

# Futures

## Missing person

Photographic memories. By John Gilbey



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I was sorting through a box of books destined for the charity shop when I found the photo. It was wedged into a hardback data book of the kind that's now almost vanished. A glossy print, 8 inches by 10 – crafted by the skilled professional photographer the department used to keep on staff. In the monochrome image, three rows of folk in suspiciously pristine lab coats sat or stood in formal pose. I sat down on the sofa by the window and looked at the image more closely. Years fell away as I saw my younger self lurking in the second row, standing next to Helen, who was standing next to Dave rather than me. We must have been in our mid-twenties, convinced we knew everything and ready to change the world.

For a while, I guess we did change things – although it morphed into just an interesting dead end. Looking at the back of the picture, I saw it was dated to the same year as our first *Nature* paper, so perhaps it was a press image for publicity. I smiled to myself as I

remembered the headline in our local paper – ‘Lab Boffins Track Cracks in Time’, a claim that showed zero understanding of our real achievement. Looking along the rows, I started putting names to the faces, a feat of memory I managed in every case except one: a mature woman, dark hair just starting to grey, perhaps in her late forties. I scanned the print and enlarged the image on the wall screen, which gave just enough resolution to make out her VRW badge. So, a visiting research worker – but from where?

I mailed the scan to Helen and Dave, who are still together, to remind them how young we once were and ask if they recognized our mystery colleague. As an afterthought, I suggested meeting up for lunch – to which they both agreed, settling for that new place by the railway station. Between courses, I brought out the photo and asked them if they had any ideas. Dave swept back the remains of his hair and shook his head. “I sort of recognize the face, but can’t place her name. Sorry ...” Helen

assumed a frostily neutral expression. “An invisible woman in science. How unusual ...”

“That’s Julia,” she went on. “Julia Fernandez, I think. She was only in the lab for a month or so. Her English was a bit shaky, and she didn’t mix much – but she taught me some excellent Spanish swear words ...” Helen looked again at the print. “She had some good ideas on the theoretical stuff, though – and quite a few of her tweaks went into the production rig. In fact, looking back, I suspect she was something of a catalyst ...”

Dave nodded slowly. “Yes, now you mention it, I remember a bit of bother with her and Spike. He really didn’t like being told his code for the sensor array was crap – despite her mods making the routines an order of magnitude more efficient. Actually, I wonder whether we’d have seen the effect at all otherwise – we wouldn’t have had the granularity. I wonder what happened to her?”

But then the main course arrived, and the moment was lost. Much later, after a convivial

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afternoon and the bus ride home, I did a quick search for her. Perhaps inevitably, trawling for 'Julia Fernandez' gave an ocean of possible matches – so I gave up and did an image search on the lab photo itself. The only hit was from the lab's annual report for that year – but just the director and senior management team were named.

While making coffee, I thought of another possibility – and cropped Julia's head and shoulders from the image, dropping her onto a plain background. Running the image search again gave me a further match, one which brought me up short and made me reach for something other than coffee.

Both Dave and Helen seemed bemused by the invitation to meet again so soon – but they showed up and I parked beers and nibbles in front of them.

"Well? Have you done with being cryptic?" asked Helen, sampling her IPA with approval.

I nodded. "Yes, I think I may have found her

– Julia." I slid my tablet across the table and they looked at the two images, then exchanged glances.

"Well, it's got to be the same person – just look at the eyes," said Dave. "But ... in this other image she must be, what, 20 years younger – or more. Where did you find it?"

I reached over and swiped across the screen, bringing up a corporate contact page. "Folks, meet Julia Fernandez – currently a graduate student at the Institute for Quasi-Natural Events in New Mexico. Age 22. Her biog lists her specialism as 'temporal anomalies' ..."

In the silence that followed, Helen took a long pull at her beer. "So," she said quietly, "this is the woman who visited our lab nearly 40 years ago? When she was maybe 20 years older than she is now? During which visit she nudged our project towards finding 'time storms' – or whatever the tabloids called them – then disappeared without trace?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

Perhaps our research wasn't a dead end after all.

Dave laughed nervously. "Maybe we should send Young Julia a copy of our original paper? It might be just what she needs to set her on the right track to whatever she'll discover."

Helen frowned. "Hang on a moment. What if we don't? What if Young Julia never sees the paper? Could she still reach back to us? Would our timeline change and the paper never get written?"

I took a drink before answering. "I'm afraid we'll never know"

"You mean ...?"

"Yes, I mailed it to her this morning."

**John Gilbey** writes from the academic seclusion of the University of Rural England, and worries a lot about this sort of thing. He tweets as @John\_Gilbey.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

**John Gilbey reveals the inspiration behind *Missing person*.**

I have reached the age where I am trying to slim down my book collection, especially as I no longer have a dedicated campus office well equipped with sturdy bookshelves. My home office has never really recovered from the sudden arrival of my work-based book collection, some of which still lurks in the dark obscurity of its transport boxes.

With this in mind, I have been sorting through piles of these books – a painful but evocative task – and I've been coming across various pieces of memorabilia, including some very old team photos, lurking between the pages. I never thought I'd need to label them with a list of names, but age is a fickle companion and the identities of a few faces now elude me – mainly those of short-term visitors to the lab.

Visiting research workers (VRWs) brought valuable new perspectives to academia in a time before global networking, when connections between academics often played out at the speed of an exchange of letters – and a VRW often had a critically novel input to projects. Through the magic of the Internet, I have managed to make contact with a few of these folk once more; others have remained a mystery. The laboratories where the photos were taken, along with their administrative infrastructures, are mostly long gone – victims of contraction, rationalization and cutbacks in the research industry – and their collective memories have gone with them.

I've begun to wonder whether a few of the unidentified visitors might be from somewhere much more distant than we had thought at the time ...

Could this scenario happen? Perhaps.

Could you prove it had happened? Possibly not.

It is probably better that way.

