

SUPERMARKET

BY

DENNIS HAMLEY

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Supermarket

Gary, who is nine and small for his age, wakes up from a bad dream about drowning in a wreck-stewn and serpent-ridden sea and finds he feels much better. All through that week he has been away from school with 'flu. On Monday and Tuesday he was really terrible; on Wednesday he was merely awful; on Thursday he was just weak. But now, Friday, he leaves his choking dream to sit suddenly up in bed and say aloud, "I feel all right."

It's silly, he thinks, to go back to bed just for Friday. He lies down again and feels even better. "That's all right," says Mum. "But I must go into work today. We need the money. Are you sure you'll be OK?" Gary says he will, so she leaves her mobile beside his bed and tells him, "Ring me at once if anything goes wrong."

She makes sure he will be safe and warm on his own and then says, "You can get some fresh air over the weekend. And for a start you can come late night shopping with me this evening at Safebury's."

Mum comes home at one o'clock and makes him some soup. She sees he is pale but lively and goes back happy. But when she has gone, Gary feels strangely tired and goes back to sleep, this time to dream of mazes and being

lost for ever though the way out is just round the corner. When he wakes again his mind spits and crackles with the strangeness of daytime sleep.

Mum returns: they eat: they pile into the ancient Ford Fiesta and chug to Safebury's. It is dark now: the streetlamps are orange and Safebury's car park is vast but full. Parking the Fiesta takes longer than their journey. They get out to the clash of trolleys hurled against each other by departing shoppers and dodge the long steel snakes of reclaimed trolleys, their guides at the rear slumped over them like galley slaves.

Safebury's revolving doors move slowly. When Gary pushes them to hurry them up they stop and so does everybody trying to get in. He feels guilty. Inside, Gary and his mother walk through a wall of heat and light which makes him blink. Once through the barrier, Mum becomes single-minded. Her trolley fills, first with fruit, then with vegetables. The rasp of plastic bags she tears off becomes almost a rhythm.

The first aisle is crowded. Trolleys lie in all directions like the ships of a scuttled fleet. But his mother negotiates them all and the people clinging to them like a confident pilot and Gary is glad to follow. They push their way to the delicatessen counter. Mum looks at the rows of trays of cooked meats, samosas, quiche and pies and says, "Get me ticket, Gary."

Gary looks to right and left. He sees that a sinister little metal monster rears nearby out of the floor like a sea serpent out of the waves. Its pointed head has a sharp, clicking mouth into which people are putting their hands. Gary brings himself to do the same and pulls on the monster's thin little tongue. The ticket he now holds has a number printed on it - 21. There is a shout of, "Next, number four," and, high above him, is a buzz and 04 appears in green on a black panel.

Gary gives his mother the ticket.

"Oh, I've got to wait hours," she says. "Gary, be a dear and pick up a few things for me while I choose what I want here."

"I like the turkey pie with cranberries on top," says Gary.

"We'll see," said Mum. "I want you to get me one strawberry jam, one blackcurrant, one plum and two jars of orange marmalade, fine cut. Can you remember that?"

"Where are they?" asks Gary.

"Somewhere. It tells you on the notices over the shelves."

Gary looks up. Yes, there are signs hanging from the ceiling to show where things are.

RICE AND PASTA
BISCUITS

CRISPS AND NUTS
CONFECTIONERY

CANNED MEAT
CANNED VEGETABLES

TEA AND COFFEE
PICKLES AND SPICES

WINES AND SPIRITS
PRESERVES

Where is the sign saying JAM AND MARMALADE? He turns to his mother again: she is swallowed up in the queue. He must search the shop without help. He feels cast off into a strange sea.

Gary walks down the first aisle. Or he tries to. Soon he is fighting his way down the aisle. He struggles past immovable, shouting people whose elbows are on a level with his nose. His knees and stomach are buffeted by the ends of trolleys. Handles hit him on the chin. He cannot see faces: hands snatching avalanches of goods wave across his eyes. Soon he has no idea where he is. People obscure the shelves. Only by looking up at the neon-lit ceiling can he track his path. He remembers his maze dream.

A tinny voice sounds over the racket. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen and welcome to Safeway's." Gary pauses. He waits for the voice to say, "Gary, the shelf you want is half-way down the next aisle." Instead, it says, "Haddock and cod are reduced on our fresh fish counter."

Gary feels deserted. He can only push on.

The movement of people stops; no struggling; no pushing. What can have happened? Gary stops too. It takes him some time to realise he is in a checkout queue which stretches nearly all the way down the aisle. He escapes from it in time and finds himself at the point where the shelves end, with nothing for it but to turn and fight his way up the next aisle. He also realises that the only way he will ever tell what is on the shelves is by seeing what people put in their trolleys. If he goes right up to the goods he will have twice the journey and probably be flattened to death on the very articles he is looking for.

The next aisle is worse. Before, nuts and crisps were landing softly in the trolleys. Now, tins are flying in and crashing against thick steel wire so as to make Gary's head spin. Tinned fish, tinned meat, tinned beans, tinned peas; waterfalls of metal. They are hurled to the bottom like wrecked hulks spinning into the depths of the sea. Gary is dizzy. He remembers his drowning dream.

Next aisle. Bottles and jars. Close, surely. But they are of coffee and pickles, Marmite and Bovril. The noise is different. Teabags provide a respite. But now Gary is lost. The drowning dream and the maze dream combine and panic rises in him. He wants, - he needs - to scream.

Every shelf surely has been passed. He sees whole walls of whisky and cans of beer. He sees rank on rank of lemonade and cola bottles. He sees no jam, no marmalade. He is lost in a jostling, suffocating, trackless wilderness. He wants to sink to the ground and cry. But if he does he will be trampled underfoot; he will be drowned; he will be left for dead on a path with no beginning and no end.

And then, without warning, the crowds thin. The shelves in front of him appear like stage scenery when the curtains open. Rows of jam,

marmalade, honey. Miracle. But first he looks up. What word hangs overhead that he should have looked for? PRESERVES? He shakes his head, mystified.

Then his heart sinks. He has no basket or trolley. How can he carry five jars?

There is only one way. He selects a jar of strawberry jam, a jar of plum, a jar of blackcurrant and two jars of orange shred marmalade, fine cut, and clasps them to him in a row against his chest. Cautiously he turns round. Yes, he is free of people; they surround him some way off on three sides. It is as if he stands in a clearing in a forest. He steps confidently across it.

Without warning, powerless and out of control, he is falling. He lands face down on the floor. The jars break. Broken glass cuts his hand. Strawberry, blackcurrant and plum jams spread gorily across the floor. The marmalade ends up glassless as two solid little orange cylinders.

The noise dies away. Everyone looks at Gary. A woman in a smock bustles up. "I told you all to stay out of the way until I cleared the mess up," she screams.

Gary scrambles to his feet. Too late he sees why there was a gap in the crowd. A notice stands there: WET FLOOR. Someone has spilt a whole bottle of vegetable oil and he has slipped in the slimy puddle. The jam and oil, together with a dash of Gary's own blood, make a mess beyond a mere wet mop to clear.

Gary does not wait to find out if people are angry or sorry about him. He clasps more jars to the now filthy and bloodstained front of his shirt and melts back into the crowd.

Again the suffocation. Again the hands at the level of his nose: fat hands, thin hands, smooth hands, hairy hands. Once, alarmingly, a hook. He looks up to see the faces: thin, fat, made-up, wrinkled, stubbly, bearded, flushed, pale. Mouths open and shouts of irritation pour out of them. Nobody smiles, nobody laughs. Gary has to cling tight to his jars. He moves even slower than before. Soon he stops altogether. He is wedged in a tide of trolleys, shoppers and shelf-fillers and can only go where the tide takes him, slowly up one aisle, slowly down the next. He almost wants to sink to his knees and sleep while the trolleys run over him. He will never see his mother again: he will perish on this mad battleground. Both his dreams have come true at once but this time there is no comforting sleep to wake up from: he is in them and there is no escape.

Two trolleys wedged at an angle nudge him backwards into a corner. His shoulder is forced against something hard. Without moving his arms, he turns.

Joy. It is a landmark. The metal monster with the paper tongue. He has returned. His mother will be here, waiting.

He looks for her. She is not here. There is a buzzing noise overhead. He looks at the number which appears. 86.

Now he really does sink to the floor in despair. She will have gone long ago. She will have disappeared from his life. He is left, hopeless and sticky, in a madhouse. The dreams have taken over completely.

“And the next, please.” A man’s voice. Gary straightens up and looks across the counter. A young man in a white coat with a white hat stuck on his head is slicing cheese. Cheese? Who wants cheese? Not his mother, she hates the stuff. It was ham, quiche, samosa and with a bit of luck some turkey pie with cranberry on top that she was after. So, in this appalling place they even mix up the things they sell just to confuse him. Despair strikes again. He turns savagely on the misleading metal monster, wanting to uproot it and smash its head in.

But he doesn’t. Though his arms, stuck to the jars, ache, he is scared to move them. He stands hopelessly by the monster. He cannot do anything, he cannot think anything.

But wait. A thought has entered his head. Perhaps they haven’t shifted the all the goods around. PERHAPS THERE ARE TWO LITTLE METAL MONSTERS.

Cautiously, like someone trapped on a high, narrow ledge on the side of a mountain who inches his way to safety, he shuffles in a straight line along the front of the counter. He ignores the disgusted cries of, “Ugh! Horrible, dirty little boy.” Soon the articles under the glass stop being cheese. And (joy again) here he stumbles into another little metal monster and (oh, huge relief) under the glass he sees a big coiled sausage. And he hears from overhead another buzz and sees another number – and it is 21. And a voice says, “Next please,” and another voice replies, “Eight slices of ham, two of spinach quiche and four portions of that turkey pie with cranberries on top.”

And it is his mother. And suddenly the dreams roll away. And she sees him and says, “Well, done, Gary. You timed it perfectly. Aren’t you in a mess. What happened? Never mind. You didn’t take a basket. But you didn’t forget what I wanted.”

“No,” says Gary with pride. “I remembered. And I could carry these few jars all right.”

And already the terror has faded from his mind.

END