

## CHECK-OUT

Oh, I was so looking forward to going home.

But another customer loomed, sailing out from the confusion of the cluttered aisles, trolley replete, almost overflowing, with bread, and bread, and bread and half a hundred kinds of ready meal, and cereals, and soap, and ...

The groceries went sweetly through the scanner, sugar, sugar, corn-flakes, crisps – you had to take a firm hand with those, no messing about, make sure the bar-code is good and flat. Loo rolls, loo rolls – no problem, a little sigh of relief – they could be tricky, the bar-code buried in the crinkly plastic. Thank goodness the scanner wasn't playing up any more. The afternoon had been dreadful. First the usual rush of customers at lunch-time, impatient, in a hurry; then, in the haven of the quiet period in mid-afternoon, a milk bottle had managed to leak all over the conveyor. Keep the customer happy, call for 'assistance'. All cleaned up, but still there was a sticky patch on the conveyor. Watch the clock, only four minutes to go, nearly half-past, then – freedom, home, Mum and Dad and Kate and Mary and little Louise ...

From years ago, a memory returned.

The fire crackled in the open fire-place, sending a soft flickering light into the room. We were gathered around our Mum. She sat on a low chair, we sat cross-legged on the floor. She was thinking about what fantastic tale she would tell us. Our favourites were the eerie stories which seemed to come from nowhere out of her head – such a delight to feel the frisson of fear in the cosiness of the firelight.

‘The tower stood alone in the middle of the lonely moor. I had been dared to climb to the top, and to prove that I had done it, I had to count the stairs in the spiral staircase which led to the roof.

‘I pushed open the low wooden door at the base of the tower and went into the cold, damp space inside. I felt the rail of the stair and switched on my torch. At first, the stairs led in a simple spiral up to a platform some way up the tower – thirty-four steps. A short ladder led from this platform to one above – ten steps. This pattern repeated, though for some reason, the next stretch of staircase had only thirty-three steps. The third and final spiral gave way to another ladder which led directly to the roof. One hundred and thirty-one steps altogether.

‘I stepped out onto the roof and looked around. Since I had been climbing up inside, a dense fog had rolled in off the moors. It was as if the tower were jutting through a cloud. Looking straight down, I couldn’t see the ground. I needed to get down before it got any worse, otherwise I would never be able to find my way home.

‘Down the ladder – ten steps; the top spiral, thirty-four steps; ladder, spiral, ladder and the bottom spiral – thirty-five steps. No wait, the bottom spiral had been thirty-four. I re-climbed the stairs – it was definitely thirty-five. Shrugging, I descended again. I scanned the torch beam along the wall at the bottom of the tower – where was that door?

There was no door. Instead, there was another ladder. Ten steps. Then a spiral staircase. Thirty-four steps. Then another ladder. Ten steps. Then, a spiral staircase ...’

Going up the stairs to bed, we jostled and teased each other – ‘Don’t forget to count the stairs when you come down in the morning!’ - that tale had been one of my favourites.

The scanner beeped sharply and brought my mind back instantly to the real world. I scanned the item again and looked at the clock. Only seven minutes to go.

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