

A Hundred and Forty Two

by MaryPat Campbell

When difficult thoughts or feelings threaten, John counts. He counts everything in sight. During a brief stay in hospital last year he lay in bed for two days counting the tiles on the ceiling. He noted the evenly spaced recessed lights that gave the ward a hard bright glare when nurses switched the lights on too early in the mornings.

He counted the faded stripes on the wallpaper, the folds and even the dark shadows in the blue curtains that surrounded his own and the other patients' beds, the rings on the top of the curtains that attached them to the curtain rails. He counted the footsteps of nurses, doctors and cleaners as they walked in and around the ward. The cleaners had the slowest, most comforting footsteps, and always had a greeting or a smile.

Counting helped John feel like he was in charge, instead of feeling not at all in charge of his stomach and it's scary and disturbing pains. Counting calmed him down when the doctor came to explain what they were going to do, and which medications they would start him on before he was discharged. On that occasion, he managed to remain calm while counting the tiny yellow spots on the doctor's navy blue tie.

Once home again, still feeling nervous about his health, together with the now familiar prospect of yet another evening watching TV alone, John found himself counting new things. The coloured triangles on the duvet cover of his bed, for example. He would start with the blue triangles, then the green ones, then the unevenly placed orange ones. Sometimes he managed to work out the repeat pattern, where it began and where it joined up, all over the cotton fabric.

The last time he visited his sister Sarah, her husband Mike and nephew Billy, he found himself listening to Billy practicing his reading. He counted the words that Billy read aloud under his finger. As Billy's finger moved across the page under each word, John counted them quietly to himself. Billy glanced up at John with his sunny smile and said, "it's a good story, isn't it Uncle John, would you like to read some?"

John felt caught out, "142," he replied, keeping track of the number of words.

Billy laughed, "142, what's that mean Uncle John?"

He loved counting books on shelves, with their colourful spines, and had worked out exactly how many books of a certain spine width, could fit into Sarah and Mike's bookshelves in their living room. Of course he couldn't read any of the books, but he could count them and admire the way they stood in their shelves, some bolt upright while others leaned against each other in what John thought was a comfortable and friendly way.

Carpets and upholstery patterns kept him busy for hours, especially carpets with stripes of various widths and different colours. Anything would do really, handles on the kitchen cupboards, glasses or cups lined up on the kitchen shelf.

Last Christmas, John gave Sarah a wonderful plate that stood on the kitchen dresser with a circular pattern of sardines swimming round and round. He liked to count them too. Sometimes he saw it as if the sardines in the middle were swimming up and round, faster and faster till they reached the outer rim of the plate. Other times, they seemed to swim down and deep in ever decreasing circles until they disappeared into the centre of the earth.