



MENTAL ARITHMETIC

There was something odd about those self-service tills today. Mrs D decided it must be some kind of new customer-friendly technology they had deployed. She continued with her scanning.

“Apple juice - two pounds,” said the little tinny voice.

“That - wait a minute - five pounds forty. Continue,” said a slightly different voice. Or was that just her imagination? She scanned the next item.

“Organic Baked Beans - one pound,” said the till.

“Easy-peasy - six pounds forty. Next!”

“Red pepper - forty pence.”

“Six forty and forty - six eighty. Continue,” said the till, sounding slightly bored.

And so it continued, all the way through to the vegetarian sausages.

“Two pounds twenty,” said one voice. “Whoo - pricey!”

“Fifteen pounds forty-five,” replied the other quickly. “That all?” it asked.

“You finished, then?” asked the first voice.

Mrs D looked round. No one was nearby, the boy in attendance having been called away to deal with an unexpected item in the bagging area.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Speak up, can’t hear: are you finished?”

“Yes,” she said clearly and loudly. She noticed the boy look round at her. This was slightly embarrassing.

“Come on then,” said the voice, “time to stump up. Cash or card?”

Mrs D thought that this tone of voice was perhaps taking customer-friendliness too far.

“Card,” she said firmly.

“Stick it in then,” advised the second voice. “Know your pin-number? You can just shout it out.”

“Of course I know it,” said Mrs D. “But I’m not going to shout anything out. I’ll key it in, just in the usual way, thank you.”

The self-service till emitted what sounded like two raspberries. Mrs D stared at it hard for several seconds. But nothing else happened. She paid with her card, and was just lifting her shopping bag out of the bagging area when the red light above the till went on. A low humming noise became apparent. There was a commotion round the back. She leaned forward and peered round.

A small flap had opened and two weary-looking hamsters popped out.

“Well - it’s Haricot Bert!” said Mrs D. “And is that not Broccoli Bill?”

The two hamsters looked up.

“Oh no,” said Bill grumpily. “It the skinny human again.”

“Thought so,” said Bert. “Like bad penny, eh, Bill?”

Mrs D ignored the insults. “What are you two up to?”

“Going off shift,” said Bert. “Been long hard shift. How long, Bill?”

“Make that fifty-seven minutes,” replied Bill, yawning long and loud. “Me knackered. Me need some yoghurt drops. Brain food.”

“Skinny human bought some of them just now,” said Bert. “One pound fifteen.”

“Thirteen pounds twenty-five,” replied Bill swiftly. “You going to share them, or what?”

“Well,” said Mrs D, “since you ask so nicely...”

Broccoli Bill and Haricot Bert sat up on their hind paws and opened their mouths expectantly. Mrs

D had been on the point of leaving the store, but now felt obliged to feed them one yoghurt-drop each.

“So,” said Mrs D, as the two hamsters gnawed away contentedly, “what are you two doing here?”

“What,” mumbled Bert through a full mouth, “it look like?”

“Well,” said Mrs D, “looks like you’ve got a Saturday job helping out at the tills.”

“Go to top of class,” said Bill sarcastically. “Zackly that. ‘Sept it not Saturday job. It careet.”

“Oh,” said Mrs D doubtfully. “Prospects for promotion and so on? Pension-scheme?”

“Need another yoghurt drop,” said Bill. “Or some of those carrots.”

“Ninety-five pence,” said Bert.

“Eight pounds seventy,” said Bill, quick as a flash. “Bet you no guess what we do?”

Mrs D guessed. “Add up the bill?”

Broccoli Bill looked at her suspiciously. “You been peeking?” he demanded.

“No, not really, it’s just...”

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“Oh,” said Mrs D, “impressive.” She paused, then asked: “And what does that mean?”

“Skinny human bit of airhead, eh, Bill?” suggested Bert.

“Yeah,” agreed Bill. “But humans not hamsters. Need to patronise them. Customer-oriented,” he explained, “mean we have to deal with customers. Usually daft ones. Unseen mean wot it says. Totalising is technical word for adding, mean we use mazing calculating powers as wot hamsters born with. That right, Bert?”

“That totally right, Bill.”

“Give us two prices,” said Bill. “Go on - try us!”

“Seventeen pounds forty-seven,” said Mrs D, “and four pounds eighty-one.”

“Twenty-two twenty-eight,” shouted Bill instantly. The two hamsters high-fived.

“Pretty good,” said Mrs D. “But,” she continued, “you’re not here every day, are you?”

Bill looked round cautiously and lowered his voice. “Sainsbury’s not pay ‘lectric bill. They been cut off today. So get Broccoli Bill instead.” The two hamsters rolled about laughing.

Mrs D looked round. Yes, it was unusually dark in the store. But the red light on the till was still working? She pointed this out.

When they had stopped repeating the joke about the two bills and laughing, Haricot Bert waddled over to the back of the till and shouted: “Patty! Come out now! Skinny human got endless questions.”

That low background humming noise stopped suddenly. Out of the little door at the back of the till emerged another hamster. It was Patty Perkins. He was gasping for breath and staggering.

“Quick, missus!” shouted Bill. “Give him two yoghurt drops, or he keel over!”

Mrs D obliged. Patty lay down and chewed, his eyes shut, his little chest heaving.

“What happened to him, poor thing?” asked Mrs D.

“Patty on power-generation,” said Bill darkly. “He part of crack team - Current and Lighting Executives.”

“CANDLES,” explained Haricot Bert.

“HamLabs[©] Power-wheel[™] inside,” said Bill. “Patty runs in it for hours on end. Hours and hours and hours. Lots of electricity. Lots and lots and lots.”

“Poor thing! Such hard work,” said Mrs D, stroking Patty’s fur. He had fallen fast asleep, the remains of yoghurt drops lodged firmly in his pouches.

“All in day’s work for hamsters,” said Bert nonchalantly. “Hamsters save Sainsbury’s again.”

“Tomorrow,” added Broccoli Bill, “the World.”

