

Caught on Camera

written by

Jenny Spence

Caught on Camera

Straitened circumstances had narrowed my life down to two locations: my tiny one-room flat and the research library at the university, where I hoped forlornly that I might one day finish my PhD. In any case, I didn't feel much like meeting people. It was too hard to explain to them what my PhD was about.

Graph theory. No, not the kind of graphs you're thinking of. It's more abstract than that. Sorry.

Have you ever tried to draw that little house with a cross on it, without lifting your pencil from the paper? Have you heard of the travelling salesman problem in computer theory? You haven't? Oh.

So that Friday night, instead of going to a fabulous medieval dinner for my friend's cousin's girlfriend's birthday, I was mooning about in the dusty stacks on the top floor of the library, looking for that elusive last piece of the puzzle. Somewhere in my reading I had found an indirect reference to an elegant method by Euler's favourite student, Hans Schengen, for showing whether a graph is Eulerian. I couldn't find this method in any of the texts, but in my hand I was holding a mouldering book, and a glance at its contents made my heart beat like a jackhammer.

I thought I heard a floorboard creak, followed maybe by a faint whoosh, then my head snapped forward with a stunning blow and the lights went out.

Fear not, gentle reader, the body in the library is not mine. I am not going to return in ghostly form to investigate my own murder.

I woke up flat on my back with a circle of faces peering at me. There was a blanket draped over me and an ambulance officer was placing a brace around my neck. It felt scratchy and too tight, and when he moved my head it sent pain screaming through my whole body. I mumbled a complaint.

“Emily, can you hear me?” said a voice far away. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“The stretcher’s here,” said someone else. Hands lifted me.

“We’ll take her down the stairs.”

“Burr...thasha...” I couldn’t move my lips to speak properly. What was wrong with the lift?

Pain jolted through my head and I automatically counted steps as they carried me down. One, two, three.... Only one flight, then I felt cold air on my face and smelled the sickening exhaust of the throbbing ambulance. Something was wrong with that, I thought blearily.

No more nights in the library for me for a little while. The doctor at the hospital shook his head and tut-tutted about concussion and a possible fractured skull. The nurses kept wrapping blankets around me but I couldn’t get warm. Pain was my world as I dozed uneasily, then at last it was night again and everything clicked back into place.

My friend Albert was sitting by the bed. “Emily!” he whispered as I opened my eyes. “You need a slug of this.” He held up a small whiskey bottle, already half empty. I could smell it on his breath.

“Errghh. Have you brought anything to eat?”

“I got you some sushi. Here.”

He opened the plastic container and the smell of raw fish sent a wave of nausea over me.

“Maybe later,” I said faintly. “What happened?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“I was in the library. Where’s my stuff? I had my laptop and some notebooks.”

“It’s all okay, I’ve got it at home.”

Home. Albert had been sleeping on the kitchen floor of my tiny apartment pretty much ever since my PhD grant had run out. He insisted on paying the rent and I couldn’t argue with that, because we’d be out on the street otherwise. In return I did the cooking, while he swooned in ecstasy over the simplest meal. Albert was supposed to be doing a PhD of his own, in Philosophy, but it was hard to pin him down. In any case he had what he called “family money”, and could do as he pleased.

“But why am I here? Did something fall on me?”

“Somebody slugged you.” He said the word with relish.

“Bullshit. Why?”

“Who knows? They didn’t get it on the CCTV. You were found just before closing time in the stairwell on the first floor.”

This didn’t make sense, but my eyes were closing against my will. There was a sense of dread, of something missing, but I couldn’t grasp it before sleep overtook me again.

Then it was morning and Albert was helping me out of the hospital and into the street, almost carrying me. I don’t weigh much. With the noise and smells and the throbbing of the bus my head was raging again, and when we got home I stumbled into my bed with gratitude.

The next time I surfaced I felt almost human.

“What time is it?” I croaked.

“Ten-thirty.” Albert was in his pyjamas, and sunlight streamed into the room.

“What day?”

“Sunday.”

“Oh my God. I need food.”

Albert had been shopping. We ate a big breakfast of toast, croissants and strawberries washed down with tea, and I made my way to the couch, floating in post-headache euphoria.

“You’re popular on Facebook,” said Albert, buried in his phone. “Fifty-seven likes already, and nearly thirty comments.”

“Likes? What are they liking?”

“You getting knocked out. Not really. You know.”

“Huh.” I reached for my laptop and started trying to catch up with life. On the news feeds there was a fuzzy image of a figure on the floor and someone standing over it. Shelves of books were visible in the background.

“Albert! You said there was no CCTV.”

“There’s not. Hey.” He peered over my shoulder. “This isn’t you. Look, this happened last night.”

Here was a real live mystery. The night before, Saturday, the security guard who monitors all the CCTV cameras in the library had spotted an aberration: a small figure lying prone on the sixth floor. He had rushed to the rescue, but by the time he got there the body was gone. Back in his little den he looked through the CCTV footage from the past half hour or so, then immediately called the police.

This drama was played out: a woman in a dowdy skirt and cardigan wandered from the foreground into the background of the shot, her head bowed over a large book. A bulky figure appeared from behind the shelves and was upon her in two swift

steps, his arm already swinging back to fetch her a massive blow to the back of her head. The woman dropped like a stone and lay motionless. The attacker hit her a few more times, then made off between two tall bookcases.

“Did you see where he hit her?” I whispered, my hand straying to the back of my neck, which had started to throb.

“Sand in his little socks he put, and whopped her on the occiput.”

“Exactly. Just like me.”

The rest of the story was maddeningly vague, but it seemed there was no further footage from the other cameras. The woman’s body remained motionless on the floor for five minutes or so, then it was gone. Both the assailant and the woman had simply disappeared.

“Well, he must have come back and taken her out of the library,” mused Albert. “The coverage has lapses, doesn’t it? When it switches from camera to camera you don’t see everything from each one.”

“So he must have come back and grabbed her in the interval,” I said, busily calculating the likely number of cameras, the area they might cover and the possible down time of each one. “He could have worked the gaps in the timing to avoid all the cameras and get her out of the library, probably down the fire stairs.”

“If he did get her out of the library. Maybe she’s hidden somewhere?”

A spooky thought. All the report said was that a search was under way.

“This is some weird scholar-hating serial killer,” concluded Albert. “You were lucky, Em. Better stay out of that library until they catch him.”

“There’s a strange resonance here,” I murmured. “She’s small, like me, and she was on the top floor. That’s where I was.”

“No, darling, you were on the first floor, in the stairwell. And this was last night, not Friday. Maybe he particularly hates small female scholars.”

“Why would I be on the first floor? That’s just English Literature and crap like that.”

The whole thing made me uneasy, but there was something else troubling me, and it was a while before I could remember what it was. My research.

“Albert,” I said. “I have to go back to the library.”

“Haven’t you been listening? Stay away from there!”

“No, but just before I got knocked out I found something, something really important.”

“What was it?”

“That’s the thing, I don’t know. All I can remember is the feeling, that Eureka! feeling. If I go back there I might remember.”

“Tomorrow. We’ll go tomorrow.”

When we got up the next morning there was a development. A Professor Witherspoon had come back on Sunday night from a weekend conference and reported his wife missing. Her disappearance was “out of character”. A photo of the couple showed a small, slight woman, and my blood ran cold.

“It’s her,” I said. “The body in the library.”

“You don’t know that,” said Albert, poring over the story. “Maybe the wife’s just shot through, got herself a good start while he was away. Look at him, what is there to like?” The professor, pictured with his wife in front of a gated mansion, was heavysset and glowering at the camera.

It appeared Professor Witherspoon was in the computer science department, and the conference was about electronic security systems.

“Does it say when he left for the conference?” I asked.

“Ummm ... Saturday morning. He flew to Brisbane.” Albert peered again at the photo. “I’ve seen him,” he said. “He was getting cosy with some secretarial type in the back bar at the old Jolly Roger.”

“You’re making that up!”

“Well, I think it was him.”

When we got to the library we found the top floor locked off.

“Damn, damn, damn,” I said.

“The fifth floor’s a similar layout,” suggested Albert. “Let’s go there and, you know, let your mind float free.”

The shelves on the fifth floor stretched out into hazy darkness. I half-closed my eyes and sniffed the comforting aroma of decay.

“I had a desk by the window,” I said. “I had a pile of books.”

“It’s History and other odd stuff up there, not Mathematics. Why were you there?”

“I don’t know.” I waved my fingers, trying to recreate the feel of the books. That woven, hard cover feel, frayed on the corners. Surely there was one with a few pages still uncut.

“Whoever got my stuff out of there must have seen the books,” I said. “Let’s talk to the librarians.”

A helpful young man batted his eyelashes at Albert and was eager to tell us what he knew. It was obvious to me that Albert was gay, but he didn’t seem to realise it. That’s not supposed to be possible. On the other hand, he didn’t seem to know he was an alcoholic, either.

“Yes, it was me,” said Albert’s admirer. “I put them on a cart with a stack of other books, and the next day they were all put back on the shelves. No-one had cleared the desks up there for a while.”

“So you wouldn’t know which particular books I had?”

“Not really. There was one that was open on the desk, I remember that one.”

“Yes? What was it?”

He went to the computer and tapped away for a while, then came back with a handwritten slip of paper.

“You can’t get it, though,” he said brightly. “The top floor is out of bounds at the moment. Oh, and there was a book on the floor, between two lots of bookshelves.”

The hairs stood up on the back of my neck. That book in my hand. The Eureka! moment.

“What was it?”

“Sorry, I don’t remember what it was called. It was small and really old.”

Back home I looked up the book title he had given me. It was an anthology of nineteenth-century German diary entries, but I couldn’t find out much about its contents.

“It looks like you’re right,” called Albert. I was hunched on my bed with my computer and he was ensconced on the couch at the other end of the room.

“What?”

“The Prof seems to have looked at that footage, and now they’re implying the body is his wife, Dr Barbara Müller. He must have recognised her.”

“She was an academic too?”

“German department. There are German books on the top floor too.”

I went back to brooding about the mystery book. What was I looking for? If Hans Schengen, my main subject, had kept a diary it would have been mentioned in my text books. And what, I wondered, was the other book, the small book that was in my hands when I fell?

“My mum knew her,” said Albert.

“Knew who? Dr Müller?”

“Society stuff. Ladies who lunch.”

“Huh?”

“She was one of the steelworks Müllers. They go back to the First World War. Armaments, you know? Serious money.”

“So, the big house in that photo of them – it’d be hers?”

“Could well be.”

Two days later Barbara Müller’s body washed up on the beach. It was in a bad way, but there was enough left to make a positive identification. The police announced that they had not ruled out foul play. The Professor appeared on television, distraught, asking for anyone with information to come forward.

The police called on me, and about time, I thought. The male detective constable had a dewy, unformed face and a wispy moustache. His companion was a brisk older woman with bleached-out hair. She was clearly in charge.

“Did you see your attacker?” asked the guy.

“I really don’t think so, but in any case I can’t remember anything.” I couldn’t stop looking at his moustache and imagining him gazing into the mirror and giving himself a preening smile.

“Why were you in the stairwell?” asked the woman. “Is it possible you were pursued?”

“I don’t know. All I remember is feelings, and I don’t think I felt scared. I was on the top floor, in the stacks, and I can’t think

of any reason I would have gone down the stairs.”

“The top floor?” She showed me a photo. “Were you anywhere near this spot?”

“Absolutely. I had my stuff on one of those desks by the window, but I was looking through the shelves. That’s where she was attacked, isn’t it? I’m sure that’s where I was too.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“Well, we have to simplify the graph, don’t we? That’s my field, you see, graph theory. We study the connections between vertices, or nodes if you like, and you find that reality prefers the simplest path between two points...” I could see that I’d lost them, and they escaped as soon as they could. But the woman did leave me a card, urging me to contact her if I remembered anything else.

“Have they got any leads?” asked Albert when he got home.

“Doesn’t look like it,” I said grumpily. “They should be looking at the symmetry here. There’s an intersection between his reason for hitting me and his reason for hitting her.”

“Life’s not all graph theory, Em.”

“No, but a lot of it is. The Internet, Facebook, most theories of logic...”

But now I’d lost Albert. He took his vodka out of the freezer and turned on the TV, while I retreated to my domain, the bed, to brood and re-read all the news stories.

There was something awfully familiar about Barbara Müller’s face. I supposed I must have seen her around the university, but it felt like more than that. According to her husband she often went to the library in the evenings, when it was quiet.

Before I could stop myself I was drawing it up. A graph, in the Euler sense, is a sort of map of the connections between

things. You can use it to work out the simplest, the most likely connections. In this case, I had pairs of facts that seemed to match. Barbara Müller was hit on the head, I was hit on the head. We were both in the German section of the stacks. We were both small and light, and the assailant moved us both after he hit us. Despite what people kept telling me, I was sure I didn’t take myself into the stairwell.

The glaring difference was that he didn’t kill me. Why?

I kept going back to the library. The top floor was still inaccessible, so I wandered around a few similar floors, checking where the CCTV cameras were and drawing up a rough floor plan with arcs, showing the areas covered. If the top floor was similar, I concluded, then it was indeed possible to get to the stairwell – but not the lift – without being seen, but you would have to plan it carefully.

So, the assailant must have planned the attack on Barbara Müller, but why me? That became the burning question.

I wondered about the CCTV on the night I was knocked out. All I’d heard was that there was no coverage of the attack, but there must be something. Maybe it would reveal that the assailant had been just as clever to spirit me down to the first floor stairwell? If so, it might prove that this attack was also planned, which would only deepen the mystery.

I fished out the card and called Detective Constable Cynthia Stammers, who seemed delighted to get a follow-up call.

“I don’t think you even appear in Friday night’s footage of the top floor,” she said. “I suppose I could arrange to have a look.”

“Please, please, please can I watch it with you? I know the layout really well, and where the cameras are, and I’m sure I can help you interpret it.”

She agreed, a little guardedly, and we arranged to meet in the basement of the IT department. It turned out that was where the computer linked to the cameras was kept.

“This is where Professor Witherspoon is based, isn’t it?”

I asked Constable Stammers.

“That’s right. He’s quite high up – deputy head, or something like that.”

I mentally joined another two nodes on the graph inside my brain: Professor Witherspoon and the CCTV system. I could feel the graph beginning to whirl and thrum, yearning towards its resolution, that perfect connection between all its parts.

The quiet techie in the basement took us through footage from all the cameras on the top floor, starting about the time I remembered arriving at the library. Endless scanning shots of bookshelves and corridors, with the very occasional glimpse of a shadowy figure.

“We should have seen some images of me by now,” I said, as time went on. “I’m sure this is the area where I was working.”

“Our information was that you were found on the first floor.”

“I know, but that’s not where I was, I’m sure it’s not.” I’m nearly weeping with frustration.

“Can you tell me precisely where you believe you were?”

“Not really, that’s the trouble. I’ve got a gap in my memory.”

“It’s too bad,” said Constable Stammers. “If we had visuals of your attack it would help the investigation enormously, especially if it turned out to be the same perpetrator.”

“I know,” I sighed. “But can I see the footage from Saturday night?”

“Hmmm. I don’t really think I can...”

“Come on, please, it won’t hurt. Maybe if I see what happened to her it might jog my memory?”

Constable Stammers was remarkably easy to persuade. While the techie was finding the footage she sat making notes in a little notebook.

“Tell me,” I asked, “would Professor Witherspoon have had a motive for killing his wife?”

“I can’t tell you that!”

“But did they get on well?”

“Not according to some of the neighbours,” she conceded.

“So could he possibly have slipped away from his conference and flown back for a couple of hours on Saturday night?”

“Not a chance,” she said. “The CCTV tells us precisely when the murder happened, and at exactly that time he was at the conference dinner, giving a speech to three hundred people.”

Exactly that time? I thought. Another pair of matched facts that could be connected.

Saturday night’s footage was almost identical to Friday’s, until the arrival of Dr Müller and the attacker.

“Does this jog your memory?” asked Constable Stammers.

“No, sorry.” Something was wrong, something out of kilter.

“Could I see the last few minutes again, please?”

The techie obliged. I was getting the hang of the system now: it would rotate through the half dozen cameras, showing a few seconds from each, then it would go back and start again.

“A bit further, please,” I said. “Could I see the sequence before that one? Yes, that’s... Stop!”

“What is it?” asked Constable Stammers.

“See that desk in the background, by the windows? It’s bare, right?”

“Yes.”

“Now, let’s see that desk the next time around.”

The next set of images appeared, and the desk now had what looked like a stack of books.

“Someone must have come in,” said Constable Stammers doubtfully. “They must have put down the books and gone off to look for others, just in the few seconds that desk wasn’t covered by the camera.”

“Okay, let’s look at this area after the attack.”

In the next cycle and the one after that, the pile of books was still there, but a couple of cycles after the attack it was gone.

“Someone must have come and taken them,” I said drily.

“This is strange,” admitted Constable Stammers. “I’ve got to take this to my Sergeant.”

“Just before we go, can we zoom in on those books?”

The techie nodded and made some adjustments, then delicately manoeuvred the mouse. Close-up the image was fuzzy, but not so fuzzy that we couldn’t see the stack of dull-coloured books and the single book open on the desk.

My blood ran cold.

Constable Stammers was eager to get back to her police station and pass on what she had seen, so I found myself alone on the campus. I started to walk home, mentally rearranging the facts in my mental map.

If a graph is Eulerian, there is one perfect connection between every pair of nodes, and the “last” node connects seamlessly back to the first one. It’s a beautiful thing, and it’s the reason why I am a mathematician.

Halfway home I stopped and turned around. I could see how the whole thing might work, and I needed to be in the library,

pacing it out. The top floor was still out of bounds, according to the sign by the lifts, but when I climbed the fire escape stairs I found the door unlocked.

A shaft of sunlight reached from the windows almost to my feet. Dust motes swirled and shimmered. I went straight to the shelves, found the book the library guy had told me about, the anthology of diary entries, and flipped through it, trying to pick up some meaning with my rudimentary understanding of German. Then I looked through the index and a name leaped out at me: Hildegarde Schneider.

“That’s it!” I exclaimed aloud, and the words opened up a door in my memory. That’s exactly what I said last time, on Friday night, sitting at the desk with this book open in front of me.

Now I remembered there was someone else there, a soft voice at my shoulder that said: “Found something?”

It was her. That was why she had looked so familiar to me. She had smiled at me, friendly and encouraging.

“Yes!” I had said. “Do you understand German?”

“Of course.”

We looked together through the few entries attributed to Hildegarde Schneider. She was a student who was once rumoured to have had an adulterous relationship with Hans Schengen. I could never find confirmation, or indeed any other mention of this.

“This one!” I said. “What does it say?”

“Hmmm. ‘Hans is so excited about his new theory. I think he loves his work more than me. He keeps explaining his ideas to me as if...’ Let me see, this is a very German construction here... ‘As if I had become his notebook.’”

“Wow. Is there anything more about his theory?”

“Not here,” she said. “But you know, I’ve heard of this woman before, Hildegard Schneider. I think her diary was published. You might find it along there...”

I stood paralysed, remembering this, then I fumbled my way along the shelves, where she had told me to look. Tears blurred my vision. Barbara Müller! I hadn’t even glanced back over my shoulder at her.

And now, once again, I stood with the precious little book in my hand remembering how I blew the dust off it that first time; and once again I heard a tiny sound behind me. I leapt away and turned in the same motion.

He cursed under his breath and came at me again, swinging a small steel baton, like the batons they use in relay races; small enough to fit under his jacket. He was wearing a bulky coat and a balaclava.

“You bastard!” I yelled. “Not this time!”

I dodged around the shelves and out into the open. This area was covered by cameras, so I jumped up and down and waved my arms. He kept coming and I skittered away again.

“Forget that,” he jeered. “I’m looping it.”

Of course. He had come here from the IT department, where he had set up the output from the cameras so that he could kill me without anyone seeing, now that I knew too much.

I ran back into the rows of bookshelves, his footsteps clattering behind me, then I leapt at a shelf and started climbing. The bookcase quivered, but I’m so small and light it took my weight. The top was gritty, sprinkled here and there with bright blue pellets. I hopped across onto the next section, then the next, while he ran in and out, trying to grab my ankle. I kicked away, raising choking clouds of dust, and he cursed and jabbed at his

eyes. I recoiled as my hand closed on the desiccated body of a rat, then I gripped it and threw it in his face.

When I judged I had him in a good position I jumped down and ran towards the lifts. It was a forlorn chance, but my only way out. He was upon me as I jabbed at the lift button, and I held up my arm to ward off the blow.

With a faint ding the lift door slid open. Detective Constable Stammers stood there with a wiry man in an ill-fitting suit who sprang out, grabbed my assailant and handcuffed him.

“Professor Charles Witherspoon,” said Stammers with an air of great satisfaction. “I’m arresting you for the murder of Barbara Müller. You do not have to say anything...”

“So,” said Albert later, “Mrs Policeman Plod came to your rescue?”

“She was smarter than she looked,” I conceded. “She worked it out as quickly as I did, and she was bringing her boss back to show him.”

“And why had the Prof come back at just that time?”

“Well, he must have been monitoring the CCTV, and he’d already seen me spending far too much time on the other floors, checking out the cameras. When he saw me back on the top floor he had to get in there and eliminate me.”

“So the solution was quite simple?”

“That’s what solutions are like,” I said. “The logical resolution of the vertices.”

“Emily!”

“Oh, okay. Yes, it was simple. Professor Witherspoon had written a little application that captured the relevant footage from Friday night and saved it, while actually displaying film he’d saved from the night before. Then he programmed Friday night’s

footage to play at the same time on Saturday night, while he was at the conference in Brisbane.”

“And how did the body get into the water?”

“It looks like he took her home on Friday, after the murder, and put her in the freezer. When he got back on Sunday he threw her in somewhere convenient, then reported her missing. Her being in the water for the next few days messed up their calculations of the time of death.”

“And he had himself a cast-iron alibi.”

“Exactly. It must have all taken a lot of planning, then I showed up on Friday night and nearly ruined it.”

“And that’s why he hit you on the head and took you down the stairs, to get you out of the way?”

“Yes, then he could go on with his plan, and he probably thought it was even better. They’d think there was a serial attacker, working on separate nights, attacking random people; so that obscured his motive for murdering his wife.”

“Which was, essentially, money?”

“Isn’t it always?” I sighed. “He wanted out, but everything they had belonged to her.”

“Anyway, well done, Emily. You’re an ace detective.” He popped the cork from the bottle of champagne he had insisted on buying to celebrate my escape.

“It wasn’t me,” I said modestly. “It was all down to graph theory. I’m going to have to add a chapter to my thesis.”

“To the future Dr Emily,” said Albert, and we raised our glasses.

Jenny Spence

Jenny Spence grew up in country Victoria, and went to university in Melbourne. After a brief period as an English teacher and a year scriptwriting soap operas, Jenny stumbled upon a profession that suited her mismatch of talents and became a technical writer. She and her husband, Bruce Spence, have two grown-up children and two granddaughters.