been living under a thick grey blanket of smoke for a few days, and it wasn’t safe to go outside to send letters.

When it was finally safe enough, Mahia entered the forest and found a melted blue piece of plastic with the words “Made in the UK” stamped on it. She wanted to send it to Willow because it was from the UK, which meant Willow and her friends were responsible for the fire in the forest.

Heartbroken by what she had read, Willow scampered back to the house to find her mum to show her the hurtful things her friend had written about her.

When her mum read the letter, she asked to see the blue piece of plastic that Mahia had sent. Maybe that would give her some clues about what Mahia was talking about. They retraced Willow’s steps to find the missing piece but couldn’t find it anywhere. Remembering the excitement of opening the letter, Willow suggested looking outside. Maybe it had flown out without her realising it.

It didn’t take long to find it on the garden path. It was rectangular and thick, and when Willow rubbed her hands over the top, she could feel each letter like the studs on her Lego bricks. She didn’t recognise the blue plastic as a Lego piece. She couldn’t remember ever seeing it at all, so how could she have sent it to Malaysia and started the fire in the first place? It was a rubbish clue, she thought.

“Ah ha. Come, Willow. I have something to show you.” Said her mum.

Confused by what her mum had figured out, Willow hurried to the office upstairs behind her. She sat on the desk chair, as she did when she wanted to type something on the computer, and watched her mum bring up YouTube and type something in.

A video started playing, and the sounds of a fire crackling, popping and snapping filled the room. The concerned voices of people and the whirring of a helicopter could be heard in the background.

Moving to get a better view, Willow watched as people scampered around, covering their faces from the massive plume of black smoke that had engulfed them. Many were carrying empty buckets and spades, and everyone was shouting at each other in a language Willow couldn’t understand. This must have been the fire Mahia was talking about. And this must have been the place she described in her stories.

“Willow, it wasn’t you who caused this fire.” Her mum began to explain. “What Mahia meant was that rubbish from the UK had been illegally dumped in her forest and set

alight. What these people are saying in this video is that the UK needs to take its rubbish back. And that Malaysia isn't a dumping ground."

A little perturbed by what she had found out, Willow watched the video a little more.

"But how did our rubbish end up in Malaysia? Why would someone send it there when we have rubbish bins here?"

"We have rubbish bins here, you're right, but all this rubbish was from those bins. What happened was when the rubbish truck came to pick it up and take it away to be sorted. Some of it has probably been recycled, and some has been burnt here in the UK, but most of it has been sent to Malaysia because we don't know what else to do with it." Her mum explained.

"But then why are we told to be careful about what rubbish we put in each bin when it all gets put together anyway and sent to Mahia's house?"

"Our government hasn't built the facilities to deal with the amount of rubbish we produce. Many things in the UK come in plastic packaging or materials that can't be recycled. So, instead of figuring out the problem, it's cheaper to dump it elsewhere. So, it's no longer our problem.

"But now it's Mahia's problem," Willow sniffled. "And now she's mad at me because her forest was on fire."

"She's not mad at you, Wills. She's mad at everyone over here. And she has a right, too. We shouldn't be dumping our rubbish on them. It's not fair. But there may be something we could do to help."

In the lead-up to Christmas, Willow and her mum have been collecting their recycling, and they've also done an enormous litter pick of their village. They've made sure to clean and sort it properly because they've made big plans for it.

They've been talking to their neighbours and sharing Mahia's story. They've also been showing everyone the little blue piece of plastic Mahia had sent in her letter.

Saddened by what they heard, the neighbours also started to collect their recycling and sort it into piles for Willow's big project. They can't wait to see what she does with it, and they've also realised that they can help Mahia by buying fewer products wrapped in plastic from the shops.

Mr Hughes no longer buys big bottles of water anymore. He uses a filtered bottle that lives in the fridge. Mr Dennis has stopped buying his coffee in takeaway cups because Willow's reusable mug keeps it hot enough to last all day. Ms Montgomery has changed the cat food she buys. Her new cat food is made from real chicken and responsibly sourced fish. It now comes in a tin that is easier to recycle. Everyone in the village has stopped using plastic shopping bags, and there's even a small basket of spare cotton tote bags in the local shop in case someone forgot to bring theirs.

The whole village was behind Willow and her mum, and they were all determined to help Mahia clean up her village, too. They've all written to the Prime Minister demanding a change in the recycling policies and a complete ban on plastic production in the UK. They've also called for a ban on exporting waste and investing in better waste management systems. They know that the best way to help Mahia clean up her forest is by stopping any more rubbish from getting there in the first place.

Not wanting to spoil the surprise, Willow hasn't sent a letter to Mahia since she received the bad news about her forest. She had hoped that Mahia wouldn't be upset or angry with her and that the surprise she had for her was worth waiting for.

With Christmas only a few days away, Willow and her mum get to work cutting and shaping their collected material. They find some old wood and borrow some power tools from the hardware store in the village. They cut and saw a wooden base and drilled some supports to make it more stable. They then start tying and bounding their collected materials onto the base.

It takes a few days to get through everything they had collected. The entire village did such an excellent job of collecting so many bits and pieces. There were empty water bottles, cereal boxes, plastic wrappers, crisp packets, and cardboard boxes. And each item was twisted, moulded, and bound into shape.

It took a few days, but they were finally done. With the help of a few more people, Willow and her mum covered their creation and precariously lifted it onto the wooden dolly trolley. They wheeled it down the road and into the village square, ready for tomorrow's big unveiling.

Willow couldn't sleep. She was so excited to unveil her big surprise because she had arranged for someone to video the whole celebration and send it to Mahia so they could all see how tirelessly they had worked to help clean up their village. Willow felt like it wasn't much, as there was still a lot of rubbish in Malaysia, but if they could encourage a village to stop using so much plastic, then maybe other villages would start to make some changes, too. And more people will write letters to the government urging them to change their policies and how they dispose of our rubbish.

Already dressed and ready, Willow bounded into her mum's room, desperate to get to town and show everyone what they had been making.

"Mama, wake up, wake up. It's time to go."

"We're going to be too early," Her mum said. "Go back to bed."

"But muuuuum. Wake up! We need to get things ready!"

"Oh, alright then. But breakfast first. And a quick tidy up to ensure we have everything we need tonight."

Willow hadn't tidied up that fast ever. She was too excited to waste time, so she put all her tools and toys back where they lived before her mum could finish her coffee. She grabbed their coats and stood by the door, hurrying her mum along.

Running down to the village, Willow saw that their creation was exactly as they had left it the night before. The village hall had built the stage, and the lights were ready to do. All the local business owners were setting up their stalls, and everyone had been down to reserve their place in the crowd. Camp chairs were lined up neatly in front of the stage, and hundreds of banners begging people to stop using plastic and encouraging the government to change how we recycle.

The local news crew were setting up their broadcast van, and the news reporter was already telling people about the event happening in the village.

Willow couldn't believe how big their idea had gotten. She began to cry at the thought of how proud her friend would be and how one small piece of blue plastic would hopefully change the world.

The square started filling with people as the sun went down. The news crew had their spotlights shining, and all the villagers were excitedly chatting amongst themselves and waving their banners. Willow clutched the blue piece of plastic in her coat pocket and gripped her mum's hand tightly as they walked up on stage.

"Good Evening, ladies and gentlemen," the village mayor spoke, and the crowds went silent.

“Please welcome to the stage the vision behind the project and the driving force behind the change – Willow Griffiths and her mum, Skye.”

The crowd erupted in massive applause, and people hollered and whistled at them as they came into view. Willow squinted her eyes from the glaring spotlight and tightened her grip on her mum's hand.

“Thank you everyone. Thank you. We honestly couldn't have done it without you,” her mum shouted over the applause.

“It's been a big effort from the entire village to make these changes, and we wouldn't be here today if you didn't help collect the materials but also draft and sign the letter to the Prime Minister. Plastic Pollution is a collective problem. Not only do we have to do our part, but the government must also do theirs.” The crowd erupted into more applause and hollering.

Willow's skin pricked with excitement, and the tears threatened to escape her eyes. She tried to take it all in but felt overwhelmed by how many people were there and how loud the crowd was getting.

Hiding behind her mum a little more, Willow listened as her mum continued to talk.

“This idea came from Willow's friend Mahia, who nearly lost her house in a forest fire started by the illegal dumping of waste from the UK. We couldn't stand by and watch more destruction, so Willow and I have been working tirelessly for the last few days to bring you all a rubbish Christmas and a message this year to end plastic production for good!”

And with that, the cover was ripped off their creation, and the crowd erupted into the loudest cheer. Willow had to block her ears. The spotlight moved from her face and shone on the Christmas tree they had made using all the rubbish they had collected.

“Go on, Willow, switch on the lights,” her mum said.

Willow pressed the button, and the lights on their tree sprung into action. It looked even better than before, and all the shiny material they used glistened in the Christmas glow.

The crowd continued to shout their support and chant their chants, demanding change. There was hollering, whistling, and the loudest clapping Willow had ever seen.

They made their way down the stage and towards the tree, clutching a copy of the letter they had sent to the Prime Minister. They took the letter and stuck it to their tree, with the address clearly marked:

The Prime Minister  
No. 10 Downing Street.  
By Kind Hand.

Willow stuck her little blue piece of plastic to the envelope and scribbled, *Take back your rubbish from Mahia* on the front.

“And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen, one small but critical message from Malaysia. Let this serve as a stark reminder that our collective actions today shape the world our children will inherit tomorrow. A very Rubbish Christmas to all and to all, a good night!”

The next day, Willow sent her letter to Mahia and the link for the video, too. She also included a copy of the letter they had all sent to the Prime Minister. She hoped that although she couldn't fix the problem in Malaysia or bring back her forest, she could see that people in the UK care and that, collectively, they have promised to do their part to end plastic pollution for good.