It seemed like tinker, tailor, soldier, security guard as we did our late-night shopping

Roddy Phillips

It's probably some primal instinct that kicks in when I'm grazing around food and small domestic appliances, but I'm just not that keen on being watched while I'm shopping.

It was just after 10pm, and the supermarket was practically deserted. Maybe the rain was keeping the crowds away. My wife and I had gone our separate ways at the door, agreeing to meet in about 20 minutes. In my wife's world, that's about an hour.

I had blank CDs front of mind and one of those history magazines that explains everything with wonderful illustrations as if you were aged 10.

I was engrossed in a fascinating illustrated article about trench warfare when suddenly it occurred to me that I was being watched, if not actually spied on.

But after glancing up and down the empty aisle, I decided it was just my overactive imagination.

A few minutes later, I was all trenched out, so I moved on to a magazine about Cats. As I opened it, something white caught the corner of eye.

I stared up the empty aisle at a display of children's party masks and shuddered. With their soporific music and surreal lighting, empty supermarkets can be quite spooky places. Certainly a great place for a haunting, when you think about it.

I was only a few seconds into an article about Cats who act in films when the white flash disturbed me again.

This time, I was quick enough to catch a glimpse of a bloke in a white shirt; in fact, he was a security guard.

Round the corner, I found him leafing through birthday cards. He was at the Dad section and laughing at the verse in one of the cards. I stood nearby and had a look through the Congratulations, Your Blood Test Was Negative section. When he'd gone, I checked the card he was laughing at and it was blank.

I didn't think much of it until I was at the DVD section and he appeared behind me. I could see his reflection in a video screen that was showing a silent trailer for the film Frozen on a loop.

He appeared in a scene with Olaf the snowman and Princess Anna and stood between them like a ghost. Slowly, he turned and looked at me watching him in the screen while Abba sang Knowing me, Knowing you.

This is great stuff, I thought. John Le flipping Carré would have struggled to dream this up. Naturally, I thought I would start acting suspiciously, just to test him, although quite what that should have entailed I really had no idea. So, instead, I thought I'd wait him out. He could only arrange PlayStation games for so long.

"With their soporific music and surreal lighting, empty supermarkets can be quite spooky places"

Eventually, after about five minutes, I threw in the towel. This bloke had been well trained. He had stealth, patience and silent shoes – everything you need to combat retail crime.

I moved round the end of the aisle, but it was full of toasters, so I quickly changed my mind, turned back and walked straight into him.

For a brief moment, we made bodily contact. He was wiry with ginger hair and not as tall as I thought.

He had eaten a mint recently.

We made our muffled apologies and parted.

He then tailed me round the store while I looked for my wife. I found her sniffing pears in the fresh-fruit section

"Don't look now, but I think I'm being followed," I whispered.

My wife automatically glanced around as an old lady shuffled towards us with her trolley.

"I see what you mean," she whispered back, "she does look slightly shifty."

"Not her," I replied as the security guard appeared, "him."

"Oh, he's probably just bored," said my wife before going back to her big pear debate.

"He was reading a blank birthday card and laughing to himself," I said.

"Why would he have a birthday card with him?" asked my wife.

I explained how the security guard had been using the greetings card display as a cover so he could scope me out.

"Scope you out?" repeated my wife slowly just as the security guard passed.

He was carrying a PlayStation game, but I wasn't fooled. I was sure I saw him smirking, so while he was still in view I made a big show of placing my "purchases" in our trolley.

"I'll just put this stuff in our trolley, darling, so we can pay for it at the checkout like normal people," I announced, making my wife sigh heavily.

Down at the assorted nuts, the security guard was back again in full hover and I was beginning to bristle, so I decided to take the bull by the horns.

"Excuse me," I began, "can you tell me when the store closes?"

Slightly startled, he thought for a moment.

"I think it's midnight," he said.

"Good," I replied, "I've still got an hour-and-a-half left to nick stuff."

The bloke looked surprised, then smiled broadly.

"Knock yourself out, mate," he said, "I don't work here."

Yeah, right, I thought.