

The Man Who Counted

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(by Robert Bee)

“If you don’t count for something, Stanley, you don’t deserve to exist.” Mr Babbage Senior towered over his bachelor son, pointing an authoritarian finger between Stanley’s bespectacled eyes like a pistol. “And you do exist, don’t you?”

“Er...I think...”

“Out with it Stanley. Either you do or you don’t exist.”

“Yes father...sir.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes sir, I exist.”

“Good. Then make sure you count.” With that, Mr Babbage Senior slipped into his Jaguar and drove out of Stanley’s life.

Stanley stood outside his home and watched the empty street, remembering his father’s words.

“Count”, his brain repeated, like a mantra. “I have to count.” And as a dutiful son, he resolved to do so.

He turned and walked up the garden path to the front door. “Sixteen azaleas”, he noted. “Ten cracks in path.” He mounted the stairs. “One, two, three, four steps”, and entered the house.

By the time he retired that night, Stanley counted that the house had sixteen windows, seven doors, two tables, eight chairs, five vases, one television set, sixteen knives, fifteen forks, twelve desert spoons, eight tea spoons.

He also had twelve singlets, ten pairs of underpants, eight shirts, fifteen pairs of socks, thirteen hankies, two pairs of jeans and two pairs of pajamas.

When he slid into bed, he noted it had four legs. As he drifted off to sleep, he had counted one hundred and eighteen sheep.

The following morning, Stanley lay in bed, thinking hard. “If I’m going to exist, I have to count.” He chased this axiom relentlessly, rounding up the logical implications, gathering them into his mind’s corral. He rode the theorem like a wild horse, being bucked and thrown, remounting and being bucked again until, at last, the stallion was broken. Stanley had his answer.

“If my world is to exist, I have to count it. If I don’t count it, it won’t exist.”

With this impeccable logic, Stanley leapt out of bed, his life’s strategy decided. He had to count. His father would be proud.

His zeal was soon tempered by pedestrian practicalities. He realised that his car wouldn’t complete the trip to work because from the driver’s seat he couldn’t see the wheels. How would they continue to support the car if he couldn’t count them at reasonable intervals? Regrettably, he discovered this only after removing the car’s bonnet so he could count the engine while he drove.

So he walked to town, counting his shoes as he went, and the footpath slabs before he stepped on them.

His day was a long one and, inevitably, unproductive. But, he counted.

Stanley awoke the next morning in a panic. He'd had an extremely disturbing dream. In the dream he watched himself sleeping. As he watched, he counted his sleeping self's breaths. Hour after hour he breathed, and his watching self counted... "four thousand and three, four thousand and four..." Then, inexplicably, his watching self stopped counting. He just watched. And his sleeping self, who's breaths were no longer being counted, stopped breathing... and slowly turned blue.

Stanley sat immobile, remembering the dream. Then he realised he wasn't breathing. With an effort, he took a deep breath. "One", he counted. Then another. "Two." Desperately he looked around the room. "One bed, one floor, one window..." breath... "three breaths."

It was another long day. But he counted.

That night, Stanley was confident of a safe night's sleep. He had rigged up an ingenious device which he attached to his head. As he breathed, his exhaled breath moved a vane which was connected to a sensor. The sensor was connected to a control box which activated an electronic counter whose read-out increased, breath by breath. When Stanley awoke in the morning, he would see his breaths had been counted and would know he had breathed. So he would exist.

His dream, between two efficiently counted exhalations, was breathtaking. Literally. He saw himself sleeping securely. Then, the air in the room simply vanished, leaving a lunar-like vacuum. His eyes began to bloat like overboiled eggs. His veins pressed out of his skin and his face took on a hideous pre-explosion appearance.

Stanley woke, holding his breath, afraid to exhale lest he next inhaled the vacuum. Then he saw the curtains gently swaying in a breeze and rationality took hold. It was a dream But also a timely warning.

The gas analyser he purchased was hellishly expensive. It would be difficult to pay for, especially after losing his job that day. The girls in the office had complained to his boss about hearing him muttering "... one breast, two breasts..." as he walked past them each time all day. He tried to explain that he was only counting his breaths, but that only seemed to aggravate matters.

At least he'd have air to breathe that night. The machine would regularly sample the air in his room, analyse it and display the percentage of oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide on a printout. The air would be counted and exist. He would breathe the air, his breaths would be counted and exist. And he would sleep safely.

Stanley counted the window, the mirror, the blanket. He counted the breath counter, the gas analyser, the bedside light. All one each. He turned off the light, counted the Moon shining a lopsided smile through his window and after only fifty three sheep, fell peacefully asleep and, eventually, dreamed.

His father stood over him, wearing his austerity like a cloak. "I see you've been counting, Stanley."

"Yes." Stanley swelled with pride. "Everything father... sir."

"So I see. Four bed legs, one mirror, two thousand six hundred and twenty breaths... ah, there's another, umpteen trillion oxygen atoms... very thorough. Commendable."

"Thank..."

"But tell me Stanley..." Mr Babbage Senior pointed that imperious finger once more, seeming to nail Stanley's head to the pillow. "How many of you? How many Stanley Babbages have been counted?"

The dream promptly ended.

And so did Stanley Babbage.