

Pollysyllabubble!

By David Chadwick

Polly had a problem! Well, to be quite accurate, Polly did not have a problem! Other people had a problem with Polly.

Polly collected words. She collected them like other children collected Beanies and Pokemon cards. Every time she saw a new word, she had to write it down, take it home and find out all about it.

This thoroughly disconcerted her classmates at school. You couldn't swap words, you couldn't keep them in your lunchbox with an elastic band tied around them. Words were too personal, too eccentric for her to have any friends to share them with.

But she still loved words. She loved the sound of them, she loved the way they can be used and she loved the magic of them. And being just 10 years old, in the senior class at her school, she hadn't

yet learned that finding a ‘life-long best friend’ was an absolute necessity for young girls.

So, she was happy.

She hadn’t learned, however, to use words she had collected as effectively as she might, even though she had accumulated quite a few of them – words such as ‘panjandrum’, ‘paraphernalia’, ‘circumlocution’, and even ‘perspicacious’. Wonderful words which, in the right context, would express exactly what Polly needed to say. It needed a bit more skill than she currently possessed to place them in the right sentence, even though she knew what they meant.

Instead, she found an alternative, and quite acceptable, solution. When faced with a barrage of jeers like ‘Polly Polly Parrot!’ or ‘Tittle Tattle Tuttle’ – for Tuttle was indeed her surname – from the other children in her class, she retorted with a quite audacious ‘farradupple’ and a ‘bonygurgle’ – and, indeed, any combination of wonderful sounds that, if they didn’t at all, should have conveyed some quite devastating meaning.

Endowed with just the right amount of emotion they fortified Polly's spirit enormously and expressed exactly what she thought of her tormentors. They, in their turn, were completely nonplussed by her replies, not at all sure that they weren't being castigated with some dreadful words dredged up from the depths of iniquity!

So, Polly stayed alone in the classroom, and was quite content.

But Polly was only alone at school. At home she had an argumentative and contrary six year old brother, Edward, and a standard issue of parents – one Mother and one Father, the latter working as an Account Manager in a large advertising agency. As advertising is all about words and talking to people, it caused little comment when Polly became so fascinated by the linguistic process at such an early age. That she should treat the subject like tegistology – collecting beer mats – was, indeed, a surprise, but when the cost of a large dictionary and Roget's Thesaurus was balanced against the sartorial demands of a Barbie Doll her parents happily acquiesced in her passion.

Edward, at six, was four years younger than Polly, and was currently exploring the scatological extremes of the English language, with words like ‘bum’, ‘titty’, and ‘winkle’ appearing monotonously at the slightest provocation. Sprayed liberally into any domestic conversation, they were designed to provoke outrage – often succeeding – to be followed by as raucous a bellow as a six year old throat could manage.

Chapter 2

‘Today, we are mostly going shopping’¹. Polly’s mother unconsciously borrowed words and phrases from her favourite television programmes. She didn’t use them with any intention to amuse. They merely slipped out from amongst the myriad of inconsequential ephemera that she carried in her head, and would help any astute observer, listening to her irregular chatter, to deduce her regular viewing habits.

That today would be mostly given over to shopping was, to the rest of the family, mostly unsurprising. After all, it was a Saturday, and with Polly’s father’s clients reluctant to pay for weekend activities on their behalves, all hands were there to be mustered to carry home the fruits of any shopping expedition.

‘Furthermore,’ Mrs Tuttle added, “we are mostly going to the new Tesco’s that has just opened up in Bidstow’.

¹ The Fast Show -

Mr Tuttle, driver, comptroller and carrier of the larger loads, expressed a mild form of surprise. Unaware of the intricate details of provisioning a household, he went, most weekends, where he was directed, paid for what he steered through the checkout counter in his trolley, and stowed the various items in the boot of his car, taking care not to place, under instruction, the heavy bags of potatoes on top of the tray of eggs.

‘Surely that’s another 20 miles further on than the Tesco’s in Biddlesham?’ he asked ‘Isn’t one Tesco exactly the same as any other?’

‘Not when they’ve just opened!’ Mrs Tuttle replied. ‘There’s masses of Special Offers. They’ve got to attract lots of new customers to let them know they are open for business’.

‘Bogoffs’ interjected Edward ‘loads of Bogoffs’ satisfying his prurient instincts at the earliest opportunity. ‘Buy One, Get One Free – Buy One, Get One Free!’.

‘It’s a lot bigger than the local Tesco’s as well’, Polly’s mother added, ‘There’ll be masses of things we can’t get locally’.

‘Such as?’ asked Mr Tuttle. ‘I thought the local supermarket already supplied everything we needed. What sort of things?’.

‘Well, you know – a bigger deli, for instance. And it’s near Birmingham, and as they’ve got a bigger ethnic population – Poles, Italians, Asians - they tend to cater for their tastes as well’.

‘Isn’t that just a bit racist?’ pondered Polly’s father. ‘We are not supposed to differentiate between the different races in this country.’ Mr Tuttle had cultivated a particularly sensitive radar system to ward off discriminatory advertising material, and to soften the demands of his clients who were generally more focussed on their products than their customers.

‘Of course not,’ Mrs Tuttle scoffed ‘What’s wrong with appreciating the fact that somebody with Chinese ancestry would prefer chopping up ginger to go in their recipes, to a born and bred Brit who would rather lather his food with ketchup’.

Polly sat at the breakfast table, smearing her toast with honey. She liked breakfast at the weekend. Her father's presence diverted her mother's attention from the mundane sartorial, alimentary and intellectual requirements of her school – 'You're not going to wear those socks for school are you?' 'That's' the third time this week you've had burger and chips for lunch – haven't they heard of lettuce, for Heaven's sake?' and, of course, the perennial 'Don't forget your homework this time – Mrs Crowther will murder you – and me – if you do!'

Instead she quite enjoyed sitting quietly, absorbing the to and fro of her parents chitchat – which was more like a gentle game of badminton than the ferocious games of squash which usually occurred after the visits of his father's mother – and Polly's gentle and affectionate grandmother.

Edwards demands were sub-consciously glad-handed by Polly's mother, whilst he glued his eyes to the minor antics of the Rugrats² on the television – the only occasion, Mrs Tuttle insisted, that the screen could co-exist with a meal.

² A popular American cartoon series from 1991 to 2007.

Polly opened up her notebook and counted the words she had collected since the day before. On each page, for it was quite a large notebook – A4 in fact – she had drawn two vertical lines. The left was merely wide enough to write in the new words she had picked up. The second line ran straight down the middle of the page, and it was in the second column that she wrote an immediate definition of the word, culled from her dictionary, or similar reference book.

In the third column, a full half-width of the page, she wrote as much supporting information about the word as she could find, leaving up to five lines per word – allowing her to insert quite precise details about where the word came from, what it really meant, and how it should be used.

She used a large indexed notebook so that she could separate the words alphabetically. She was well into her second volume. Having found, however, that the incidence of interesting words did not occur regularly throughout the alphabet, she had wasted too much space in the first volume and was actively investigating an alternative method of recording her research.

I suppose I need to describe Polly here – you know, put down some idea of what she looked like – and her brother Edward, too. And even, if it comes to that, her mother and father, although you could get away with saying ‘they were a typical mum and dad, mostly OK, but occasionally looking a little care-worn around the edges’.

Polly was slightly above average height and a bit skinny, probably on her way to becoming a lanky six-footer. After all, her parents were both around that sort of height – her dad just a couple of inches taller than her mum. She was usually to be found in a long, calf length, skinny skirt and a tee-shirt. Sometimes she wore jeans and sneakers, daps, or whatever you call them – definitely not the trainers with the Nike flash, or some other brand name, as she hadn’t yet succumbed to that fad – but she preferred the looseness and freedom of the skirt and often liked to twirl it around, just for the effect.

She kept her hair in two bangs, one on either side of her head and bunched together with elastic bands, or some highly coloured plastic thingies. And she wore an outsize pair of glasses, as

befitted her predilection for reading. It made her look a little bookish, but, as we discovered earlier, she was totally unconcerned with her image and wore what she wanted to and was comfortable with that.

Edward was a good six inches shorter than Polly. Unlike her, he displayed a modicum of worldly wisdom and his favourite garbs came with one or two of the more popular names emblazoned on the front in large letters - GAP was his current favourite, and he was, accordingly, provided with the means to continue flaunting the name by various aunts and grannies throughout the year – uncles and granddads, of course, whenever they thought about presents, which wasn't often, tending to supply more practical items, like guns, game-boys, and junior golfing gear. (How's that for a nice bit of alliteration?).

The house they lived in was a modern four-bedroomed detached house in a quiet estate road, where each house was different from the one next to it. Each retained a certain style, though, that was echoed throughout the estate, with open lawns at the front, decorated with varieties of shrubs, bushes and miniature trees that accentuated the

distinctiveness of each plot. And, as befitting the trappings of moderately comfortable families, the occupants transport systems – cars, MPVs and the occasional 4 x 4, sat on the driveways in front of each house, or in the road. The garages, single or double, according to the style of the houses, were filled instead with the overflowing paraphernalia of modern existence – bicycles, unused fitness centres and rowing machines, boot sale treasures that didn't quite make it into the house, rabbit hutches from some long-departed pets and, of course, the paint pots, drills, saws, ladders and trestle tables of countless started, but not quite finished, DIY projects.

Chapter 3

Long car journeys were always a time of delight for Polly, for, besides the length of the journey that held travellers in a form of suspended animation where meaningful activity and the effort of making decisions were unnecessary, both her father and her mother helped to pass the time with them in childish banter.

This often took the form of simple word games, a pastime that had probably helped to encourage Polly in her current love of words. Her father dealt with words, and how they are used to influence people, every day in his advertising office, and Polly's mother had had a job as a Marketing Executive since leaving University with a degree, pausing only briefly to have Polly – and then giving it up completely when Edward came along.

“‘Anyone like a toffee’, he said, sweetly” Polly's father set the game going.

“‘It'll rot my teeth’, she said, cavernously” Polly's mother replied, for they had all played this game before, and were now quite adept at providing fast retorts.

“‘I’ll have one, but not if it is a hard one’, she said softly” answered Polly – the object being to add an adverb after the sentence to reflect its meaning.

“‘Any idea where we are going?’ he said, pointedly” asked Mr Tuttle.

“‘Well, we are not too far away’ she said, shortly” responded Mrs Tuttle – “‘in fact, in about another two hundred yards, we take a left turn’ she said sinisterly”

“‘Hey, that’s a good one! Sinister – from the ancient word for being left-handed!’Way to go’, he said advisedly”.

“‘Why is sinister the same as being left-handed” asked Polly?

“‘Why not? People used to think that people who wrote, or did other things with their left hand – that they were being influenced by the devil,“ suggested her father – “or was it because before they invented loo-paper, people had to wipe their bums with a bunch of leaves in their left hands?”

“Nick – that is not the right thing to tell your daughter – Don’t believe him, Polly, I am sure that there is a better explanation”.

Before Edward could chime in with a suitable remark reflecting his pet subject, Mr Tuttle supplied his own rejoinder. “No loo paper? That’s why they invented newspapers. They’re usually full of crap, anyway”.

“Really! No wonder Edward has a mouth like a sewer.” Mrs Tuttle couldn’t help giggling, though, and Mr Tuttle had to turn his face away from Edward so that he wouldn’t see his difficulty in controlling his smirk.

“No, seriously, sinister comes from.....

Tesco loomed out of the trees at the end of the brand-new, twisting drive. It was fronted by a large, black-topped car park, half-filled with bustling cars, for it was still quite early, Polly’s father having broken one or two speed limits on the way.

“If we don’t get there soon, it will be absolutely packed” he had said when they started out, and he had taken every opportunity to overtake and take short cuts, without actually breaking the law, to get to the store in good time. “You know I hate shopping in crowds”. He tore between two rows of parked cars, narrowly avoiding an old couple who were backing out into the aisle – without their car, that is.

“Be careful, dear” admonished Polly’s mother, “There’s plenty of space for everyone”.

But Mr Tuttle was of the ilk who believed that spending five minutes looking for an empty parking space just twenty metres closer to the entrance was well worth the effort – a personal sort of one-upmanship - despite the fact that they could have walked 400 metres in the time they wasted looking for it. “There’s a space” he cried “in the other row! Get out quickly and stop anyone else getting it, while I drive round the end!”.

“I will not” retorted Mrs Tuttle. “The last time I did that I ended up in a slanging match with the gorilla who was just about to reverse into it!”.

Mr Tuttle swung left at the end, instead of right, dashed across the zebra crossing in front of the main entrance to Tesco's, causing a flurry of supermarket trolleys to cannon into each other, and darted into a narrow space he had spotted three cars up the next aisle.

“Brilliant!” Mrs Tuttle muttered. “Now how do I get out of here with my door just six inches from the next car?”

“Mummy”, enquired Polly, a silent observer in the back seat, whose little fingers had been gripped tightly round her seat belt throughout her father's manoeuvres, “why does Daddy drive so fast?”

Edward hugely enjoyed his father's driving, and having been brought up on a diet of cartoons, thought it highly entertaining and not in the least bit dangerous. “Hee hee – you just missed his bum! Can we do it again?”

Polly's mother was as sanguine as Edward, having sat beside her husband for many miles, and had become well acquainted with his manner of driving.

“It’s all part of the male character, dear,” she said.
“Having failed to impress me over the years with his puerile impressions of Fangio or Nouvolari³, he seeks other souls to show off to”

“Who are they?” asked Polly, “Never heard of them”

“Oh, don’t worry about them” she answered, “just some other juvenile heroes from your father’s childhood, who also drove too fast for their own good.”

“Not true, “said Mr Tuttle, “They drove racing cars many years ago, when cars didn’t use fancy technology and computers to keep them on the track.”

“Anyway,” he added, “they were around in the middle of last century – and where as famous then as Schumacher is today!”

³ Famous racing drivers from the 1940s

Polly led the way across the vast car park, threading herself between stationery or dawdling cars, and cars that, seemingly, had no proper sense of direction, in spite of the intentions of the person behind the wheel. The rest of her family trailed after her, like bearers on a safari, as they made their way towards the glass-roofed shelters containing the shopping trolleys. She always ended up fighting with Edward for the privilege of selecting and wielding the trolley, only to discard it within a row and a half of the store, finding more interesting things to do. The discarded trolley was to be picked up, as always, by Mr Tuttle.

She ran her chosen trolley backwards and forwards a couple of times - a precaution she learned from her father – discarding any that had somehow had a bite taken out of a wheel, causing it to clunk, disconcertingly, every time it went round. She also declined to push trollies with wheels that preferred to wander off in a different direction to the one she had chosen.

Sure enough, the first choice proved to be a dud, despite the store having been open just a few weeks, and she left it by the side of the trolley

shelter to be picked up by a shopper with less discernment – whilst she selected another.

Satisfied, she aimed the trolley at the entrance of the store, but not without having to add a certain amount of ‘side’ on the handle bar to offset the weight of Edward clinging to the chassis for a free ride.

The razzamatazz and the fanfares of the grand opening were all spent in the first few days, to be replaced by a multitude of placards, streamers and banners – all proclaiming some magnificent offer – a special price for one item – three packets for the price of two on something else – a brand new ‘taste sensation’ – and, of course, the ubiquitous BOGOF offers.

‘Lovely Jubbly’⁴ exclaimed Mrs Tuttle, her eyes brimming at the mountains of cash she was about to ‘save’ by enthusiastic participation in the opening rituals – a phrase Del Boy would have been proud to utter himself at the range of bargains on offer.

⁴ Only Fools and Horses – BBC TV – 1981 to 1991

Polly's father was less convinced. But went along with the charade. "Er – should we go and get another trolley?" he asked, but only half in jest. To give credit where credit was due, he refrained from pointing out that two tins of creamed rice pudding were hardly a bargain when the family had previously declined to consume just one tin – both of them having propped up the tins of ready-made custard and other 'bargains' in the rear of the uttermost pantry cupboard for at least the last eighteen months.

Entering the store, the unit manoeuvred the trolley round the towering piles of tinned sweets, gift-wrapped bouquets of flowers, early boxes of Christmas crackers that the store, in collusion with their favourite suppliers, had purchased at ridiculously low prices to act as un-repeatable loss leaders.

Shoppers successfully completing the mini obstacle course found themselves ejected into the sprawling, colourful, fruit and veg section – the more steadfast of them without a selection of bargain offers in the bottom of their trollies.

For Polly, this was a wonderful chance to increase her collection of words. She had no predilection for the types of words that she was looking for – nouns, verbs, adjectives – and the variety of produce laid out before her was considerably wider than any she had encountered previously in any other store.

“Mummy – what are cumquats?” she asked. Her gaze wandered over tiers of exotically shaped fruits and weirdly formed vegetables from foreign countries. “Wow – look at the shape of these! Okra! What’s Okra?”

Before her mother could answer, she had read for herself the accompanying ticket that explained the origins and uses of the strange delights on offer. “It says here they call them ‘Lady’s Fingers’
- Huh, they just look like misshapen beans to me!”

Edward rushed over “Ladies Fingers? More like Ladies Noses!” To Edward, seemingly ridiculous parts of the physiognomy, when used in a certain way, could quite often elicit the same sense of ribaldry as the more delicate parts of a person’s anatomy.

“Put them down” Mrs Tuttle admonished, as Edward proceeded to double the quantity of digits he already possessed by jamming okra between each adjacent pair of his own fingers.

“Ladies Fingers” he repeated. “Let’s see if we can find some Ladies Bums and Ladies Boobies” he yelled, rushing over to where he had spotted a pile of beef tomatoes in close proximity to some ripe Ogen melons.

Mr Tuttle shepherded the expedition through the outer edges of the groceries with a small degree of trepidation. Normally, it took about 30 seconds for either Polly or Edward to disappear. In a moderately sized town centre superstore – in which a methodical foray could be conducted with Mr and Mrs Tuttle co-ordinating a search pattern from either end of the store until they had scanned every row – either of them could be located without too much bother in less than five minutes.

In a store this size, just about anything could happen, and, in an effort to forestall the drastic consequences of either of them becoming separated, he gave instructions to each of them

about a precise point of assembly – on the hour and half-hour. And to be on the safe side, said assembly point was to be next to the ice-cream freezer amongst the magazines and tobacco, where they would be likely to end up, so Mr Tuttle cunningly thought.

Before he could communicate this to Polly, though, the calamity had occurred. A careless positioning of the banana rack produced two alternate exits from the fruit and veg section. Superstores are normally laid out to persuade shoppers to follow set paths – designed to encourage them to visit the greatest percentage of the store as possible whilst picking up the most popular daily provisions. On leaving the bananas, Polly proceeded, therefore, up the right hand side of the yoghurt counter, whilst Edward, her mother and her father, unaware of Polly's absence, wandered along the left side, past the cream cheeses – and cheddar slices.

Chapter 4

Polly wandered up the side of the yoghurt cabinet, peering in awe at the colourful display inside. It was obviously not the first time she had seen pots of yoghurt and cream stacked on top of each other, but on this particular occasion her eyes were drawn to the peculiarities of the different brand names.

She hadn't really considered them to be unusual before, but now she couldn't miss being struck by the incongruity of the juxtapositions of the different types of yoghurt. Next to the Greek Strained Yoghurt, for instance, was a row of natural yoghurt and tubs of different sized bio-yoghurts.

And, if she thought that was peculiar, it was nothing compared to the rows of margarines masquerading as butter – or not, as closer inspection of the titles seemed to suggest.

“Does Utterly Butterly come from cows?” she mused to herself, as its name seemed to suggest. “Daddy says its only margarine, and its made from those yellow flowers that we can see in fields all

over the place – the name he wouldn't tell me, because Edward was listening – and he said we shouldn't start him off again”

“What about I Can't believe it's not Butter? Is that the same stuff?” It was standing next to the Utterly Butterly, and trading on the fact that although people actually prefer the taste of Butter they would rather eat something that came from plants, rather than from cows – believing it to be more healthy. She went along the display, counting off the different variations on the theme of butter impostors –

more – list brands of butter fakes

till she came to the genuine margarine section, and even here the confusions remained. The same obsession with health was displayed in the range of margarines that proclaimed their origins to be the healthy olive. We all know that eating olives and using olive oil in our cooking leads to a long and healthy life, because we have all seen the results in advertising on television. It all started with Olivio. When the shopkeepers noticed that customers in the right income and social brackets

started eating it in large quantities, they decided to launch their own versions of the margarine with as many different brand names they could think off that included the word 'olive'.

Now Polly wasn't aware of much of the subtleties of advertising, that certain words used on products have been devised to encourage people to think that they contain what they need for a healthy life style. Instead, she was merely amazed that so many different words could be used to describe something as simple as margarine.

Pondering on this, she ambled further along the display unit, idly tracing her fingers along the cold chrome trim.

“Would you like to try one of these, Dearie?”

The voice came from a tall buxom figure standing next to a small table on which were stacked numerous boxes of chocolates. One of the boxes had been opened and several of the contents had been laid out on a plate. To one side of the plate was a small notice repeating the popular phrase “Buy One and get One free!”.

The speaker was nearly six feet tall, with a head surmounted by an enormous frizz of light brown hair. Polly was astounded by the length of her legs which were accentuated by a short brown mini skirt that only seemed to cover half of her thighs, and by an utterly inappropriate pair of shoes.

Normally, one would describe shoes as black, or brown, high-heeled or flat, and, possibly, with a strap or two and maybe a bow. The only possible word to describe the shoes that Polly saw was, even to her inexperienced eyes, inappropriate.

“Don’t be shy, dear – these lovely chocolates are free for anyone to try”

Diffidence wasn’t a normal response for Polly, as she had a particular fondness for chocolate, as most children do. What put her off, for a few moments, was the slightly sinister impression that the tall woman radiated.

She soon shuffled up to the table, though, and selected one of the chocolates that, by its appearance, slightly knobbly, suggested that it might contain her favourite filling – hazelnuts. Popping it in her mouth, she looked up at the

woman again, and was most disconcerted to see, instead of the friendly smile she expected, what could only be described as a triumphant smirk.

Confused, Polly turned away and made to move off. After a couple of steps she turned to look back. The woman was still looking at her, but her eyes seemed to grow smaller, her lips tightly compressed and what looked like an unseemly sneer.

The notice seemed different as well – not, as Polly had previously remembered it, but this time it said ‘Try One and Set One Free!’.

Chapter 5

Tescos larger stores – and this was the biggest that any of them had been in – were all laid out in a similar fashion. Based on a huge rectangle with a high ceiling, the display cabinets ran in parallel from one end to the other, with a wide corridor running through the middle. Along one of the longest sides, at the front of the superstore, was a long line of checkout counters, stretching nearly the whole length of the store. Each had its number stencilled on a globe perched above the counter. The feed into each checkout held mini racks stacked with tempting low-cost goodies, hoping to persuade shoppers, standing patiently in the queues, to add to their already overflowing trollies.

In front of the checkout counters were a number of public service points – the information desk, a couple of loos, a baby’s nappy changing station – and the cafeteria.

The cafeteria was decorated with large, vivid montages, showing too realistic close-ups of fried tomatoes, black puddings, sausages and eggs – Tesco’s cut-price breakfast. It sold other tasty

meals as well, such as spaghetti Bolognese (actually a dish that nobody from that Italian city, Bologna, would recognise, as the sauce is usually served there with a ribbon pasta, like tagliatelle), battered cod and chips and cottage pie, but by far the most popular dish was the ‘Full English’, a large oval plate overflowing with all of the traditional ingredients of an English cooked breakfast – even down to the baked beans, and a fried egg, freshly overcooked for you on the spot. Toast and fried bread were optional and there was a choice between tea and coffee. All for just a couple of pounds!

With breakfast being served on the hoof in many homes, consisting merely of a couple of rounds of toast, or a bowl of serial, consumed standing up in front of the television before the whole household decamped to catch a bus, join the traffic jams, or squeeze into the tube, the ‘Full English’ represented a seldom savoured delight and tempered the reluctance of many fathers to join the family in the weekly shopping marathon.

Tesco, like all other superstores, understood perfectly the psychology of the treat and enhanced

the irresistible incentive by offering it as a loss leader – to entice people into the store.

Around the other sides of the store were open displays of fresh produce. A bakery opened out onto the floor, were nimble counter assistants wheeled out tall racks on castors, stacked high with brown, white and wholemeal loaves, crusty buns and other traditional breads, straight from the oven. Shelves of fresh bread, baked from recipes gathered from around the world, stood cooling against the wall, customers making for them to indulge in the ancient ritual of ‘laying on of hands’ to determine which of them was warmest – and, therefore, the last out of the oven.

The delicatessen counter stretched nearly halfway along the back wall, commencing with a bewildering variety of fresh cheeses at one end, and progressing through dips, salads, pates and cold meats, to the mouthwatering, freshly baked, pies at the other.

Mr and Mrs Tuttle reached the back of the store and paused to take in the huge expanse that lay before them. Row upon row of display units,

stocked with all that could possibly be desired, consumed and ultimately discarded lay before them. They also took time out to count the flock – not usually a demanding task, but, because of its’ peripatetic nature, given to sudden fluctuations in quantity.

“Where’s Polly?” Her mother was the first to notice her absence, as Mr Tuttle was engaged in a quaint pas-de-deux with an elderly shopper who was trying to edge her trolley closer to the shelves that he was currently obscuring.

“Don’t know”, he answered. “In the next aisle, probably. “She hasn’t had time to go far”.

“Edward, you stay here with Daddy. I’ll go and have a quick look”. She disappeared around the corner, to re-appear just 15 seconds later half-way along the same row that they were already in.

“Not there!” she said. “We’ll probably catch up with her in a couple of rows”. Unperturbed at this stage, as Food stores were generally friendly places – and they had agreed meeting times and places should they all become hopelessly

separated – Mrs Tuttle settled down to some serious shopping in her immediate vicinity.

“Edward – grab the trolley and stay with us”
Losing Polly for a few minutes was not initially worrying, as she had proved herself to be quite a sensible girl. Edward, on the other hand, was a different kettle of fish.

Polly, at this stage of the proceedings, hadn't actually wandered far. Fresh from her encounter with the strange, frizzy headed lady, and still slightly bewildered by the funny look she had been given, she wandered down the third aisle.

The shelves soared on either side of her, and the aisle appeared to stretch further than she remembered. She felt that she was in a deep canyon, almost deserted, except for the occasional, intent looking, shopper who glided past at speed with a slight murmuring from the wheels of their trollies.

She walked slowly along the floor of the canyon towards the middle of the store, where the central

corridor split the aisles in half. Her senses alert, she felt, before she heard, a low susurration emanating from one side of the intersection, accompanied by occasional, slight, metallic pings.

Wondering what the noise was, Polly sidled up to the edge of the counter and peered around the corner.

To her amazement, she saw a whole swarm of shoppers with trollies, some half-filled, some nearly empty, weaving in and amongst each other.

‘Sorry!’

“Sorry! Sorry!”

“Sorry!”

“Sorry!”

And what a whispering and a whistling!

“Sorry!” “Sorry!”

“Sorry!”

“Sorry!”

It was like a slow, sedate dance, as each of them pushed their trollies forwards and backwards and occasionally to each side....

“Sorry!”

“Sorry!”

...all trying to get around each other, and, with the politest of attitudes, expressing their profound sorrow at getting in each other’s way!

“Sorry!” “Sorry!”

The tinging and clanging emanated from pairs of trollies that had not quite succeeded in avoiding each other, drawing forth renewed mutterings of regret.

The sibilant accompaniment was conducted without a single raised tone, with no overt demonstration of impatience, and all at the same gentle pace.

Gradually a trolley here, or there, emerged from the middle of the melee on the side in which the owner wished to go, and wheeled off along one of the aisles until the whole tangle of humanity and hardware had dispersed.

Polly put a hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh. What a carry on! And what a strange word to use in such a situation.

There were no ‘excuse me’s’, no strident ‘could you please get out of my way’. No expletives, either, ‘watch where you are bloody well going!’. The whole courtly dance was carried out with the utmost decorum and deference to each of the participants. Perhaps, even, with genuine embarrassment and contrition from getting in somebody else’s way.

The whole episode lasted no more than a couple of minutes, and the hubbub subsided to the gentle clicking of tins and packets being stacked inside trollies, punctuated by the quiet squeals of trolley wheels being propelled contrarily to the direction in which they were pointing.

“Why do they all say ‘sorry’” pondered Polly. “Nobody’s done anything wrong! It’s not anybody’s fault if somebody gets in the way of somebody else. Perhaps they need a traffic policeman at the corner of each aisle” She giggled at the thought of somebody standing at each

corner, directing trolley traffic. You could even install traffic lights!

Quite forgetting that she should be retracing her steps to look for the rest of her family, Polly moved further on down the centre aisle. She was quite amazed by the enormous size of the store – far bigger than any she had previously been in.

She walked past two further rows of cold cabinets, packed with fresh meat – beef, and lamb and chicken, and came to an end display cabinet with some more special offers on display – this time sausages. She picked up one of packs on offer, and was delighted to find that she had selected one of Tesco’s ‘finest’ treats – Mediterranean sausages stuffed with feta cheese and herbs!

“Wow”, she said to herself, “I thought sausages were just made with meat!” Picking up another from the same range, she discovered that she was holding, this time, a pack of Hungarian sausages, in the same ‘finest’ range and resplendent with its luxurious silver packaging. This time the sausages contained paprika and other spices - and all so cheap! Tesco’s were willing to let their customers purchase each of these at £1 less than their normal

price! The rest of the display was crammed with an assortment of sausages of lower calibre – unworthy of the term ‘finest’ and mere pink fleshy specimens compared to the rich brown colour of the premium range.

Putting the two packets back, she carried on, her eye momentarily distracted by the description of one particular batch of sausages – ‘thick Irish sausages’. She giggled, remembering some of the jokes that her father came out with about the Irish – quite permissible he explained, and not at all racist, as the Tuttle family had more than a trace of Irish blood in their veins.

It was her undoing. She backed around the corner, her hand over her mouth to stifle the chuckles that the packaging had prompted, and stumbled over a large display of tinned baked beans.

Chapter 6

How long does it take to build a mountainous display out of baked bean tins? Well, it may not have been a mountain, but it certainly towered over Polly – before she knocked it down, that is!

Her rearward motion dislodged three baked bean tins from the fourth row from the bottom – which just happened to be those tins that bore the most critical part of the structure. Naturally, with nothing left to prevent their gravitational precipitation towards the centre of the earth – the remaining tins also fell. Polly continued in the same direction until she ended up sitting ungainly on the top of the resultant heap of cans.

“Uh-oh”, she sighed aloud, copying her mother in a very precise imitation of the favourite expression of Lala in Teletubbies – a programme that neither of them would ever have admitted to seeing even once.

“Wa’all, you seem to have found yourself a real hill of beans there, young lady” drawled John Wayne from somewhere above Polly’s head.

Polly, startled, looked all round her, and then up, and saw a round, cheery face, with a grin that split it from side to side, peering down at her from the top of a tall aluminium stepladder.

“Hang on there, Missy, and I’ll be down presently”. The face disappeared from the top of the ladder and a clattering of steps announced that the owner would presently re-appear at its’ base.

Wondering what on earth John Wayne, who just happened to be one of her father’s favourite actors, had to be doing in Tesco’s, she looked round to see who was coming to her aid.

There are some who say that John Wayne wasn’t as tall he appeared to be in his films, and had to stand on a soap box to meet the gaze of his foes eye-to-eye – or was that some other cowboy – she would have to ask her dad about this – but the person who rushed up to help her get up seemed to take the height discrepancy to extremes, being no taller than Polly, even as she sat on the top of the heap of beans. What was more, was that she was female!

“Come on, little girly. Give me your hand, and we’ll soon have you off there”. Well, there was no doubt that she sounded like John Wayne, and even had the lopsided grin and the twinkle in her eye. She even wore a cut-off pair of faded jeans, a white shirt without a collar – and the black waistcoat favoured by all cowboys. And, topping, or bottoming it off – a pair of fake alligator cowboy boots with high heels!

Her diminutive size, however, that barely reached four feet, gave the lie to her bravura performance – but it didn’t really seem to matter.

“I’m Brenda”, she announced, in a more appropriate voice, a couple of pitches higher than her John Wayne impersonation. “Are you hurt at all?”

“I’m sorry”, said Polly, “I didn’t mean to knock the display over”

“Well, sorry – what’s your real name – and don’t worry about all the tins”

“Sorry”, said Polly again, “I’m Polly – and, and I’ll help you build it again”

“Wa’ all that’s real kind of you, Miss Polly” said John Wayne again, ”but don’t you go fretting yourself none – we’ll soon have it back up again. Third time it’s been knocked over today. Two more times, and the boss will agree with me that it shouldn’t have been there in the first place”.

“I didn’t see it. I was just coming around the corner – and all of a sudden – “

“I know - coming round backwards. Don’t know as if I seen many critturs with eyes in the back of their heads. Happen to anybody. Grab them cans over there, and lets make a start”.

Glad to make amends, Polly rushed across to grab a couple of baked bean tins that had rolled along the aisle and were just about to impede the progress of a trolley driven by an old lady more intent on the wares at her side than her direction of travel.

“See – just put them down thar – and we’ll soon have it up. Make sure, though, that all the labels point to the front- look, just like this”.

Brenda laid out half a dozen cans in a slight curve, making sure that the front of the labels on each was lined up exactly. She showed Polly how to put the next rows of cans on top of them, each overlapping half of the cans below them to start building the wall of the display.

“Why do the labels have to be so exact?” asked Polly. “It makes it much longer to build the wall?”

“Well, you see,” said Brenda, “it’s all part of the art of shelf-stacking. Absolutely everything you see on the shelves has to have its’ label pointing to the front – not even a couple of millimetres out. It’s so customers can see what’s inside without having to move the packet or the can – and if he takes it, the next one is just as visible. A good shelf-stacker can stack them the right way round as fast as anybody else with all the labels pointing all over the place”.

“Are you a shelf-stacker?” asked Polly, warming to the open demeanour of Brenda – “but”, she added, a bit more diffidently, “you seem to be a little too short – er, small – to be one”.

“Wa’ all, Little Miss Polly, you see before you the only, the unique, the amazing, fast-talking, dwarf shelf-stacker in the whole of Tesco’s”, laughed Brenda.

Shocked, Polly couldn’t help pointing out “But, my mummy said you shouldn’t call people dwarves – or midgets. It’s not nice”.

“What should you call them, then?” teased Brenda.

Polly was beginning to get a little bit flustered. “She said it wasn’t their – er, your fault – and they should be called – er, people of reduced height – or, something – oh, dear, I’m awfully sorry!”

She was getting really miserable as the conversation seemed to be taking an extremely embarrassing turn.

“Don’t you worry yourself, none, Miss Polly – perhaps your mother meant ‘vertically challenged’, or even ‘people of diminutive stature’”. Brenda’s smile half allayed Polly’s embarrassment, but she was still shocked by Brenda’s candour.

“Anyways”, Brenda added, in her natural voice, “it’s always other people that are more embarrassed at what to call people like me. Seems to make them a bit more comfortable with themselves if they can call me something that they hope won’t offend me – euphemisms are what they call them”.

“But what..?”, blustered Polly..

“What do I call myself? Well – dwarf or midget is the terminologically correct term – can’t argue with that, can I?”

“Matter of fact”, she considered, “How do you know that people like me aren’t the real size of the human race – and all the rest of you aren’t suffering from giantism?”.

Polly gulped at the thought. “But there are a lot more of us!” she blurted out, then flushed bright pink at the thought of another enormous gaffe.

“Look in the dictionary, Polly – I take it you can use one – and look up dwarf. It means ‘person much below the ordinary size of the species –

nothing derogatory about that, is there? And midget means extremely small person, but as it adds, ‘especially when exhibited as curiosities’, I prefer the former. We’re not curiosities, we’re just normal human beings. All the other names I find patronising. You do know what ‘patronising’ means, don’t you?”

“Not sure”, admitted Polly. “I think it means talking down to somebody. “Daddy says it does when he’s talking about his advertising”.

“So, your father is in advertising, is he? Well, he would certainly know all about it, I suppose. Anyway, all politically correct language is a form of patronising”.

“What do you mean by politically correct?” Polly asked, her attention stimulated by all the new words and phrases she was picking up.

“You can’t, for instance, call somebody black, even if they have a black skin – or a cripple when they only have one leg. They have to be called coloured – or physically handicapped, instead. A cripple means, only, that the person is lame – which you would be with one leg.”

“The problem is”, she added “Instead of people using the original words to hurt people they want them to use a sensitive substitute that wouldn’t cause offence to anybody.”

Polly was on surer ground here, remembering when her classmates tried to belittle her for her unusual hobby, and realised that the words she made up as a comeback were, perhaps, her own form of political correctness – her own inimitable gobbledegook countering the mean jibes of her class.

Polly felt that the conversation was beginning to get beyond her, so she sat with Brenda, concentrating on stacking up the tins. By now they were reaching the 10th level, and the display was, once more, starting to look quite impressive.

But, her inquisitiveness got the better of her. “Why did you become a shelf-stacker”, questioned Polly, getting a bit bolder. “It must be very hard to reach the top shelves”. She blanched a bit at the sudden thought that she might, unpardonably, be getting a bit patronising, herself.

“Simple” said Brenda. “I wanted to do something that only you ‘giants’ should be able to do – and this seemed an obvious choice – and I like meeting people as well, and everybody is very friendly here – all the staff and all the shoppers”.

“But didn’t the manager think..?....”

“Ha, I’ll tell you a story about that – have you got the time, or shouldn’t you be thinking about getting back to your mother? I’ll bet she is going frantic looking for you, right now”.

“Oh”. Polly had forgotten all about the rest of her family. She really wanted to stay and talk to her new friend, and anyway, there were still a couple of rows to go up in the display. “She said we were to all meet in the café, if we got separated – so I guess it’s alright”.

“OK, then. I’ll tell you how I got the job. You might learn something useful!”

“The Personnel Manager here is Mr Winterbourne – a very nice man, but suffering from exactly the same problem you have. He really doesn’t want to

hurt anybody's feelings. So, when I turned up for the interview for the job, he didn't turn me away saying – 'no way, shorty, you wouldn't be able to reach the top shelves' – so we sat, instead talking about all sorts of things whilst he thought of the nicest possible way to tell me I wasn't suitable for such a 'high-reachin' job. We got on real well".

The he plucked up enough courage to ask me how I thought I would cope with the job, being as I was, er, rather shorter than my prospective colleagues"

"Easy", I said. "You've got a really nice office, here – that girl, over there, does she do all the accounts?" "That's Shirley", he replied "She does all the invoicing, and the staff payroll, as well. She's very good – came with me from my last store".

"Great", I replied, "and does she do all of the calculations in her head – or does she use a computer?"

"Mr Winterbourne laughed – thought for a minute – and said I'd got the job. When I turned up for

work the next Monday I found this top-of-the-range stepladder waiting for me.”

Just then the public address system butted in. “Good Morning, shoppers – as part of our opening celebrations, Tesco’s are pleased to announce that you can buy Tesco’s own brand of tinned tomatoes at just 10p per can, with no limits to the amount for each customer. You will find the tinned tomatoes in Row 7!”.

“Oh, Heck, that’s us!” exclaimed Brenda. “Quick, up the ladder”. Both of the girls scrambled rapidly to the top of the stepladder and perched themselves on the top two steps. Just in time, too, as, with a thunder and squeal of trolley wheels, and a babble of excited voices, posses of shoppers converged on the shelf space in question from all directions.

The stampede of trolleys surged below the feet of the two girls to converge on the tinned tomatoes, the whispered expressions of sorrow that Polly had witnessed earlier, conspicuously absent as the shoppers pounced on the incredible bargains.

“Hah”, Brenda side-mouthed to Polly, as they watched the milling throng. “This is where a bit of retail psychology comes in”.

“A bit of what?” asked Polly.

“Just watch that lady in the brown coat over there – the one that can’t get at the tomatoes just yet, and is waiting her turn. Look, she’s started to scan the shelves right next to her!”

“You mean she doesn’t want the tomatoes any more?”

“No, I mean Yes, she does – but Tesco’s doesn’t sell tomatoes at a loss because they want to sell tomatoes – they sell them cheap to attract customers to that part of the store where they are – to persuade them to buy other things as well – wait, she’s picking something up just in front of her – can’t see what it is from here – could be kidney beans – yes, I thought so – great! She’s just put a couple of tins in her trolley”.

“Huh, what’s so exciting about that?” said Polly with some degree of scorn, besides being caught up somewhat in Brenda’s excitement.

“Don’t you see”, explained Polly, “She had no intention of ever buying them before she came to grab a couple of tins of cheap tomatoes – that’s what retail psychology is all about. I bet your father knows all about that, as well”

“But that’s not fair, is it? Why should you persuade people to buy what they don’t want?”

“It’s all about impulse buying, Polly. Tesco’s doesn’t just want people to buy things that they actually need. They lay things out in the store so that people can’t avoid seeing exciting new stuff, whilst they are buying their bread and milk. That’s why good shelf-stacking and merchandising is so important”.

Polly was beginning to feel a bit bewildered by all the talk about ‘psychology’ and ‘persuasion’ and merchandising or whatever’, but she remembered how her mother had always seemed to come back from the supermarket with things she had ‘just happened to pick them up because it was on special offer – well above and beyond her carefully compiled shopping list.

The first bout of bargain shopping at the tinned tomato counter subsided sufficiently for Brenda and Polly to climb down from their perch – and Brenda declined further offers of help from Polly to finish the baked bean display. “Time you went and found your mother – she must be worried sick about you”.

Reluctantly, Polly agreed that she might be right, and set off in the general direction of where her family were last seen.

Chapter 7

“Don’t panic, Don’t panic!”⁵ Mrs Tuttle came bundling down the aisle back to her husband and Edward, who had been waiting by the cheese counter. “Still can’t find her. We must have been dodging each other between the rows”.

“She knows where to go. We’ll find her in the café after we’ve finished shopping”. Mr Tuttle wasn’t so concerned about Polly wandering around the store by herself. He knew she wouldn’t come to any harm – but the store was big and it might take a time to find her. “Let’s organise a search party -” He knew Polly’s mother was getting a bit anxious. “- so you can finish your shopping without worrying”.

“A search party? With just the two of us? Or should we get the staff to beat the rows at the other end of the store to flush her out?” Mr Tuttle was looking a bit hot and flustered, having already been up

⁵ Dad’s Army – BBC TV

and down numerous rows himself, without success, which, in a store of such a size, was quite tiring.

“Look”, he said, trying to apply some rational thought to the subject. “Let’s treat this logically. We’re stuck in this corner. Somewhere between us and the far corner is Polly. All we have to do is to walk from one end to the other, covering as much ground as we possibly can, and we should find her.”

“While Polly stays put – as it were” added her mother, dubiously.

“Precisely, but that’s the problem!”, he conceded. “She could always be one step ahead. If we look at this scientifically, it’s like having two clocks, and one is five minutes a day faster than the other. How long would it be, before they both show the same time again? We worked it out in the office last week for one of our clients – and the answer was 144 days!”

“Charming!” responded Mrs Tuttle. “You mean it could take 144 days for us to catch up with Polly”

“Well, that’s just the general principal, and if everything goes to plan - but then, you have random effects creeping in”

“What random effects? – What else can go wrong?”

“Just say that after 144 days you caught Polly up, but just as you were walking round the same corner, you both happen to be looking the other way – and passed without seeing each other – you would have to start all over again!”

“That means we could be searching for her in the store indefinitely!” shrieked an alarmed Mrs Tuttle.

“Yes, I suppose so” admitted her husband, with a twinkle in his eye, “but ...”

“Aargh!..don’t do this to me” yelled Mrs Tuttle, although she knew that her husband was just trying to wind her up. “What shall we do, then” What’s the answer?”

“Easy” said Mr Tuttle. “Extending the same scientific analogy, the quickest way for one clock to catch up with the other – and remembering that we are in the position of the trailing clock - is to stop it! And then we wait for the other one to come around again – in precisely 11 hours 57 and one half minutes!”.

“You mean stay here and wait until she pops up!” “But what good is a stopped watch?”

“Absolutely none at all, if you want to tell the time – but with this particular problem, we are mainly concerned with assisting two

clocks to show exactly the same time – ergo dim sum and all that Latin stuff.”

“And how long do you expect to wait before Polly returns to this end of the store?”

“Well. It all depends...”

“Daddy..can clocks go backwards?” Edward piped up from beneath the trolley, where he had been engaged in trying to retrieve some smarties that had fallen from the end of the cardboard tube.

“Leave those alone, Edward – they’re dirty now! I suppose they could, if the mechanism was reversed in some way” Mr Tuttle explained.

Young minds, uncluttered with the rubbish of age, sometimes make surprising connections without the tortuous accompaniment of reason .

“My God, he’s right!” exclaimed Mr Tuttle. “If you turned the second clock back, you would meet up with the first even sooner!”

“Stop the pseudo-scientific mumbo-jumbo, and tell us how we are going to find your daughter” Mrs Tuttle demanded.

“Right – action plan number 2 coming up! Edward – in the trolley – you’re the prime lookout! We make straight for the café – where Polly will be ultimately aiming for. If she is not there, we retrace our steps in precisely the opposite direction that Mr Tesco wants us to – till we bump into Polly”.

“Edward, if you see any sign of her at all – from your look-out perch – just yell”

“Whoo-ooop!” hollered Edward, loudly, trying out his vocal cords in anticipation, and startling two elderly ladies dithering over the right sort of pasta they should buy to go with the minced lamb and bolognese sauce they had just put in their trolley (please refer to the previous statement about Spag Bol).

Chapter 8

“Hi, Tony!” Fresh from her somewhat surreal encounter with Brenda, the dwarf shelf-stacker, Polly was less surprised than she would normally have been to find Tony the Tiger standing, rather forlornly, alongside a table piled high with boxes of Kellogg’s Frosties, a stack of plastic bowls and a couple of jugs of cold milk - in front of massed ranks of brightly coloured cereal boxes.

“Hi, to you too, young lady”, Tony responded mournfully from his six foot height that towered over Polly. His yellow and black striped coat hung loosely from a gaunt frame, but his large round Tiger’s head looked friendly enough. Polly came up and sat demurely on the chair at the side of the table – for, although she had never met him face to face, Tony was an old friend. She even had a furry replica – just one foot tall – sitting on the chair beside her bed at home.

“Want to try some Frosties?” Tony asked, half-heartedly. “They’re GRREAT!” Even his growl was a trifle subdued, as though a full-blooded roar would have somehow alerted too many customers to his sad presence.

Polly was immediately sympathetic to his lack-lustre and melancholy attitude, sensing that here was just one large, sad, pussy-cat. Picking up his rubbery tail that lay on the table she inspected its furry covering.

“Gosh, Tony”, her nascent motherly instinct coming to the fore, “your tail is getting a bit threadbare. Don’t you have anybody to look after it for you?”

“What? Oh, that! No – I suppose not –kids aren’t interested in tigers any more. What they want is monsters – and dinosaurs – and cereals that make a noise, instead of just tasting good”.

“But, I thought everybody loved Frosties”

“Not any more. It’s ‘cos they don’t have chocolate in them – and they don’t go pop – or crunch – when you eat them”.

“Well, I eat them, and I like them, and so does Edward –he’s my brother”.

“So – GRREAT! – what did you have for breakfast this morning, then? – er – what’s your name?”

“I’m Polly – and we had – oh dear – Coco Pops”

“See what I mean? Come over here and have a look at this lot”

Polly took hold of Tony’s gigantic paw and walked along the rows of stacked cereal packets with him.

“Know why they give them all those names?” Tony asked. “They’re ‘onomatopoeic’”, he answered, without waiting to see whether Polly already understood the word, deliberately pronouncing each syllable of the word slowly and clearly.

“Wow!”, thought Polly, “What a word!”. She just had to add it to her collection. “What does that word mean?” she asked, all agog for the answer.

“What it means is that the sound of the word, is the same as the sound of the thing it describes. Crunch, crunch, crunch you go as you grind up your Oat Crunchies – smack, smack, smack sounds just like your mouth slurping in Sugar Smacks. It stirs up kids imagination, and makes them want to eat it more”.

“But they don’t get tigers in them?”

“Bless you, Polly, no! – but they do have little plastic velociraptors and action heroes – tigers are old hat, now – you ‘gotta go with the times’! Just look at all these cereals here. They can’t sell them unless they’ve got some superhero on them. You can’t just sell the box, it’s got to have somebody on the front telling you to buy them”

“But you started all that years ago – didn’t you?” Polly was just guessing at this, as she could only remember that Tony the Tiger seemed to have been around for ever.

“Yes - but that’s just the trouble. Once you start on that trail, you’ve got to keep up with all the latest trends – and, like I just said – Tigers are no longer fashionable!”

Polly hated to see anyone so sad, her natural instinct being to try and cheer them up. “Never mind” she said, “I’m sure there are lots of children that still love you – everybody loves tigers”

“Yeah, mebbe so, but they aren’t buying my cereal like they used to” They’re GRREAT!, you know”. Tony seemed more wistful than ever – his great head drooping sadly from his shoulders.

“Tell you what”, said Polly brightly, “I’ll come and eat some of your cereal – and maybe other children will see me eating them and remember how good they are”

“Might as well” admitted Tony mournfully, “Can’t seem to get anyone else to try them” He measured out a tiny bowlful of his free samples, poured in some cold milk, and gave Polly a spoon, whereupon she dived in with exaggerated gusto, crunching with all of her might on the frosted flakes, until a small crowd had gathered to watch her energetic performance.

“Mam – Can I try some” – a grubby little boy with tousled hair pushed forward from the small crowd and held out his hand for a bowl as well, without waiting for a response from his mother – followed by another, younger urchin “Me too!” he grunted, his manner not quite matching his forwardness.

Tony perked up a bit – even managing to evince a couple of “They’re GRREAT’s!” with increasing approximation to a genuine roar. Polly finished the first tiny bowl and asked for another – to the delight of Tony – and even his audience – which she despatched rapidly with the same evident relish.

“I’d better be off, now”, said Polly, handing the bowl back to Tony. “Got to find my mother, you know”. She gave Tony a big grin, which he responded to with a huge conspiratorial wink, and waved her goodbye.

Polly walked down to the end of the aisle and found herself at the back of the store again, where the whole length was dominated by low level counters, selling everything from fish at one end, to cooked meats, fresh cheeses, salads, and, finally, bread and cakes, at the other.

Chapter 9

It was the striking vision in the middle of the delicatessen counter – for that is what this section of the store was – that caught her eye. There were two gentlemen, quite dissimilar in appearance, but dressed in the same Tesco uniform squaring up to each other, with a twinkle in their eyes.

It was obvious, even to Polly, that they were putting on a performance for the customers. It was also obvious from their accents that they were from another country – Poland being one, as he had a similar accent to the plumber that Polly’s father occasionally used.

“Niya”, expostulated the short and fat one, with a large label on his apron which said that his name was Heine. “Germany produces the tastiest sausages in the world.”

Well that settled where he comes from,” she thought.

“Our Wurstchen are unbeatable”, he added “and we make them with ‘echte Schweinfleisch’, not like your Polish sausages, which are full of breadcrumbs.”

“Never!”, the tall thin one with the large moustache, bald head and the Polish accent replied. His badge proclaimed that his name was

Stefan. “We have the tastiest because we smoke them over the most fragrant fires.” He looked at Polly and winked.

“What’s a Wurstchen?” Polly asked Heine.

“Hah! Wurstchen – actually, the real name is Wurst. It’s the German name for a sausage”, he explained. “It is where I come from, Germany – and Stefan here, he is from Poland – a little country beyond the woods in the Eastern part of Germany – aren’t you, Stefan?”.

Stefan came to attention, and bowed his head slightly, whilst he answered, the bright lights of the store bouncing off his pate. “Da, Nastrovya – and Germany is that smelly country downwind of Poland”.

Polly was aware that Germany was on the other side of France, where she and her family had been on holiday a couple of times, but Poland was a new country for her, and she looked at Stefan with renewed interest – but he seemed to look much like everybody else, except for his large handlebar moustache.

“Ah, Poland, she is a beautiful country”, he sighed, “stuck between two races of ignorant savages – and they make the best sausages in the World!”

“Pah!” retorted Heine, “The most wonderful, the tastiest, the most exquisite Wurstchen – they come from Germany – the Bratwurst, the Knackwurst – and, of course, the Blutwurst”.

“Cattle fodder!” exclaimed Stefan, “How can they compare with the rich and spicy taste of krakowska sausages?”

Heine and Stefan looked as if they were going to continue arguing about who had the best sausages for some time, so Polly decided she had better intervene.

“There’s certainly a lot of different sausages here,” she said, “and they all look very interesting. Which is which?”

“Ach,” put forward Heine – his short, fat, body hampering his reach as he leant over the counter. “See these delicious looking sausages here – they are called Bratwurst. And these, here – they are Bockwurst.”

“Bah, pale and uninteresting,” interrupted Stefan, “Not at all like the ones over here from Poland – look how richly coloured they are, compared to those.”

“As I was saying – Dumkopf”, (in an aside to Stefan). “Here we have the Bratwurst, which means roasted sausage – and here is the Bockwurst which must be boiled, and eaten with the finest German mustard, and, of course, a Brotchen.”

“Mere pork and breadcrumbs,” claimed Stefan. “They have no spices in them – no, how do you put it – no zing!. Not like the kabanosy or kielbasa, or the krakowska, a spicy sausage made with peppers and garlic -which we smoke a little – to give it an extra flavour.”

“Smoke?” exclaimed Polly, a mite startled. “You mean you smoke the sausage just like a cigar?” She remembered her father lighting up a similarly shaped and coloured - and highly pungent cigar after the huge Christmas lunch at Gran’s last year.

“Hah!” She has a joke? Ja” inquired Stefan of Heine. “Smoking sausages is a bit like – er – smoking fish – salmon or kippers.”

“What a nincompoop he is,” said Heine to Polly, as Stefan bristled his moustache. “You don’t smoke kippers or sausages, you hang them over a smoky fire, and the smoke cooks them. Kippers are what you get after you smoke herrings – everybody knows that.”

“Golly” said Polly “alarmed at her vision of fresh pieces of fish dangling over the sooty, smelly smoke of one of her father’s bonfires.

Stefan, asserting his dignity, explained that the process was a bit more refined than that, often using the most delicate, scented wood chips, and gently flavouring the fish over several days – and, most

alarmingly of all, that smoking the fish saved the fisherman from having to cook the fish as well. “It can be eaten straight away. You don’t have to grill, poach or fry it, at all!”

“You mean that people eat raw fish – or fish that has only been cooked in smoke?”

“Certainly, and most delicious it is, too,” exclaimed Heine. “Here, try a piece.”

“No, thank you,” Polly said, hastily, the memory of her last free tasting still fresh in her mind.

“What’s this sausage here?” asked Polly, pointing to a stubby, blood red sausage lying in an oblong dish and garnished with some lurid, green plastic parsley.

“Ahh – that’s Chorizo”, explained Heine, pronouncing it the same way that a Spaniard would. “That, dear girl, is an inferior type of sausage that comes from Spain, that is only fit for peasants”.

“Inferior, he says” riposted Stefan, “That’s because the Germans don’t like putting spice into their sausages”

“That’s a funny word – k-k-korizo – how do you spell it?” Polly tried to imitate the sound that Heine had made at the beginning of the word.

“Chorizo” repeated Heine. “In Spain, when you have a ‘c’ and and ‘h’ at the beginning of a word, it doesn’t sound like ‘ch’ as in church or children – it goes ‘ck’ – like – when you want to spit. You have to clear your throat when you say it”. Heine, who had lived in England for nearly twenty years, and was proud of the way he had mastered English, added, “I think you call it, in English – ‘hawking-“

“Hah, what does he know!” said Stefan, who had been in England just two years longer, and thought he knew more about the language. “Hawking is when you fly eagles and falcons from your hand – hunting – like they did in the Middle Ages”.

“Hawking is when you bring up spit in your mouth, and then try to clear your throat.”

“Not spit – phlegm!”

“What’s phlegm?”

“That thing that’s spelt funny, that the English have a lot of – Phlegm – meaning, I think, a stiff upper lip.” replied Stefan.

“What’s phlegm got to do with a stiff upper lip - anyway, I spit on your phlegm!” Heine and Stefan just couldn’t stop arguing, but, perhaps, it was merely a double-act put on for the public. It seemed

that they enjoyed baiting each other, and playing around with their, somewhat eccentric, command of the English language. There was no rancour in their exchanges, and they were always accompanied by a wink in Heine's eye and a deft finger flicking of his moustache from Stefan.

“Anyway, you know, little girl, that in Poland, we, also pronounce our words differently. This” – he picked up a large loop of sausage,” is a Winecka. Spell it w.i.n.i.e.c.k.a, but when you pronounce the ‘c’ it is a ‘ts’. Winięcka.

“Gosh”, said Polly, It must be awfully difficult to speak properly in Poland, as well.”

“Not at all, not at all! We come to England – we think your language is crazy. How you spell cough, bough, though, through and rough – you all crazy!” Stefan's perfect English grammar always seemed to suffer when he got excited.

“What you don't have – what you don't have, any of you – “interjected Heine, proudly, “– is the Umlaut!”

“The Umlaut? What's an Umlaut?” Polly loved discussing words and spelling – she always, naturally, came top of her class at school – and here were some fascinating new friends who seemed just as interested in words as she was – even though they must be in a foreign language.

“An Umlaut” Heine pronounced majesterially, “is two little dots that you put on top of a vowel that changes the way it is pronounced”.

“I will give you an example” he added, in his precise German manner.

“If you say von – that means from – it is spelt v.o.n. If you add an Umlaut – for instance, over the ‘o’ in Schon – which means beautiful – it is pronounced ‘schurn’, and” he added” it is spelt ‘s.c.h.ö.(Umlaut) n – the ‘s.c.h are just like your ‘sh’.”

“But ‘s.c.h.’ is pronounced ‘sk’ like in ‘school’, “interrupted Polly.

“Ja, as Stefan has said, the English language is crazy – now, let us” he continued, “in the same manner, consider our sausages. Here we have a ‘wurst’” He picked up a single sausage, then laid it back down among the rest. “And here” he indicated all of the sausages “we have ‘würstchen’ – with an Umlaut- Lots of sausages. Over there, “he pointed to the bread counter “you have ‘brot’ – bread – and ‘brötchen’, again with an Umlaut – some little bread rolls which are delicious to eat with ‘bockwurst’ and a little German mustard.”

“Und ‘Magd’ und ‘Madchen’” added Stefan. “Ach, die Deutschen sind Dumm auch!”

“Not so,” said Heine. “It is all very simple”.

“Aber, nicht so” answered Heine, “and to Polly, “The German language is easy to speak – you only pronounce the word in the way in which it is spelled – or even spelt!. In English you have many ways to pronounce a word. It is most confusing!”.

Polly decided, when she was a bit older, that she would start to learn another language – perhaps German – or French – but only when she knew a bit more about the English language. It would be fun, she thought, to compare the different ways in which people speak.

“Now, young lady, do you wish to buy a Polish sausage – or two? Or perhaps some tasteless English corned beef or watery ham – without any succulent spices in them?” asked Stefan “Or, perhaps, some of these colourless English sausages, which, perhaps, have mostly breadcrumbs in them?”

“No, you must have German sausages”, said Heine, “They are the tastiest!”

“Or wouldn’t you prefer a delicious piece of which comes from my home town of Gdansk in Poland?”

“Danzig”, said Heine, shortly,

“Gdansk” re-iterated Stefan,

“Danzig, Danzig.” Heine hissed Heine.

“Gdansk, Gdansk, Gdansk.....Gdansk”, Stefan retorted, both of them becoming more agitated and heated.

“Polish!”,

“German!”

“Polish! Polish!”

Stefan winked at Polly and picked up a plastic glove – one that they use to handle cold meats, and wafted it in front of Heine’s face! “I challenge you to a duel”

“For the honour of Germany, I accept!”, answered Heine, picking up another glove according to the Health and Safety approved ritual for picking up cold meats from the counter, and putting it on his right hand. He then selected the longest, straightest and firmest German sausage he could find and faced Stefan, who responded by taking hold of a similarly resplendent Winieska and faced Heine.

“Na strazy!|” Stefan said, in Polish.

“Auf der Hut!” responded Heine, as they faced each other, sausages aloft and with each free arm raised behind to balance their stance, ready for a ‘fatal’ thrust. He saluted Heine, courteously – in the manner of combatants of old – and both advanced on each other

brandishing their wursts – or would that be intent on doing their wursts

Polly knew she was being teased, and was about to answer, when she caught sight of Glenda, the lady who had got her to try the free chocolate, bearing down towards the delicatessen counter, her eyes seemingly fixed on Polly, and with the same sinister smile playing about her lips.

“Er – I think I had better go – my mummy will be looking for me” She scuttled off. Heine and Stefan lowered their sausages, saluted Polly and resumed their gentle banter.

Chapter 10

Polly skittered round the corner of the adjacent food aisle, and narrowly avoided knocking over Brenda, who had moved from the tinned vegetable aisle, and was steering her stepladder to her next assignment.

“Whoa, there, young lady!” John Wayne, again, pulling her up short by the reins. “You’ll scare the shoppers and set off another stampede!”

Polly cantered to a stop and did her best to hide behind Brenda, so that she could peer over her shoulder and watch as Glenda strode past the end of the aisle with hardly a glance in Polly’s direction.

“Found your folks, yet?” enquired Brenda, “or are you still roaming the range by yourself?”

“Oh, I am sure they will be somewhere around here. Mummy said she needed to buy some – “ she looked around her to see where she was “ - dog food for Diddums and Fang”

“So, you got a couple of pooches, then? Let me guess – - Diddums – a cute little Yorkshire Terrier – and Fang – a huge coyote – or wolf, maybe?”

“Oh, no! the wrong way round! Diddums is our German Shepherd, and Fang – well – he’s just a dachshund”

“A dachshund called Fang! He a fighter then – he go for your ankles – and snap them off just below the knee?”

“No, he’s quite sweet, really – and Daddy just called him that to give him some ‘self-respect’ – and Diddums is not his real name. He’s so sappy, we always call him that. His real name is Barnaby Bellweather the Third”

“Wanna help me some, then, while you wait awhile – you can hand me up those tins I gotta put on the top shelf”

“Sure” said Polly, catching the idiom, and delighted to be involved in the game.

Brenda cut open the top of a box of dog food tins, and clambered up the ladder so that Polly could pass them up to her. She soon realised that it was more fun throwing them up one at a time, so that Brenda could catch them and slide them into place. It was quicker, too.

“So what was the hurry?” Brenda inquired, pushing a row of Pedigree Chum tins to the back of the shelf.

Polly wasn’t at all sure herself. She was certainly becoming quite frightened by Glenda, but she couldn’t put it down to anything that

she could describe to anybody else. It was a feeling that the woman conveyed every time she happened to glance at Polly. Perhaps she was just imagining it. She certainly couldn't tell Brenda who would have thought she was being too fanciful – and being full of a natural pugnaciousness, would, almost certainly have taken Polly straight to Glenda to sort it out. The last thing she would have wanted.

“Er, I thought I saw Mummy and Daddy, she improvised “but I... but I didn't...”she added, somehow feeling that an additional explanation was required to explain why she hadn't continued after them. Anyway, in spite of her inadequate explanation, she felt safer around Brenda who seemed to possess a considerable amount of common sense in her small frame.

“What a lot of dog food, there is” exclaimed Polly, throwing up yet another tin of Pedigree Chum to Brenda. “They must eat an awful lot of food!”

“Not really...there's just a lot of them about. Most families seem to have a dog or a cat – or even a budgerigar – these days, and some people spend more on feeding them than they do on themselves”

“Well, we've only got two dogs, and Fang eats more than Diddums – or he seems to, as he's always hungry. Do you have any pets?”

“Wa’all” breaking into her John Wayne impression again, “seeing as how the ranch, being on the third floor of a block of flats, don’t have no access to the prairie – I just got me a kindle of cats”

“A kindle – what’s a kindle?”

“You ain’t never heard of a kindle – well, shame on you missy! A kindle is a cluster of young cats” and before Polly could ask what a cluster was as well, “- and a cluster is what you call a handful of household or handful of cats. All animals have group names – didn’t they tell you that at school?”

“you mean like a flock of sheep, or a herd of cows? – That’s easy!”

“Alright, then – what do you call a lot of mice – or pigs, even?”

“Pigs are easy – cos’ mummy always says I leave my bedroom as if a litter of pigs have been living in it. I don’t know about mice, though”

“A group of mice is a nest – and birds, do you know any groups of birds?”

“That’s easy as well – a flock of birds – a flock of sparrows, a flock of pigeons, a flock...”

“Ahh, but not all birds are the same. Chickens come in a brood, and crows, well – you can have a murder of crows - ”

“A murder – Gosh!”

“Or a convocation of eagles, a colony of gulls, a covey of partridges, a bevy of quails – and there’s lots more –“

“Why do they have so many different names?” asked Polly, fascinated by some of the names applied to the different species.

“I reckon it all goes back to the Middle Ages – how people used to describe them. It helps to describe the way the birds behave – peacocks, for instance, used to be called an ostentation (that’s showing off) or a pride of peacocks because of the way they used to strut about with their fine feathers on display. A clamour of rooks describes the fuss and the noise they make when they are all together.

“Does everything have a group name, then?”

“Sure – fish, insects – you got an army of frogs, a school of porpoises – and so on”

“What about people?”

“Ahh, people! They can have special group names – not all of them quite so common. You can even make them up yourself – one you should remember is a patience of mothers!”

“Oops! I hope she is!”

“And a column of journalists, or a grouse of farmers – or even a guffaw of clowns”

“Can we make some up for the people in Tesco’s?” asked Polly, delighted to find, yet again, another exciting word game – and someone who obviously enjoyed playing them as well.

“Let’s see – I’ll make up the first one, and then it’s your turn. What about –“ Brenda thought hard for a few moments “What about a chink of cashiers?”

“Or a howling of babies?”, Polly added.

“Or a – scamper of children?”

Or a fidget of children – you mean” said Polly, “or” Polly remembered the earlier dance of the trollies “a clash of shopping trollies?”

“You got it, you got it! – and don’t forget a sizzle of sausages, and a stodge of puddings”

Both girls succumbed to a fit of the giggles, and had to sit down, Brenda in fear of overturning the step-ladder which was shaking in sympathy. Polly sat on a box of pedigree Chum that had yet to be opened – “Watch out, here comes a grumble of grannies!” she called out as she watched two old ladies turn into the aisle, pushing their trollies before them.

Chapter 11

“And what happens to be your name?” A lilting voice with a strange accent stopped Polly’s reverie. She had been standing, looking at a wonderful selection of sweets and chocolates, quite unlike the ones she had tried earlier, which had been offered by the strange lady.

She looked around and saw someone who was quite different to Brenda in every way – tall, thin, male, dressed in a very smart pair of grey trousers, which actually had a crease in them, black shoes, and wearing a smart white shirt – and a tie! He was squinting through a rimless pair of glasses that were really too large for him, and had a tousled mop of bright red hair. In his right hand he held an alarmingly large roller device with a continuous roll of labels and a dialler on the side for setting prices.

“It’s a wonderful sight, to be sure, isn’t it?” he added, as he started attacking a new row of sweet packets with his price gun.

“Oh yes, “ agreed Polly, as she really had a bit of a sweet tooth. “I love these”, she said, pointing to a box of Maltesers, “ but mummy rations me and Edward to just one packet a month”.

“She’s very wise, then”, said the young man, for he was no older than 20 or so. “too much of a good thing isn’t good for you!”

“That’s a funny thing to say, “ said Polly, “If something is good, why isn’t it always good?”.

“Well,” said the young man, thinking carefully, “I suppose it’s because we are using the word good in two different ways. First of all, we mean that it is something we like – and then, perhaps, it’s not good because too much of what we like will be bad for our health – or it will rot our teeth – or something like that! – You didn’t tell me what your name was!”

“Polly”, said Polly, “as in Polly put the kettle on!” she added with a grin, as she liked listening to his funny accent - and, wanting to hear more she asked “and what’s your name?”

“Oh, Sean”, he answered, “Sean MacFadyen, if you please – with an Irish mother with emerald green eyes, and a Scottish father who’s hair is redder than mine!”

“And how do you spell Sean?”, she asked, as she knew two boys her school who were also called Sean, and each spelled his name in a different way – and she got a shock when Sean replied.

“Well, now, there’s a thing! I don’t really know, as my Mam and Dad could never agree on it, anyway. Let’s see, there’s Sean and Sian, both true Irish spellings, you understand, and then you could spell it Shorn, as in born, or Shawn as in lawn, or even Shorne with an ‘e’, as in borne – you know, borne along the river. Or even, Shaughan, the same as Vaughan, or...” Sean recited, standing up, looking into space, as if he had done all of this before, and was attempting to recall all the different ways you could spell his name – “then there’s Sharn, as in warn, and Shourn, spelt the same way as mourn, and, and.....” he tailed off, searching for other antonyms.

“Wow”, exclaimed Polly. “What a lot of ways to spell your own name – no wonder your Mam and Dad were confused!”

“And that’s not all”, said Sean. “My surname is a bit odd, as well – do you know what Mac means?”

“It’s Scottish, isn’t it? I know that lots of Scottish names begin with Mac.”

“Mac or Mc”, agreed Sean. “Well, it means – ‘son of ‘ – so, if your name is MacFadyen, it means, literally the son of Paddy. It comes from MacPhaidean, and Paidean is the Gaelic name for Paddy – Paddy is short for Patrick. Do you know who St. Patrick was?”

“Ha, I know that! My teacher comes from Ireland – her name is Mrs O’Reilly, and she told us all about St. Patrick. He chased all the snakes out of Ireland.” Polly said proudly.

“And didn’t he just”, agreed Sean, “And did you know that Fitzpatrick also means the son of Patrick, but that is the Irish version, and not the Scottish one”.

“Gosh, are all the Scottish names the ‘son of’ somebody?”

“Not all of them, but I bet I can tell you where most of them come from. My Dad’s hobby is Genealogy, and I sometimes help him look up names and things on the Internet. Do you know any Scottish names, and I will see if I know where they come from?”

Polly thought for a while. She only knew a limited number of people, anyway, and most of those she knew where in her school. “Well, we have a Sharon McMillan in my class at school.”

“Hah, that’s an easy one – McMillan comes from Mac-Gille-Mhaoil in Gaelic – and it literally means, ‘the son of the bald Ghillie’.

“What’s a ghillie?,” Polly asked.

“He’s a gamekeeper, in Scotland”, said Sean, not quite sure that Polly knew what a gamekeeper was – and he was right.

“What, he keeps games? Like Monopoly, and Scrabble? Why does he do that?”.

“No, not that sort of game – he looks after deer and pheasants and grouse on an estate”.

“Well, we don’t have any animals like that on our estate”, answered Polly. Beginning to get a little confused. “Why does he have to look after them?”

Sean was not sure that Polly, in her innocence, would want to know the answer to that, so he turned the subject back to people’s names. “So what is your surname? Let’s see if I can tell where you come from”.

“Bet you can’t,” said Polly, “Daddy says there aren’t many people with the same name. It’s Tuttle – t.u.t.t.l.e “. as she had, no doubt, had to spell out many times before.

“You’re right, never heard that one before. I’d guess it has a Northern origin to it – rather than French. I’m very interested in people’s names”, he said. “learning where they come from helps you learn a lot about the history of the country, as well. Have you any idea where it comes from?”

“Daddy says it’s an old Irish name and has something to do with somebody called Thor, who was the God of Thunder, but his brother, who lives in Portsmouth thinks it came from a French name”.

“Irish, you say, and I haven’t heard of it!” Sean threw up his hands in mock horror, knocking over several tins of Ovaltine out of his trolley, which, with a clatter, rolled across the floor and came to rest against a pair of highly polished black shoes.

And, the resultant clatter caused Polly to step back hurriedly, knocking the stack of cardboard boxes of the table which contained Sean’s rolls of labels, precipitating a colourful spiral of streamers as they unravelled along the floor.

Chapter

The owner of the said shoes stood looking down at Sean and Polly, because he was taller than Polly, and heaps taller than Sean who was on his hands and knees picking up the tins rolling around the shoes to replace them in his trolley.

Neither did the owner say anything as Sean picked up his price marker again and, ignoring Polly, proceed to ticket everything in sight, whistling tunelessly through his teeth.

Alexander Westmacott pronounced the label on the shoe owners shirt, a label that, unlike the rest of his staff, had overflowed either side of his breast pocket. He was clearly one of the managers, and if Polly had but spotted it when she first entered the store, was repeated alongside the title of Retail Manager with a photograph of the luminary, himself.

Tesco's managers were mostly office bound, but could sometimes be found wandering the canyons of the supermarket, fine-tuning the activities of

their staff. Each of the different departments had their own managers, but the grand title of Retail Manager proclaimed Alexander as the chief of chiefs on the shop floor.

Polly wasn't aware of all of this, as she disentangled herself from the boxes of labels she had knocked onto the floor, and who's contents were now strewn over the tiles in muddled confusion. She had, once more, attempted some forward locomotion with her head, and her brain, focussed on that which she had just left behind.

“Whoops!” seemed scarcely an adequate word to express her shock and dismay at causing a second catastrophe. She quickly added another, more conciliatory, word – “Sorry!”

“Well” Alexander said, “Well, well, well – are you just going to stand there looking at them, or are you going to help me pick them up?”

Alexander Westmacott was as tall as his name was long, with a slight stoop from talking to people a lot shorter than himself, as he had a quiet, but authoritative, manner. He didn't raise his voice much, but what he said, he said with careful

deliberation, so people listened to him. He also attempted to peer over his half-moon glasses, which he used mostly for reading, but which he rarely took off as he was constantly switching his gaze from perusing the general appearance of a row of goods, to careful scrutiny of individual price tags on a tin of beans, or jar of jam. He seldom lost his temper, but the act of discovering a price tag on an individual tin that differed from the ones on the rest of the shelf was enough to bring a pointed rebuke to his lips. His staff had to keep on their toes!

“Oh! Pick them up, I suppose”, she mumbled a shamefaced reply, dropping to her knees and throwing the empty boxes right side up.

She picked up the first card she came to. On it was printed the phrase – “Final Offer!” in lurid yellow against a red background and with a large asterisk after it. “Which box does this go in”, she asked.

“The large box with maltesers on the side – “ a box that had clearly relinquished its’ designated

role and which was now serving as a receptacle for Mr Westmacott's labels.

“What does ‘Final Offer’ mean?” Polly asked – not really asking what the words meant, as she knew that already, but attempting to find out the context.

“It means that this is the lowest price that we are going to sell something”

“What, you mean lowest price, ever?”

“Well, not really – next week we may put the price back up again – or we might even put it lower”.

“But that means that it isn't really the ‘Final Offer’” Sally insisted.

“Well, it's just a phrase to make people think it's the final offer, and the best price they will pay for something, so that they will be persuaded to buy it.” Said Mr Westmacott.

“But, doesn't everybody know, then, that it's not really the final offer?”

“Of course they do,” confessed Mr Westmacott,
“but it’s all part of the game!”

“Game?” There’s that word again. “You mean like rounders?” Polly was getting a bit confused because everything seemed to be a game – but wasn’t really.

“The game of selling – words are very powerful things, and you use them to help you sell things – and everybody knows that they are only being used for that purpose.”, replied Alexander.

“What, they think it’s true, then, that it is the ‘Final Offer’”, Asked Polly.

“No, not really. Everybody likes to think they are getting a bargain. So we use words that they recognise – such as special offer, sale, reduction – and sometimes we add other words to make them seem even more tempting – amazing, fantastic – can’t be repeated”.

“One of the best ones we use is ‘Special Purchase’. People think we have gone out looking

for special bargains just for them, when really, we have just done a good deal with a supplier”.

“But that’s not fair?”, said Polly.

“Off course it is. People have to buy something, or else you wouldn’t find your dinner on the table tonight, and if we make them a little bit happier, thinking they have done a good deal, why should that be wrong?”.

“Words can also be used to hurt people!” Polly looked round. Brenda had joined them, on her way to pick up some more cartons of cream crackers to lay out on the shelves. “Either intentionally, or unintentionally” she added. “Has our young lady been demolishing things, again?” she asked.

Polly picked up on her earlier statement. “When words hurt people, do you mean people have to be.....” Polly searched for the word she had heard earlier, and which her father used a lot...”PC?” This was one of the few words that Polly had come across that she wasn’t sure about, but knew that her father, Mr Tuttle, used it a lot when speaking about one of his clients at work. He used to say that he wasn’t really allowed to say

what he thought about anything, because his client was frightened by the PC police. Mr Westmacott obviously had similar thoughts about the word. What form a PC policeman would take rather stretched Polly's imagination.

“PC, or not PC? Having to be politically correct is boloney” he snorted – in a tone of voice seldom heard on his shop floor. “It’s all a matter of how you behave towards people. If people treated each other with more respect, there would be no need to be ‘politically correct’”.

“He’s right”, said Brenda, “If you like someone, and have a good relationship, they will understand it if you use a word that would be a lot more insensitive if it came from someone who didn’t like you!”

“Well, it does sometimes depend on the word that you use,” said Mr Westmacott, remembering some of the things he had said before about selling.

“How do you mean?” asked Polly.

“Well, if you were a coloured person, and I was to call you a nigger...”

“That’s really bad, because it was used by old American slave traders to describe their slaves – it comes from the word, Negro, I think, which is a perfectly correct word, but one that you can’t use today. You have to call such people black – even if they are not so much black, but more a of a milk chocolate brown.”

“And what about shorty?” asked Polly, being bolder than her years, or perhaps showing the innocence of her youth.

“Fine by me,” acknowledged Brenda, as long as you don’t mind me calling you lofty – which is what you will be when you grow up!”

“Ah, but will it get you into a lot of trouble with the ‘thought police’” asked Mr Westmacott?

“The ‘thought police’ – who are they?”, asked Polly, aghast, imagining yet another tier of helmeted busybodies. “Do they come and lock you up for what you are thinking?”

“Would if they could”, said Brenda, “No, they’re a lot of interfering busy-bodies who like pointing out other people’s behaviour. No, there are words that people use every day that hurt more than people realise”.

“Words like idiot, numbskull, silly cow – words that show a disrespect for a person’s feelings, and that really hurt them”.

“But they’re not swear words?”, said Polly.

“No, swear words are bad, but they reflect on the people who say them, and not on the persons they are directed at,” said Alexander.

“You mean that they hurt the people who say them? asked Polly, incredulously.

“Not that they would ever know it, but yes, the person who is sworn at will think a lot less of the person swearing at them”.

Polly wound up the last of the reels of labels and handed them back to Sean, who was working on another section of the row. He avoided her studiously, aware of Mr Westmacotts eyes burning

into the back of his reddening neck, until Polly whispered a meek “Thank you, Sean MacFadyen”, as she slipped past in the direction of another row.

“A pleasure, Polly Tuttle from Ireland”, he whispered back and winked.

Chapter 12

Polly's parents sat down exhausted in the café. They had been up and down each isle a couple of times each, and as luck would have it, they must have gone up one side whilst Polly was going down the other.

“Time to use the stopped watch strategy”, said Mr Tuttle – “and I could do with a cup of coffee”.

“If the mountain doesn't come to Mohamed – Mohamed must go to the mountain,” he added. “We, of course, are the mountain. If we stay put for a while, she is bound to wander past”.

“It's where we agreed to meet, anyway,” said Mrs Tuttle. “Perhaps we should have plonked ourselves here right at the start”.

“We could always use the tannoy, “ she added “I think they will let you send a message if you go to customer services.”

“Not come to that yet. Let's give it a couple more minutes.”

Edward took control of the trolley and wheeled it into an empty trolley store. Mrs Tuttle had downloaded a couple of essential items in the first fifteen minutes, before they started to get concerned at Polly's absence, plus a larger pile of 'bargains', some of them, thought Mr Tuttle, bound for the nether reaches of the tallest kitchen cupboard, to be discovered after many months,

or even years, and rejected as being ‘too far beyond the sell-by date’ even to be consumed by Mr Tuttle.

They had found an empty table on the edge of the café, and sat, facing into the store, in the hope of seeing Polly cross the end of an aisle, whilst Mr Tuttle ordered a couple of coffees and a milk shake for Edward. He paid for a cold glass of milk for Polly, in the hope that she would be joining them in due course, and added a couple of chocolate brownies – more bait for the errant girl.

They didn’t see Polly, but what certainly aroused their curiosity was the sight of Glenda – they didn’t actually know her name, but she was certainly quite distinctive with her mop of frizzy hair and long skinny legs – as she skulked round the corner of one the aisles, intent on something beyond their vision, and wishing to keep concealed. Mr Tuttle had noticed her before, and had even tried one of her chocolates, but thought that, for a demonstrator, she wasn’t particularly interested in what she was supposed to be selling.

On a number of occasions he had spotted her away from her little stall - lurking. He suddenly realised that that was what she had been doing, something which he couldn’t quite put his mind on at the time. She had been ‘lurking’. You can tell when somebody’s actions don’t

quite ring true, and she was obviously intent on something other than her little tray of chocolates.

Confirmation followed quite quickly as she surreptitiously removed a small communication device from her pocket, and spoke a couple of words into it. That could only mean that there was someone else involved in her little bit of subterfuge! She was tracking somebody!

So The Tuttle family were not the only ones on a quest. “Oh Dear,” Mr Tuttle suddenly thought, “I hope we are not after the same target. Polly, what have you done now?”.

“Stay here,” he ordered the remnants of his clan, “two can play at that game”. He set off stealthily in the direction of Glenda

Chapter 13

Polly thought that it was about time she made tracks for the café. It was the agreed meeting place should they split up, but she had quite lost track of time, having made so many new friends. Her brain was buzzing with the different things she had learned, and she was anxious to get home to add some of the new words she had picked up to her list.

She looked up at the signs across each aisle to get her bearings. Despite its size, Tesco's stores all seemed to be laid out in roughly the same familiar way – and, despite her young years, she had been in enough of them – so she knew that if this was the cakes and biscuits, she was somewhere in the middle of the store. She looked around her, and decided that if that, then, was the deli counter it would be against the back wall, and the tills would be in the other direction, and the café beyond the huge serried rows of checkouts. She set off in that direction down an empty aisle- empty, that is, except for a youngish man standing in front of her and half blocking her path.

He was looking up at something on the shelves, but as she approached, he turned to her and smiled. “Hi,” he said, pleasantly. “Sorry I’m in your way”.

As she sidestepped to get past him, he smiled again, and asked her “Gosh, I am in a pickle. I wonder if you could help me?”.

Polly looked at him more closely before she said yes, and saw a kind looking face surmounting a slightly heavy body in worn out jeans and a loose khaki anorak. His trainers looked reasonably clean and new, though, and he didn't smell funny. He wasn't as old, or as tall as her father.

“If I can”, she answered, not at all sure what it was he wanted her to do. It was pretty mundane, though, and more of a manufactured opening gambit than a genuine request for help.

He was looking up at the top shelf - “I love chocolate and ginger, and can't decide which I should go for – Chocolate cookies with ginger on top, or Ginger cookies with chocolate on top! What would you choose?”.

Polly laughed. What a silly question, but she could see that the man was half joking anyway, and he was as easy to talk to as the manager and the price checker. “I don't really like ginger, so I wouldn't go for either”, she admitted.

“What do you like best, then?” he asked. “I bet it's those orange chocolate thingies.”

Moving closer to Polly, he pointed up at them with his left arm, so that she had to look along his arm at where he was pointing. As she was squinting at the top row,

his right arm slid around her back and he grabbed and squeezed her bottom. He was getting a bit red in the face and panting slightly as he did so.

Polly jumped back, startled, and found her arms above the elbows pinioned in two strong grips. She was lifted bodily off the floor and swung away from the young man.

As she was being moved away, she saw Glenda grab the left arm of the man, and, speaking softly to him, started to move him away from them both. The hands gripping her arms deposited her on the floor, and she swung round to see who it was.

“Daddy!” She dove into his arms, and clung on to him, quite scared, and totally bewildered by the experience.

Chapter 13

Polly sat with her mother and Ed at the table in the cafe, Polly was on her second flpajack. She was playing another game with Ed, making a list of shoppers who had either got dogs or cats to feed at home, by spotting tins of either Kit-e-Kat or Pedigree Chum, or something similar, in their baskets as they went past.

with “Dogs winning by 15 to 9” she proclaimed,
a whoop of triumph, as this time she had
positioned herself as the dog champion, whilst
Ed was looking out for cat lovers.

“I want budgies, as well,” said Ed, having just spotted a woman going past with a packet of Trill in her trolley.

“Sorry, birds and cats don't go together”, answered Polly. “You can have goldfish”, knowing full well that fish food was not really on the list of Tesco's pet food counters.

“Curiosity trumps concern”, thought Mrs Tuttle, to herself, as she listened to Polly who had shrugged off the earlier incident as though it had ever happened.

She looked up to see her husband approaching with Glenda in tow. Glenda took Mr Tuttle's earlier vacated chair whilst he went looking for a fifth for himself.

“Hello, Polly,” Glenda smiled at the young girl who had previously associated her with one of Dorothy's nemeses in the Wizard of Oz. She didn't look so sinister with a smile on her face. Polly was still a bit guarded, and looked up at Glenda, but said nothing.

Mr Tuttle sat down next to them, having found a vacant chair. He explained to his wife what the outcome of the episode was.

“We took our 'friend' to the managers office, and Glenda called her colleagues – she's actually an undercover policewoman – and when they turned up to escort him to the police station, Glenda thought it would be best if she came and explained what will happen next. Polly won't be involved any further.” he said to allay Mrs Tuttle's fears.

“Not at all,” said Glenda, chiming in. “What I saw, with your husband who was, thankfully, right behind me, is all the evidence we needed.”

“The store's only been opened a couple of weeks, as you know, but they had had a couple of reports from customers about a strange man approaching their children. There were no decent descriptions

– well, most of what we had were contradictory – and nothing we could act on. So they asked us to put somebody on the inside. So I pretended to be a sales demonstrator to keep an eye on things”

“So you used Polly as a scapegoat,” accused Mrs Tuttle.

“Definitely not” replied Glenda. “She was wandering around the store by herself, making friends with Tesco staff all over the place – but I kept an eye on her, all the time. She just made one friend too many.”

Polly was listening to what Glenda was saying, and remembered catching glimpses of her at odd times, peering round the corners of the isles, or thinking she did.

“I just saw someone with dog food and cat food in their trolley” yelled Ed,

“What are they going to charge him with?” said Mr Tuttle, hoping to round off the conversation and get back to normal.

“Very difficult. They'll check his past and see if he has any history. If not, they'll threaten him with 'inappropriate touching', smack his bottom and send him on his way”, Glenda's words raised alarming images in Polly's imagination, almost as much as the phrase – 'inappropriate touching'.

She knew all about the use of the suffix 'in' to denote the opposite to an adjective – such as accurate and inaccurate, and even correct and incorrect – and had argued with her father about the use of 'famous' and 'infamous', when he said that they weren't opposites, as both famous and infamous meant famous - but the latter still meant famous, but famous for something wicked. And she also knew some words that didn't appear to have a corresponding opposite meaning, such as insatiable and 'satisfiable', at least not one that was used a lot, so she just had to ask the question of Glenda and her parents. "What's 'appropriate touching?'"

Glenda's eyes rolled upwards, and Mrs Tuttle looked sideways at her husband, barely concealing a giggle. This was Polly back to normal, all right!

Both of them hunched forward conspiratorially over the table, looked straight at Polly, and said "Well....." almost simultaneously.

Mrs Tuttle took on the task. "When somebody touches somebody else, anywhere on the body, especially someone of the opposite sex, or someone younger like yourself – unless they are best buddies or a close member of the family – then it is 'inappropriate'".

“That means you shouldn’t do it”, added Glenda.

“What, ever?”, asked Polly.

“Hardly ever”, conceded Mrs Tuttle.

“Mostly never”, Glenda appended.

“Except....”

Mrs Tuttle pondered,

And she considered,

And finally she decided..

“Except...when you shake hands”. They both added, together, laughing.:-

Glenda explained further. “When you shake hands, you are face to face...as equals,, and you are both agreeing to make formal contact - ”.

“I suppose that’s the only type of touching that you could ever call ‘appropriate’” stated Mrs Tuttle, thinking its about time that the conversation and the subject matter be closed.

