

OUT WITH THE OLD

The damn thing was stuck in the slot, as firmly as if someone had squeezed a dab of Superglue in there. Grabbing the coin between her thumb and forefinger, Marilyn pulled upwards as hard as she could. Nothing. She wiggled it from side to side; then backwards and forwards. Still nothing. Not even a hint of movement.

‘Stupid thing,’ she muttered.

She took a deep breath. This was ridiculous: it had gone in easily enough, so it must come out again. She dropped her bag on the ground and leant over the trolley to have another try. Half of the coin was sticking out of the slot, a perfect semi-circle of shiny gold, the thin edge milled, the top half of the Queen’s head just visible: nose, forehead, some neatly curled hair and a fair amount of crown.

With her thumb and forefinger, Marilyn grasped both sides again and pulled upwards, her skin pressing so hard against the metal that it turned white as the blood drained away.

Still nothing.

‘For God’s sake!’ she yelled.

She let go of the coin, using her other hand to rub life back into her sore fingers.

‘You need to do it more gently,’ said a voice.

Marilyn turned around, ready to snap. But the elderly gentleman behind her wasn’t laughing, he was looking sympathetic.

‘They’re a nightmare, these trolleys,’ he said. ‘I’ve had problems myself. Do you want me to have a go?’

She smiled and stepped back.

‘Yes please! I put my pound in the usual way, but it’s jammed.’

The man shuffled towards the trolley. Claspings the coin, he began to push it backwards and forwards, then from side to side. Nothing. He tried pulling upwards, fierce concentration on his face, his cheeks colouring with the effort.

‘Arghh,’ he spluttered. ‘Is it moving?’

She shook her head.

‘Don’t think so.’

He let go of the coin and stepped back, breathing heavily, wiping sweat from his brow.

'I've never seen anything like it. You must have pushed it in very hard.'

'I didn't mean to,' said Marilyn.

A young woman, with a baby in a sling across her chest, was now waiting to one side.

'Any chance of getting a trolley?' she asked.

The elderly man shook his head.

'Not at the moment, dear. This lady has got her pound stuck in the slot. If we can't release this end trolley, you can't get to any of the others.'

Marilyn smiled apologetically at the woman.

'I just put it in like normal,' she said.

'Want me to have a go?' the woman asked. 'I'm strong. I do Taekwondo twice a week.'

Marilyn had no idea what Taekwondo was. It sounded like something you'd eat in a Chinese restaurant, so she wasn't sure how it made you strong enough to remove a coin stuck in a shopping trolley.

'Be my guest, if you think you can get it out,' she said.

The woman started to unwind the material straps that were binding the baby to her chest.

'Hold him for a tick,' she said.

'Really? Oh...'

Marilyn had no choice but to take the baby that was being thrust at her. She found herself staring at a pair of wide, blue eyes.

'Ah. The thing is, I'm not very good with babies...'

'So, what we need to do here,' the woman was saying. 'Is to give it a good yank. Like this...'

She had grabbed the exposed half of the coin with both hands and was bent over, straining with the effort.

'It's moving!' she gasped. 'It's definitely moving!'

She started growling under her breath with the effort.

'Just a bit more! Eeeeeh, this should do it!'

The elderly man, Marilyn and the baby leant forward to take a closer look.

'Damn it!' the woman straightened up again, swiping a strand of hair out of her eyes. 'That coin is well and truly stuck.'

They all stood staring at the trolley; the young woman was breathing heavily, while Marilyn jiggled the baby up and down.

'Is there a problem here, folks?'

The supermarket security guard had wandered up, hands in pockets, a crackling sound coming from the walkie-talkie strapped to his waist.

'She's got her pound coin stuck,' said the woman who did Taekwondo. 'We can't get it out and she's blocking all the other trolleys.'

'I didn't do it deliberately,' said Marilyn, feeling aggrieved.

'But you are blocking all the other trolleys,' agreed the elderly gentleman. 'I was hoping to be finished here and home by three.'

'I'm sure we can sort this out,' said the security guard. 'Let's have a look.'

'Do you want your baby back?' Marilyn asked the woman who did Taekwondo. But she was demonstrating her coin removal technique to the security guard, and didn't hear.

'So, you've tried pulling it out,' said the guard.

'Yes!' they chorused.

'But...!' he paused for dramatic effect, unable to stop a smile from tickling at the edge of his mouth. 'Have you tried pushing it in?'

They stared at him.

'But we want to get it out?' said the elderly man, his forehead wrinkling like a walnut.

'That's the clever bit, you see,' said the security guard. 'Sometimes you have to push the coin in even further, to free it up. Then it pops out more easily.'

He beamed at them all.

'Trust me,' he said. 'I've spent my life in retail.'

They clustered around as he turned to the trolley and put his right forefinger on top of the coin.

'Ready?' he said, looking back at them, grinning widely now.

'Go on then,' said the Taekwondo woman.

'Are you sure you don't want your baby back?' asked Marilyn. The blue eyes hadn't moved from her face and she was finding it unnerving. Her arms were also starting to ache from the jiggling.

'Let's give it a quick push here... and...'

Nothing.

The security guard leant forward over the coin.

'OK then, a bit harder...'

His face contorted as he put his left hand on top of the right one, and pushed.

'Jeez, lady, what have you done to this coin?' he gasped, stepping back from the trolley. 'I've never seen one stuck like this.'

'Can you try again?' asked the Taekwondo lady. 'I'm running short of time here.'

'Me too,' nodded the elderly man. 'I'll never be home by three.'

'Excuse me,' came a voice from behind them. 'But can I just squeeze past, to get a trolley?'

'No!' they chorused, turning as one to the man who was standing a few feet away, a shopping list in one hand, a bulging mass of plastic bags in the other.

He looked taken aback.

'Sorry, I was only asking...'

'Well don't,' snapped Taekwondo woman. 'We're all in the same boat, mate. We all need trolleys. We're all running short of time.'

'You know what she's done,' said the security guard suddenly. 'She's only gone and put an old pound coin in here, the type they're phasing out. That's why it's stuck. The slots in these trolleys have been adapted for the new coins, love. You know, the ones which come in two colours?'

'Silver in the middle and gold around the outside edge,' nodded the elderly man.

'With twelve sides!' said the man with the shopping bags.

'Exactly!' said the security guard.

'I like those new coins,' said Taekwondo woman.

'So, if you use an old one,' continued the security guard. 'It won't work.'

They all turned to stare at Marilyn.

'I'm sorry!' she said. 'I didn't think. I just pulled it out of my purse.'

The baby was beginning to grizzle, rubbing his eyes with his balled fists.

'It was an accident!' she added, jiggling the baby up and down more energetically.

'I really need a trolley,' said the man with the bags. 'I've got so much to buy today. Look at this list!'

'Me too,' said Taekwondo woman. 'He needs nappies. I'm out of washing powder. A basket is no good: I'm here for bulky goods.'

'I can't use a basket anyway,' said the elderly man, now so worried that the forehead wrinkles were spreading up into his hairline. 'I need a trolley to balance on. The last time I held a basket, I fell into the cereals. There were Bran Flakes everywhere.'

'Have you tried pushing it in before you pull it out again?' asked the man with the bags.

'Yes!' they yelled.

'Sorry, I was only asking.'

The security guard rubbed the back of his neck with his hand.

'I'm not sure what to do here, folks,' he said. 'I'll get my line manager. We need to free up some trolleys, but I'm guessing that will involve some heavy duty cutting equipment, because they're all connected to this front one.'

More shoppers were arriving, and being brought up to speed on events.

'A coin has got stuck,' the elderly man was telling someone.

'This woman has broken all the trolleys,' said the man with the bags.

'The whole supermarket may have to close,' said Taekwondo woman. 'You can't offer a full shopping experience without trolleys.'

Marilyn knew she was blushing and thought she might cry. There was a tell-tale prickle at the edge of her eye, a wobble in her lower lip that she couldn't control.

The baby was wailing loudly now, bashing his fists against her. He was so heavy that her arms were throbbing.

'I think he wants you,' she said to the Taekwondo woman, who didn't hear because she was talking animatedly to a young man, waving her arms around to demonstrate the method she'd used to try and dislodge the coin.

Marilyn moved up to the trolley, pushed open the fold-out seat inside, and slid the baby in. She stretched out her arms. What a relief.

The baby stopped crying and looked around with interest, banging his hands on the trolley handle.

'Who would have thought a pound coin could cause so much chaos?' a woman was saying.

'I said it was a mistake to change the design,' said someone else.

'If it ain't broke...' agreed the man with the plastic bags.

The security guard was elbowing his way back through the crowd, followed by a man wearing the supermarket's uniform.

'This is my line manager,' announced the guard. 'Mr Bell.'

'I need to do a risk assessment before we go any further,' Mr Bell was saying. 'Judge what impact this is having on our footfall. A lack of trolleys is going to have a serious impact on our sales targets.'

'Bugger your targets,' said Taekwondo woman. 'I need washing powder.'

'I've got a week's worth of shopping for a family of four on this list,' said the man with the bags, waving his piece of paper. 'It's going to take hours.'

Marilyn felt something nudging her hip and, turning back, saw that the baby was rocking from side to side in the trolley seat, kicking his legs.

He had his hands in his mouth. She peered more closely and saw – amidst drools of saliva – that his fingers were clutched around something shiny. He beamed, and offered his hand up to her. In the middle of his sticky palm, was an old-style pound coin.

Marilyn looked down at the slot on the handle of the trolley. It was empty.

'He's done it!' she said.

No-one heard.

'He's done it!' she shrieked.

Heads turned.

'The baby's got the coin out!'

They gathered round, conversations bubbling up, laughter taking the place of irritation.

'What a clever little chap!'

'Fancy that. How did he manage it?'

Taekwondo woman lifted the baby out of the seat and the elderly man nipped past Marilyn, holding a new-style pound coin out in front of him like a torch. Once one trolley was pulled free, others followed in quick succession, like trucks rolling out of a depot, their wheels clattering across the tarmac towards the supermarket entrance.

'Here you go,' said Taekwondo woman, taking the soggy coin from the baby and passing it to Marilyn. 'You'd better have this back before he swallows it.'

Marilyn smiled.

'Thanks for your help,' she said. 'How on earth did he do that, do you think?'

'No idea,' said Taekwondo woman, propping the baby on her hip. 'But it's one hell of a party trick.'

She started to wind the sling around herself again, and when the baby was snuggled to her chest she fished a shiny pound coin out of her pocket, and pushed it neatly into the slot in one of the remaining trolleys.

'Come on then, Arthur,' she said. 'Nappies and washing powder.'

As they moved away, the baby turned his head towards Marilyn and stared at her. He might have had something in his eye, or maybe his mother's cardigan was brushing against his face. But Marilyn could have sworn that little Arthur winked at her.

(2150 words)