Molly Grey’s talent for precision cataloguing and a death-stare that could pin wayward children and pensioners alike to the spot, were both legendary. For these reasons alone her colleagues at the library forgave most of her eccentricities. If Molly was aware of their occasional smirks or murmured asides, she showed no outward signs. She would just carry on with whatever tale she was recounting.

It was a well-known fact that, from the moment Molly could form a coherent sentence around the age of two, she had lived vicariously through the characters of her favourite books. Her family were often heard to say, ‘Take no notice of our Molly, she’s away with the fairies.’ And most of the time she was. Enjoying many an adventure, up in the wood, with Tinkerbell or Titania.

In 33 years, little had changed. However, she had become far more eloquent and confident with practice. Only the other day, to the sighs of those around her, she exclaimed, ‘Have I told you about that time I went sailing on Lake Windermere, with Arthur Ransome’s grandson?’

Today Molly was channelling her inner Tuppence Beresford, a bit more sophisticated than Miss Marple, or so she thought. Arriving at work early she slipped inside the inconspicuous green door. Her polished brogues tip-tapping up the staircase, her gloved hand caressing the smooth patina of the banister, she made her way directly to The George Green Room.

Whilst carefully extracting a small camera and microphone from her bag, Molly surveyed the closely packed bookshelves. Her research paid off; she found just the right spot to install it. It really was as easy as the internet had said it would be. She checked its placement; the view of the room was perfect. Satisfied, Molly slipped downstairs to make a cup of fragrant Earl Grey tea. She would be sitting in her customary chair, by the window, before any of her colleagues arrived.

Congratulating herself on a job well done, Molly failed to apply one of the most important tenets of sleuthing: Observation. This was her first mistake. Consequently, she was totally unaware of the dark shadow lurking in the alcove beneath the stairs. Someone, or something, was watching her.

Jill arrived first, her face red from the bitter wind blowing outside. She had a cold coming. She just knew it.
‘Any hot water?’ Her mouth set grimly, she glared at Molly.

Molly had not refilled the kettle after making her tea, and looked up vaguely. Some Head Librarian she was turning out to be. Molly smiled benignly and was saved from a response by the arrival of Derek who strolled in and threw a bag of doughnuts on the table.

‘Doughnuts?’ asked Molly.

‘Breakfast’ replied Derek. ‘I’ve had it with muesli and Ryvita. A man needs something filling. And when you’re as broke as me, four for a pound can’t be sneezed at.’

Molly helped herself to a doughnut and bit into it, jam spurting unnoticed on to the cuff of her white blouse.

‘Right.’ She stood up. ‘Those books won’t catalogue themselves. Get going. I don’t want to see anyone in here before 1.’

Jill and Derek exchanged a grimace and a whispered ‘Too big for her boots, or what?’ in the corridor outside.

Molly worked in the small room near the main entrance, cataloguing some children’s books which had been donated by Nick Mortimer, the library volunteer and a keen collector of the classics. Kenneth Graham, Edith Nesbit, Lewis Carroll. She despised the likes of David Walliams and Jacqueline Wilson. Where was their poetic language and depth of feeling? How did they encourage the spiritual development of the imagination?

Nick himself arrived just after lunch. He was a little taken aback by Molly’s greeting: ‘I think I would have made a good water baby’, before noticing Charles Kingsley’s book in her hand. Molly was able to demonstrate her vast knowledge of books and practically any other subject which entered her head that afternoon. She did not notice that Nick was irritable and distracted.

At 4:30, Molly chivvied the last stragglers out of the door. Jill was now sneezing profusely and Derek was checking he had enough money for the tram ride home.

And then another fatal error. Molly did not notice Nick waiting for them both outside.

She locked up and, alone at last, trod the stair to the George Green room. She opened and closed the door gently and looked round. No obvious changes since this morning, and the camera was still where she had hidden it. But looking up, to her horror the light on the camera was flashing. A red glow. It lit the book shelf like a traffic light.
'Oh no!' she thought to herself, 'If I can see it, so will anyone else.' She felt so hapless at not noticing this before. What a silly error to make; slipshod, not like her normal, methodical way of working.

Molly began to fiddle and faff; sweat made her fingers slip and slide; both her hands shook. Muttering out loud, 'That salesman told me it was discretion itself, used by none other than GCHQ, what a lot of tosh that was, and I fell for it'.

She was distracted in her task by a loud hammering on the door and the muffled voices of both Derek and Nick calling her name. What a nuisance, they must have been waiting for her to come out of the building; that was unusual in itself. Normal practice for her was to scuttle off, homeward bound, once duties had finished. No looking back to wave to anyone, never one to shout 'See you in the morning dear, have a lovely time at the cinema', it just wasn't done. No, no it would be far too 'common' for her to do that.

Grimly, she closed the door of the George Green Room, alighted the stairs much more quickly than normal and opened the front door, saying through pursed lips 'What's all this noise about? Is there an emergency? Have you left your house key in your locker again Derek?'

'No Molly, nothing left on my part.' said Derek, 'Not like you to tarry, you are such a creature of habit, we thought you may have a problem. Nick was just outside and we thought we would see you throw the lock before heading off.'

'Yes, I was just waiting to see if Derek fancied a snifter.' said Nick

'A snifter, what's that?' said Molly, mind racing to try to change the subject, without answering the question. A gamble she was prepared to take.

'Oh! The 'hair of the dog'. I find alcohol at the end of the working day calms my nerves.' said Derek.

Molly adopted a weak smile, 'Didn't know you had nerves?'

'Oh yes, been seeing a shrink for at least six months, since I heard the voices.'

'Voices, what voices?' Molly said.

Derek hesitated and looked down. He spoke slowly and avoided eye contact with Molly, 'Oh, sorry, I thought I had mentioned it at my last review. It’s a bit delicate really but… but, well… I suppose as Jill and Nick know it’s only right that you are in the picture.'
Derek went on to recount again the break-up of his relationship with Lorraine, a story they had all heard a thousand times before.

The gradual distancing, the late nights working, the weekends away with friends, fancy underwear, perfume and make up. Claimed he had no idea, he thought she was getting on well at work and the other stuff was for him.

‘I gave that woman everything she wanted; she had every household appliance any woman could wish for’

Derek felt the need yet again to expunge any neglect or guilt on his part.

‘We had a great life. We went away to Cornwall every year, Friday night curry night at home to unwind from the week, Saturday Steak Night at The Horse and Groom. I mean, what more could I have done? What more did she want?’

Molly was squirming inside, not just from Derek sharing his vivid description of life with Lorraine but from the sheer banality of it all. Just listening to him made her want to cut her throat, or his! She pretended to be listening but all she was thinking about was getting back inside and checking out the camera. She had to find a way to shut him up and let him get on with going for his ‘snifter’ so she could pick up where she left off.

Derek, realising he had a captive audience, had other ideas. He was on a roll now. Apparently, the voices started not long after Lorraine left. They started in a taunting way, similar to the way Lorraine had spoken to him as she was leaving. They called him names; fat, smelly, inconsiderate, boring, predictable, mean, selfish, sexually inept, self-centred, etc.

Then they started suggesting that he get his own back. Telling him woman were ungrateful, demanding, unfaithful, hard hearted; they needed to be taught a lesson and he was the man to do it.

Molly couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing and could not stop Derek from elaborating.

‘It was when that started happening, I went for help. It scared the shit out of me to be honest. I’m not one of those crazy guys you see on television who have to get their revenge.’

Derek seemed calm and rational as he was describing all this, which made Molly even more on edge.

‘So, what happened then?’ Molly tentatively enquired.
'Well, the doc sent me to a shrink to explore my inner feelings and all that.' Derek explained

'And how is it going?' Molly felt she had to ask to ascertain the health and safety of other staff members, especially the women.

'OK' said Derek, 'Well, actually the shrink, Mr Reynolds, seems to think I have a problem at work...'

'How can that be, when your problem is with Lorraine?' She cut in inconsiderately

'Well that's part of the problem you see, because I only hear those voices when I'm in the George Green Room; now I'm seeing flashing lights up there as well.'

She felt her blood pressure increase, what does he know about the George Green Room? She didn't have the time for this. She instinctively looked at her watch and stared in horror at a blood stain on her cuff. She had to go. She needed to check the camera and she had an urgent 5:40 appointment at Queens Medical Centre. ‘I'm sorry Derek I have something to do, maybe we can discuss it in the morning?’

Nick was losing patience, ‘You just don't care, do you? Have you ever given any thought whatsoever about us? Derek is seeing a shrink about his misogyny, I've got massive gambling debts and Jill is pregnant. You haven't got a clue, have you? You're so wrapped up in your books you can't see what's in front of you.’

Molly was taken aback; she knew she wasn't the best ‘people person’ but didn't realise how bad this had become, and more importantly didn't have the time for it now. ‘Sorry guys I've had a bad day, I'm stressed and have a very important appointment. I'll sort this out in the morning.’

‘Come on Derek, let's go, she couldn't care less.’ Nick said, storming off towards the Slug and Lettuce, Derek following closely behind.

Molly knew she hadn't dealt with it very well. She would make a mental note to deal with it in the morning. Right now, she had to check that camera and then get off to the hospital.

Shutting the door reminded her of the blood on her cuff. She touched it and it seemed sticky, unlike her usual problem. She then gave a wry smile as she rememberd spilling the doughnut jam earlier.

She made sure the door was locked and quickly slipped up the creaking spiral staircase back towards the George Green Room. As she opened the door a tingle travelled the length of her spine; it was as though someone was watching.
She nervously switched the camera onto ‘play back’ and couldn’t believe what she saw.

Surely it can’t be; it was Jill and Nick, and God, what the hell were they up to?! Jill’s cold seemed to have magically dried up; strangely, the timer indicated the recording was from the previous evening? She was singing, in a fine Contralto, a pristine rendering of the mid-section of ‘Ode to Joy’ in the original German. Molly, amazed and distracted in turn, murmuring ‘I didn’t know she was a linguist’. Then she noticed with surprise the long eyelashes, dense eye-shadow, deftly powdered face and sparkling nose-stud, below which perfectly sculpted scarlet lips formed every syllable of the libretto to perfection. She’d never seen Jill wear a smidgeon of makeup before. But wait, surely not? ‘Jill? can it really be Jill?’ Her pale shoulders were laid bare and she stood, leaning lightly against the stacks, a tightly fitting crushed velvet evening dress hugging her body like a second skin and showing the slight swelling of her midriff, advertising her condition. ‘Flaunting the bump is the way it’s done these days’, exhaled Molly to herself, somewhat impressed by the fine, choker snaking her colleague’s neck.

Jill’s well-upholstered breasts rose and fell as crescendo followed crescendo. And there, opposite her, was Nick, in black, tight-fitting leather trousers with raffishly unbuttoned silk shirt revealing a tattoo; a vividly etched crimson heart on which perched a black bird of prey, its wings extended. His chest rose equally majestically as he harmonised the melody in a sonorous rich tenor. They were singing to the Berlin Philharmonic version of Beethoven’s 9th, his masterwork, emerging crisp and clear from an iPod balanced on a reading lamp. Molly recognised Von Karajan’s rendering immediately; she had bought it for the Bromley House Classics CD library.

The two soloists gazed at each other and moved closer slowly, enjoying the soaring sound as a full concert choir re-joined the orchestra after their duet. Molly was perspiring freely and felt her pulse beat alarmingly. What to do? How could they have entered the library without the triple-set of keys, without knowing the alarm combination? Then again this couldn’t possibly have happened yesterday, could it? But her eyes, mesmerised, turned again to the play-back. Tenor and Contralto were now immediately opposite each other as they, the choir, and the orchestra reached the glorious finale. They clapped hands and turned together, raising their arms as if acknowledging the applause of an ecstatic invisible audience.
They bowed deeply, and turned, gently touching each other’s shoulders, Nick’s lingering a little longer than necessary on the fine white flesh of his fellow performer. Then the tape went black, white noise faintly discernible from the iPod.

Molly was in a state of total confusion. Apart from the unanswered questions of access to the library, and to her mystery-filled George Green Room, what did they think they were playing at? This wasn’t the covertly recorded revelation she was expecting at all. She acknowledged that everyone has a private life and that people were forever surprising, but this? This was extraordinary and she was tempted to run the sequence back again. It was something about Nick and his abandonment to the music, and those trousers. This was much, so much, more than debt therapy. She had never noticed his toned, compact body so suited to leather, so different from his usual cords, neat Oxford shirts and wholesome crew-neck merino sweaters when the heating wasn’t quite up to temperature.

She hesitated over the playback button, hospital appointment forgotten; when at that moment, her phone vibrated in her hand and she nearly dropped it with the shock. Uncharacteristically she hesitated to answer it, it could be another of those silly insurance scams: ‘We understand you have recently been in an accident’, but they usually called in the morning. While these thoughts were going through her mind, the caller rang off.

‘Drat! Oh well, I’ll find out soon enough if it’s important’

Her thoughts turned to Nick in that outfit and the two of them looking so sensual and self-assured and then the matter of how they got into the library re-entered her consciousness. That might explain the odd codes on the burglar alarm which had caused her to install the camera in the first place.

Still, that could wait – she needed to get the tram to QMC and was cutting things fine.

As the snake of metal came towards the Market Place stop, Molly recalled the music in the George Green Room; she would never be able to hear Beethoven’s ninth again without being reminded of Jill and Nick’s sexual chemistry.

A part of her that she thought was dead and gone was nagging at her as she pushed her way onto the tram – ‘I wonder where Roderick is now’, she mused.
‘I needn’t have said those things to him and, if I hadn’t, I wonder what we would be doing 15 years later.’

Rod had got a job in cancer research in London, offered to him after qualifying as a doctor (always the thinker) and he took it immediately after that fateful evening.

He said I had an empathy bypass, couldn’t see things from other people’s perspective, and was too suspicious. Of course, he would have strong bonds of friendship with the other medical students, working all those hours in such harrowing situations. Unsurprising that they would sometimes let their hair down as a way of decompressing after long shifts in A & E, his last placement.

The tram rounded the corner and she saw the edifice of the hospital looming in the distance. Her heart fluttered and memories of the last visit there came surging back.

As she trudged up to the main entrance, she felt the quivering of her mobile again. There were a few minutes to spare so, deciding to answer, she fished out the phone,

‘Molly Grey here, who’s calling?’

‘Ms Grey, … Ms Jemima Mary Grey?’, an officious male voice enquired.

‘Yes?’ her voice rose and her stomach flipped. It was a long time since anyone had addressed her by her full moniker. In fact, not that many people knew it.

‘This is John Oswald King, of King, James and Brown Solicitors, Knightsbridge, London.’

‘Yes, Mr King, how can I help you?’

‘May I ask if you know a Roderick John Cummings, consultant at the Oncology Department of the Royal Marsden in London?’

‘…Oh,’ Molly’s stomach flipped once more. ‘I was just thinking about him, how strange! Yes, I do know Rod Cummings, how is he? Is he alright? I didn’t know he’d moved to the Marsden or become a consultant. Of course, he always wanted to be a consultant.’

‘I’m so sorry to inform you Ms Grey, that Roderick John Cummings was recently the victim of a road traffic accident, he was hit by a red Astra on Wimpole Street in the city. Unfortunately, the injuries Mr Cummings sustained were severe and he was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident.’
‘Oh my god!’ Molly stopped dead in her tracks. A male visitor, not realising she had stopped, barrelled into her from behind. He grunted an apology as Molly dropped her phone and handbag.

‘Well he could have waited to check I was alright,’ she was indignant. ‘Why had he been that close anyway?’ All she caught was a brief back view of his dark hair, beige cords, and olive jumper as he rushed on through the revolving doors.

Molly bent down to retrieve her belongings and, in her shock, and haste to pick up her phone, accidently pressed the red call button cutting her caller off.

‘Blood and sand!’ she exclaimed out loud, dusting herself down. Interesting, that was what she and Rod used to say. And they both preferred Valentino in the title role… but that was another story, another time.

She retrieved her belongings, muttering at the crack which had formed across the screen of her phone. She noticed the time, it was nearly 5:30 she had better get a move on if she was going to keep her appointment with Mr Murray. No time for a quick cuppa at the Costa, no time to think about Rod, she would get herself up to the First Floor and see what her tests revealed. Then she would speak to John Oswald King.

It had to be Molly's worst nightmare. Mr Murray’s Senior Registrar, Dr Singh, watched sympathetically as the news sank in. The results of the tests showed that she was slowly, but inexorably, going blind in one eye, due to something that had happened on her holiday in Myanmar last summer. A flying insect, peculiar to the Burmese jungle, had visited her in her sleep and laid its eggs underneath one of her eyelids. The larvae had subsequently hatched and then burrowed their way into the back of her left eye. They had now entered the pupal stage. Before long, her eye would be home to a deadly swarm of the adult insects.

‘Is there anything that can be done?’ she enquired with desperation in her voice.

‘I propose that we operate as soon as possible. I think there's a good chance that we can remove the eye and prevent any further damage. There's no reason why you won't be able to function in future with just the one eye. I realise that's a lot to take in, but if you could let us know as soon as possible if you wish to proceed with the operation.’

Molly was devastated. Her life was centred around her love of books and the ability to read them was paramount.
Dr Singh seemed fairly confident that she would still have the use of the other eye, but what if he was wrong? She wondered what it would be like if she was only able to listen to audiobooks for the rest of her life.

Suddenly, the news about Rod's death no longer concerned her. Nobody had seemed to think they had been suited anyway. Even so, it would have been nice to have someone special to put his arms around her and give her comfort and reassurance. Instead, she would have to face this crisis on her own. She decided to have a coffee at the Costa bar near the Main Exit before setting off for home.

It was now 6:45 and it had been dark outside for nearly two hours. It felt much later. The cafe was almost empty and a pall of gloom hung over it. She sat down with a lukewarm cappuccino at one of the tables, accidentally spilling some over the side of her mug. A young waitress gave her a look of annoyance as if to say, 'What do you think you're doing? I've only just wiped that clean.'

Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a copy of Camus' 'The Plague'. She'd reached the chapter where the Algerian city of Oran, gripped by a deadly epidemic, had been forced into quarantine, 'At least that couldn't happen here', she reassured herself.

A man sat himself down at a nearby table. She looked up at him and thought he looked vaguely familiar. Perhaps he was one of the regular visitors to the library? But why was he staring at her? Was it the red stain on her blouse from the jam doughnut she'd eaten that morning?

'Hello. Its Molly isn't it? You don't remember me, do you? I'm Jill's husband Paul.'

'Yes, I did think I recognised you,' Molly replied, 'Is Jill with you?'

'Yes, she's on the phone to her parents. We're here for her first ultrasound scan. It's great news, isn't it? We've been trying for a child for ages and at last our prayers have been answered. How about you?'

'Oh yes that is good news indeed Paul, I am delighted for you both, sorry to dash off I have a tram to catch. Tell Jill I will catch up with her tomorrow' said Molly and at that she left her coffee and navigated the labyrinthine Q.M.C. corridors to the tram stop with Dr Singh's prognosis and Roderick's tragic demise in her head.

The tram was very crowded and Molly found herself heading home with the evening crowd ready for a good time in the city centre bars, clubs, theatres, and restaurants.

Molly sat alone watching the would-be revellers and wondering at the changes in her circumstances. Changes so dramatic and radical
reflecting on her life. A life less lived. A life she had lived alone in her beloved books.

Things like this happen to characters in novels not to her, she thought. To date nothing had spontaneously happened to her, only what she had made happen for her own personal gain and self-gratification.

In fact, more had happened to her since placing the camera and microphone on the bookshelf of the George Green room in her beloved library than at any time in her life.

‘I need to take control and write the next part of my story’ she said.

For the first time in her career Molly did not go to work in the library the following morning. Molly didn’t care about her books and her colleagues.

Molly spent the morning in her modest garden sorting out the repair of her phone and contacting Mr John Oswald King, of King, James and Brown Solicitors. Molly was now the sole recipient of Mr Roderick John Cummings’ estate.

Rod had left her a considerable fortune, a house in the country, and a flat in London. Mr King also said that Rod had left a personal letter, addressed to her and to be opened in the event of his death.

Mr King suggested that Molly make an appointment to see him at her earliest convenience, where more would be explained to her, and funeral arrangements discussed. Mr Roderick John Cummings, it would appear, was alone in this world with no living family to mourn his passing. Molly would have financial backing to support a second opinion on her eyesight and imminent eye operation. Ms Molly Grey had money enough to retire from the library and re-invent herself.

The first thing Molly would buy would be a tightly fitting crushed velvet evening dress and a sparkling choker to snake around her neck.

Molly had become a character in a novel; Molly Grey was writing her own story, and she was only at Chapter One.

Jill, Nick, and Derek, however, were sitting in the George Green room watching a light flashing in a bookcase totally unaware of the dark shadow in the alcove beneath the stairs watching them all.

The watcher watching the watchers.

‘It’s getting worse,’ gibbered Derek, ‘I’d almost got used to the voices, but now there’s the flashing light.’
‘Every time I enter this room, my heart starts racing. Maybe I need to see the doc again, he did say it might take a while to adjust the medication, find the right dose.’

With quivering hands, he took another slurp from his coffee mug - whose contents were at least 50% whisky, from a bottle he had secreted in the Theology section, behind a dusty tome entitled *A History of Non-Conformism and Dissent in the British Isles in the Nineteenth Century.*

‘No, Derek, it’s not just you – we can see it too.’ Jill laid a comforting hand on Derek’s shoulder, then withdrew quickly; the stench of coffee and alcohol was making her even more nauseous than usual at this time of the morning. Derek must be drinking a lot if she could smell him through her blocked nose. She’d had a sleepless night after her visit to the Ante-Natal Department. Paul was so thrilled about the baby – he had no idea it wasn’t his – and Nick hadn’t helped matters by turning up in a state, after apparently almost colliding with Molly Grey in the hospital foyer – what was she doing there, anyway? Visiting someone? She’s never ill. Fortunately, she didn’t see him, lost in her own world as usual – though Paul said he’d bumped into her in Costa.

‘Mystery solved,’ declared Nick. ‘It’s a CCTV camera, not a ghostly presence. Grey must have had it installed without telling us.’

‘Why would she do that?’ Derek looked even more alarmed. ‘Where is she, anyway? She’s never missed a day before. Married to the job.’

‘She phoned in this morning, just announced she’d be off for the rest of the week. Most unlike her,’ said Jill. ‘Now I come to think of it, she sounded – well – happier than usual. I wonder why…’

Her musings were interrupted by the sound of someone strumming dramatic chords on a guitar, accompanied by the clicking of castanets.

Nick had pressed the replay button on the camera. On the screen – slightly fuzzy, but still clearly visible – were a man and woman, performing a passionately erotic flamenco dance. The man was not dressed for the occasion and seemed to be wearing surgical scrubs. The woman, however, wore a traditional Andalusian costume of shiny satin, hugging her body closely to the thigh, then rippling out in voluminous polka-dotted ruffles. Her hair was pulled into a loose bun, fastened with a comb and adorned by a gardenia blossom. Her most striking accessory was an elegant eye-patch.

The two librarians and Nick stared at each other in bafflement.
They watched, transfixed, as the music rose to a crescendo and the dancers stamped their feet in ecstasy and drew each other into a final clinging embrace.

‘It can’t be …’ began Nick, but it was. The figure in Andalusian flounces could only be the normally prim and restrained Jemima Mary Grey, nick-named Molly as a child on account of her addiction to role-play as Joyce Lankester Brisley's creation Milly-Molly-Mandy. None of them could identify the man in surgical scrubs. They were well aware that in such costume even the most handsome of actors can look nondescript, but there was an indefinable haughtiness and arrogance about this figure in flapping overall and apron. As they watched, the screen had faded and reformed, the background had changed from shelves packed with brown and black leather-bound tomes to a street of white-painted Baroque house with balconies. The surgeon tore off his scrubs to reveal a close-fitting suit of fine smoke-coloured wool with wide-bottomed trousers and a frogged jacket worn over a frilled white shirt. He reached over Molly's face and tenderly teased the eye-patch off and threw into the air. A groom appeared leading a high stepping grey stallion while another servant handed him a low-crowned wide-brimmed hat matching his suit. He vaulted up onto the horse and, having slipped his gleaming tan riding boots into the stirrups, he reached down and effortlessly hoisted Molly into the side-saddle pillion. A servant brought up a tray on which stood two tulip-shaped stemmed glasses and filled them from a bottle of Manzanilla. As they took their drinks the camera lingered on their faces, especially that of the woman whose two sparkling dark eyes darted around, as if she were newly restored from blindness.

Then everything faded from the screen, which stayed dark and yielded no more tantalising images. The three watchers sat, silent, dumbfounded. Derek was the first to regain composure. He realised that they had watched the most recent recording, but what were these others? He fiddled with the camera controls and set it to play back its entire memory and was amazed to see an image of Lorraine waiting on the corner of the square, outside the Bell, holding the handle of her large wheeled suitcase. She was waiting for him to finish work and emerge from the library's entrance passage onto the pavement.

She was coming home; she had realised that Miles, the property developer for whom she had deserted him, was not the considerate lover that she had hoped would whisk her away from the mundane Derek. The camera evidently had a mind of its own. It was actually showing the futures of those working in the room. Jill caught Nick's eye and coloured up as she immediately looked away. She had been intending to explain the miracle of her sudden fertility to Paul that
evening, as she planned how to celebrate her elopement to freedom with Nick.

At that moment, in one of the many dusty commercial law offices that lined London's Southampton Row, patent attorney Henry Staggers was desperately trying to decide whether the scruffy young man in patched jeans and distressed Grateful Dead tee-shirt across his desk was certifiably deranged or simply the greatest genius since Einstein, no since Newton, no ever, ever.

‘You say that you have proved Riemann's Hypothesis, and the knowledge of the pattern of occurrence of larger prime numbers that this gives you enables you to unlock any blockchain, and more, design AI software that can not only remotely access any digital video recording ever made, but can also bend time such that any future recording featuring any person on those existing recordings may be downloaded before it is actually made.’

‘You got it.’

‘I think that you are right in saying that Google, Facebook and a few others that we need not mention would find this interesting.’

‘Sure.’

‘But to be awarded a patent you have to demonstrate that your invention can perform this reproducibly. There's no doubt that it is novel, has never been done before, but can you do it. You can't patent an idea. You have to show the IPUK guys in Tredegar House that you can actually do it, and then do it again. Don't forget they are sceptical; they are accustomed to giving a polite bum's rush to guys sitting in the waiting room with perpetual motion machines in cardboard boxes’

‘But I can. My Dad's an electrician and when he was rewiring an old building, I just said I was his apprentice, blagged my way in and installed my working prototype in a cupboard. As yet I have only built a computer powerful enough to handle the nearest camera and its subjects. But it's a start. It's in an old library in Nottingham. In the Green Room. That made us laugh. You know, like actors waiting to go on the stage…LOL.’

Mr Staggers was very troubled, he pulled at his beard and looked under his impressive eyebrows at the youth before him. He felt obliged to interrupt him, 'Just so we are clear, you and your father, credentials unspecified, installed hyper-futuristic-surveillance and video evidence
gathering equipment illegally and without the individual consent of the person or persons who entered the said room?''

The cocky youth nodded and smiled, it seemed to him that he had just been complimented. Like any old codger Staggers obviously could not begin to comprehend the incredible technological and financial possibilities of his ground-breaking device. ‘Thank you,’ he replied grinning broadly.

Mr Staggers sighed and supported his full weight on his forearms as he leaned towards the upstart, ‘Be in no doubt you have compromised any possibility of ever developing your invention, let alone obtaining a patent for it.’ He enunciated his words carefully and maintained maximum direct eye contact with the lad. They were frozen in mortal masculine non-verbal confrontation for minutes, until the youth’s mobile phone buzzed in his jeans’ pocket and he dragged it out and looked at it briefly and smugly. He turned the phone round to show Mr Staggers what was playing on the screen.

The patent attorney adjusted his glasses and squinted across the table; all that he could see was a video of a naked man in a nappy with a dummy in his mouth, crying. As soon as he’d taken this in and realised that the man looked like him, but older, the youth legged it out of his office.

Staggers composed himself and picked up his office phone, dialled a number and waited until a cultured gentleman answered, ‘Good afternoon, London City Masonic Hall, how may I help you?’

‘Get Mr John Oswald King to the phone my good man.’ There was a pause then, ‘John, forgive my intrusion.

Two things; are you still in touch with the Chairman of the Bromley House Library, I think he’s a member of the Nottingham Lodge?’ There was a short pause, Staggers began nodding to himself. ‘Good, good. Now the second thing: are you still in the market for investing in scientific innovation? I’m not exaggerating John when I say that I’m onto something big and I can cut you in for, let’s say, two million pounds for 20% share; just as a start-up, you understand.’

Meanwhile in a luxury Mercedes taxi on the M62 Molly was on her way to an appointment at the School of Tropical Medicine in Liverpool, courtesy of BBC Panorama who wanted to make a documentary about the whole ‘larval eye infection thing’. They had promised to name the
offending insect *Mollius Infecta Optica* of the *Melittosphex* genus. This was very satisfying for Molly having spent her adult life classifying and cataloguing books; you couldn't make it up!

She momentarily wondered what Jill, Nick and Derek were up to, working without her close supervision. She planned to visit them on her return, via Paul Smith's for a new wardrobe and Vivienne Westwood's for that evening gown, flamenco style.

But with an hour to go before she got to Liverpool, she phoned the man who had sold her the surveillance monitoring equipment installed in the Green Room; with any luck he could rig it up so she could view things from the comfort of the back seat of her taxi.

In the taxi Molly's phone went on ringing the number she had dialled. Eventually an answerphone cut it. 'We are sorry, we unable to take your call at this moment. Please try later'.

Honestly! A firm at the cutting edge of technology and they couldn't even pick the phone up. For a moment she thought of diverting from her appointment; but that would be silly. She must get to Liverpool.

She rang the library. A last ditch attempt. What could anyone there do? Nothing, apparently, but she was worrying at how the hidden camera seemed to be taking over their lives.

No answer there either. What was going on?

The answer to that was back in the George Green room where Jill, Nick and Derek had been watching the CCTV screen.

It was, in nursery parlance, throwing a wobbly. Lights flashing and a general impression of overload. Derek felt he knew the feeling.

Jill mentioned the CCTV installers up by the Vicky centre. She had got in touch. The response was surprisingly serious. A man’s voice said he would be over right away. Jill told the others.' Do you think it's going to blow up? Oh! What's that?

The odd doorway beneath the stairs had opened. Blown open? If so, it had blown to again but not enough to latch it.

'I said there were flashing lights and noises in that corner!' Derek protested, as if relieved to be proved right, while scared at what this might mean.

'That corner has always given me the creeps,' Jill admitted. 'Something spooky about it somehow.'
Nick looked at them anxiously then went towards the door. ‘Only one way to find out’ he said.

The door opened onto the shape of a cupboard under the stairs, but the space was empty and it went back a lot further than a doorway in such a place should be able to.

There were odd buzzing and clicking noises and the effect of lighting getting brighter, then fainter.

And an odd sort of smell. Like school laboratories. Hard to identify but recognizable ever after, once you’d been in one.

While they were cautiously moving forward, the outer door to the library banged and someone hurried up the stairs, their feet clattering on the hard steps. It sounded like men’s shoes and this proved to be so. The man who appeared was smartly dressed in a business suit, and was holding a small square case which swung from his hand with the speed of his movement. At the top of the stairs he stopped, taking in the nervous group of people standing just inside the open black door.

He stood still and exhaled in a manner that said ‘Too late’.

Jill, Nick and Derek were glad of the excuse to come out again

‘Peter Green,’ he said, extending his hand, then confusing himself as he realized he was still holding his little case. ‘Adams and Cambridge. Electrical Research. Can you tell me what’s happening?’

Between them they told him about the flashing lights and the peculiar practices of the security camera. Peter, said yes, as one who has understood so far. Then he said, ‘Why were you under the stairs?’

‘It isn’t really under stairs’ said Nick, who had been first to go through. ‘There’s an office or something at the far end.’

‘Yes’ said Peter, this time as if that meant. ‘I thought there would be. Well I think we had better go and look.’

They went back through the little black door and along a narrow passage. It opened out into a – workroom? Studio? Coils of wire. Wheels turning, odd mirrors, and a kind of metallic smell. From behind a bench an elderly man looked up and smiled in greeting.

‘Ah, do come in! I’ve been so hoping you would call. It’s the difficulties of getting the timing right, you see. The problem is going forward in time, on the same trajectory and velocity that time itself goes forward too, do you see? And so much faster all the time. Have you noticed that?’
‘I am pleased to see you. I have been aware of the curious contraption in the office up there, and have been trying so hard to reach you people. It won’t do, you know. Fascinating. Really fascinating, and I do congratulate you, but it won’t do. Freedom of speech, personal rights, you know. I’m supposing they still exist?’

Jill, Nick and Derek looked around them bewildered. The old man realized they didn’t know where they were. ‘Oh’ he said, ‘I do apologize. Welcome to MRF.’

‘MRF?’, repeated Nick.

‘Yes. All clever stuff you see. The Magnetic Research Foundation. My name’s George Green’

The room fell into stunned silence.

Derek was the first to break it, his voice somewhat higher pitched than normal and noticeably trembling ‘I…er… I’m not really sure what’s going on here now, but if you’re saying that you’re THE George Green then I’m gonna need to get out of here and go and have a lie down’.

The others exchanged confused looks. Jill steadied herself against the wall.

‘I’m ever so sorry chaps and… er… lady… I didn’t mean to blurt all of that out in such a confusing fashion. I’ve just been looking forward to talking to you for some time and it’s rather a long story to tell… perhaps I can offer you a cup of tea?’

With a strong ‘puff’, George blew the dust off some chairs in the corner of the room and offered them to his new companions. As the rest of them sat down, Peter stood to address the group.

‘I think I need to be straight with you all at this point. George is… my great-great-grandfather. His work with the MRF is something that I’ve been aware of for some time. This is a highly classified matter with major security implications for our country. No one outside of the inner circle is supposed to know about the delicate nature of our operations. I came to you today because I had been made aware that another agent has been working in our space.’

Peter examined his audience. One of Jill’s legs was faintly trembling. Nick looked dazed and his jaw hung open in suspended animation. Derek was carefully unscrewing his hipflask.

George pulled himself to his feet and traded a knowing look with his distant relative, ‘Peter, I think it would be better if I put this in rather simpler language, don’t you think?’.
George slowly shuffled across the room, his wooden cane striking the floor with each step, as regular as the ticking of the clock in the library.

Pointing at some unintelligible scribbles on a blackboard at the back of the room, George offered his explanation.

‘Essentially, through the MRF we have developed a mechanism which utilises the effect of gravitational fields to allow us to move back and forth through time as easily as moving from one room to another.’

‘The ramifications of this are, of course, huge, and it is not technology which we want to unleash on the general public, as it effectively means that time as we know it ceases to exist.’

Peter interjected, ‘Your Chairman was made aware of a device that had been installed in the library which was intended to distort time in a similar fashion to this, giving anyone who viewed it a snapshot of the future. This was…’

George waved away this interruption and continued ‘The person, ‘scientist’, who developed this was seemingly unaware of the problematic nature of multiple dimensions and many futures existing simultaneously. His ‘future vision’ is aligned to an improbable outcome… er… you might describe it as the future that we would wish to see, not the one that is likely to happen… We could recalibrate things to show the path that we’re on in this dimension but then we’re running the risk of encountering the ‘Grandfather Effect’ and… well… as you can see, this is slippery stuff and really not something that should be attempted by the uninitiated amateur.’

‘CRACK’

Derek had dropped his flask and the amber liquid began to spill across the hard floor. Nobody moved.

‘Anyway…I’m here to get back on top of things, try to stop any further damage being done, and ensure that…’ George’s voice trailed off as he caught sight of Jill sobbing, her head in her hands.

Peter rose from his seat. ‘Listen, I think we’ve spent enough time talking about this, given the circumstances. We now need to act. Tell me, who is in charge here?’

Molly offered an unusually generous tip to the taxi driver as she waved him off, having reached her destination in Liverpool. The bronze letters, spelling out the name of the imposing building, glinted in the sunlight. ‘A building almost as impressive as Bromley House’, she thought.
Her finger hovering over the intercom she felt her bag vibrate… ‘Damn, what now?’, she muttered. She was so close to succeeding this time. She couldn’t risk any delays, the eye operation had to go ahead. But good manners prevailed; it might even be the technology firm returning her call. However, the display read Bromley House.

A tentative ‘Hello’ from Molly, and then ‘It’s Peter Green here, to whom am I speaking?’ Her eye throbbed, she hesitated, then cut the call. How had they found her?

Suddenly she was worried about the gang back at the library.

George, who purported to be the actual George Green, had been a thorn in her side for years, repeatedly! His refusal to help her and his constant meddling was exasperating, and at worst downright dangerous. Now, she was sure he was working from inside the library, and had been for some time.

Hence, in hindsight, the unfortunate consequences of her amateur attempts at surveillance. But she needed to be one step ahead of him. Now George, if she was correct, had drawn Jill, Nick and Derek into his scheming. Oh dear.

But she hadn’t got time for this. Empathy was an obstacle to achieving one’s goals, she told herself. Fantasy, fuelled by good literature, had kept her going time and time again, but enough was enough.

It was typical of Molly to go off on a tangent, and had it not been for this distraction she might have paid more attention to the lettering on the building above her head: MRF Liverpool (Bromley House Division).

A disembodied voice buzzed her into the building. There, she was met with a sight that almost floored her. Standing in the reception area was her consultant Angus Murray, the chairman of the library James Kent, and Roderick Cummings. It didn’t make sense; Rod was dead, wasn’t he?

The pain in her eye was becoming unbearable. Were they all in on it, the Greens, John Oswald King? Jill? Nick? Derek?

With a huge effort Molly straighten her spine, squared her shoulders, and looked directly at Rod.

‘You owe me an explanation. Be assured I won’t go back, not this time.’ Then, appealing to the love they once might have shared, ‘I couldn’t bear the tedium, the heartache, not again, please.’ A distracting memory of dancing the Bolero came to mind. She pushed it away.

‘If you want an explanation Molly, read my letter. In fact, if you had read my letter you might have found your way out sooner. I could have
removed the remote tracking and control device in your eye during our last cycle. But no, as usual, Molly knew best and ignored my solicitor’s instructions.’

‘….. Tracking device, control, what are you talking about, it’s larvae, *Mollius Infecta Optica* …… Myanmar…… Panorama …… WHAT?’

With heartless indifference Rod continued, ‘Has the past taught you anything Molly? Or are you still as infuriatingly ……?’

Molly’s surroundings began to fade; time was fracturing, slipping, ‘No, no’ …… *not again, please*. From a foggy distance she could hear James Kent saying, ‘Peter, tell George to turn that damned machine off. Yes now. Immediately.’

‘Enough’, a voice said close to her ear, as a gentle touch at her elbow steered her to a seat. Angus Murray handed her a glass of water.

‘Jemima, we can fix this. Our current research is complete. For you, at least, the experiment is over. I was sceptical when Roderick first suggested you, I thought you’d be a bit …… well, to be frank, flaky. But with hindsight I have to say you really have been the ideal candidate for the Temporal Loop Trial. Entertaining even, which was an unexpected bonus.’

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**One month later**

Molly was sitting in the George Green Room, reading a battered copy of Don Quixote. A new Vivienne Westwood bag at her feet. She’d come to say goodbye to Jill, Nick and Derek. Fortunately, thanks to MRF, they had no memory of recent events in the library. Their lives were still chaotic, even MRF couldn’t fix that, but Derek and Lorraine were at least giving it another go. As far as they were concerned Molly had been off work recuperating from an operation and now had decided to take a sabbatical to fully recover. Thankfully George Green had been retired, Staggers had been paid off, and the electrician’s interfering apprentice dealt with. All had become liabilities MRF could no longer afford.

Molly, vision fully restored, was moving on, no longer bound to repeat the last decade of her life in perpetuity. She smiled at the thought of her healthy bank balance. The pay-out, to compensate her for undue stress and for services rendered, was considerable. She had driven a hard bargain and despite the NDA, it had been well worth it.
Molly’s eyes sparkled, she was looking forward to her imminent trip to Granada and the Alhambra Palace. She was particularly excited about her much-desired classical Flamenco lessons. On her return, not surprisingly, she intended to apply for a Creative Writing Degree at Trent Uni.

Molly laughed out loud, 20/20 vision for 2020, very apt. Molly’s future was bright, her plans confirmed for a new year, indeed a new decade. Nothing could go wrong! Could it?

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