**First go 18 August 2013**

When Greville went to get another cup of water, he saw that there was something interesting on the notice board. Usually it contained a big notice about health and safety at work, and details of first aiders and fire officers, and the odd card from people who had left, thanking everyone for whatever had been bought with their collection money. Usually gardening vouchers. Today there was a puzzle. Greville was the sort of person who liked puzzles, so after he had filled his cup from the colder of the two dispensers, he had a closer look.

The puzzle was in the form of sums, except there were letters instead of numbers. The top sum had two rows of four letters, then a solid line underneath and under that, another row of four letters, and there was a ‘plus’ sign to the left to show that they had been added. There was a similar arrangement underneath, only with question marks where the answer should have been. And there was a decimal point, made disproportionately large, presumably so it didn’t get overlooked. The idea was to work out what letters should replace the question marks, converting the letters to numbers, assuming that the top sum was correct. In the bottom left hand corner, it said, ‘one of three’, so presumably there were another two puzzles in the series.

Greville went back to his desk and put his water down, then returned with his pad and copied down the sums. No-one paid any attention to him because no-one ever really did. He sat back down and bent his attention to the task. Greville was good at sums, and he quickly worked out that there were really only two or three alternatives that could be correct. By patiently working through each variation in turn, he had soon worked out the answer. He underlined it twice because that is what he’d been taught to do when he’d studied mathematics, and he liked to do things properly. Then he tore the page out of his pad and filed it at the front of his personal development file so that it would be to hand in case he needed it later.

He carried on with what he had been doing before he’d seen the puzzle, which was writing up an audit report. Auditing wasn’t really the sort of job that Greville would have chosen if he’d been allowed to choose for himself. Although you wouldn’t really know from looking at him, or even from speaking to him, he’d actually have preferred to have done something dangerous, like deep sea diving, or something requiring physical ability, like being a footballer. But being an obliging sort of person, he’d studied for sensible exams like mathematics and business studies which is what his parents had wanted, instead of the P.E. and Classics that had really interested him. Then he’d ended up studying auditing at university, because what else could he do with such eminently sensible exams, and from there, there had really been no way back.

It was lunchtime, and so he did what he did every lunchtime, which was change into his running gear and go for a run. He didn’t really like running at lunchtime because an hour wasn’t really long enough to cover a satisfactory distance, especially when he also had to get showered and changed back into work clothes within that time. But it was better than the alternative, which was staying in the office.

Some people ate their lunch at their desks while surfing the internet, which they were allowed to do at lunchtimes, or before and after work, or reading the newspaper. Copies of most of the daily newspapers were delivered to the office every day so that the head of audit’s PA could go through them and mark any stories that were to do with auditing. There weren’t usually very many, and it meant that if a person wanted to read a paper at lunchtime, then they didn’t have to bring their own. It worked out pretty well as most of the people in the auditing area liked different papers.

It seemed to Greville rather joyless to stay at the same desk all day, and to eat one’s lunch in the same spot where one did one’s work. However, the only alternative was the breakout room. This was filled with chairs in primary colours in an attempt to look bright and cheery, which were also a bit too low to try to create a relaxed atmosphere and be as different as possible from office chairs.

The room was mostly occupied by women sitting in groups and gossiping, and if anyone came into the breakout room who didn’t usually eat lunch in there, they were subjected to a scrutiny which was rather disconcerting. Greville had tried eating his lunch in the room, but it wasn’t a pleasant experience, being watched as if he was rather strange for being in there by himself. It didn’t really help to bring a book because then he was the strange person who sat by himself with a book.

There was a shopping centre twenty minutes’ walk away, and some people went there for lunch, but Greville wasn’t the sort of person who liked to go shopping for the sake of it, and he certainly didn’t want to go there every day. It was far better to go out for a run and get some fresh air, even though he was only just getting warmed up by the time he had to head back to the office.

On this occasion, he went through the park. This was about the furthest he could go without being late back, so he had to go a little bit faster than usual just to make sure. He looped around a concrete pond where people often sat to feed the ducks. There was a wide expanse of grass on the right hand side with park benches set at regular intervals. Greville had once seen a film where someone had jumped park benches, and every time he saw them, he wanted to try it for himself. It ought to be possible. The backs didn’t look any higher than the hurdles in athletics, and he’d done hurdles for his school a few times, until his mum had said that she really needed him to help her with the shopping on a Saturday morning. But if he tried it, then everyone would watch to see what would happen. He would be so embarrassed if he tripped. Every time he came this way and didn’t jump the benches, he felt disappointed with himself.

An elderly lady was sitting on one of the benches. He had first noticed her a few months ago, in late spring. She was there every day, even if it was raining, sitting quietly by herself, not doing anything, not appearing to be waiting for anyone, perfectly content to think her own thoughts. She had a liking for hats and was invariably wearing a creation of some description, together with a matching coat. The first time he’d seen her, he’d assumed that she was an early guest to a mid-week wedding. There was a rather popular church not too far away. She didn’t stay in the park all day. Greville often had cause to head through the park during the day en route to compliances seminars and had discovered that she was only there at lunchtimes.

He raised a hand in greeting. He’d started doing this mid-way through the second week of her appearance as it seemed rather rude to run past her every day and never to acknowledge her in any way. She always gave him a neat nod in return, but today was different.

‘Good afternoon, Greville,’ she said, perfectly clearly. Greville was so firmly on autopilot that it took a few seconds for his brain to register what she’d said and another few seconds to send a message to his legs, so by the time he’d pulled up, he had to walk back to the bench.

‘Do I know you?’ he asked.

She regarded him quizzically.

‘You called me by my name,’ he explained. ‘I wondered if I knew you?’

The lady shook her head, gently so as not to dislodge her hat. ‘No. You just look like a Greville to me.’

‘Really?’ There was a pause while he tried to think of a polite and appropriate way to proceed. It was difficult to quickly switch his brain from neutral, where he kept it when running, to navigating a slightly bewildering conversation. He stuck out a sweaty hand. ‘Greville Hunt. Pleased to meet you.’

She shook his hand with a grip that was rather bone-crunching. ‘Lavender Rose.’ Her cats’ eye glasses magnified her eyes, which were indeed a startling shade of lavender. From her dress and bearing, Greville would have put her in her seventies, although now that he was so close, he could see that her skin was unlined.

‘Are you...’ he began, but out of the corner of his eye, he could see something that he’d been keeping watch for – the little dog. ‘See you tomorrow!’ he called hastily to Lavender, and set off at a pace which was considerably faster than a jog.

The dog was the size, shape and colour of a dirty mop, and also liked to run in the park, and its favourite sport was to run after Greville. It didn’t appear to have an owner, or at least he’d never seen or heard anyone either trying to call it off or enjoying its antics. He’d tried to shoo it, but the mop was equipped with sharp looking teeth and a ferocious growl. He’d tried climbing on a bench, hoping it would get bored and go away. The dog’s legs were too short for it to be able to climb onto the bench. That didn’t stop it trying, and Greville had spent several long minutes up there, to the amusement of other park-goers, before taking a flying leap over the dog’s head and then running away.

The best tactic when he saw the dog coming was simply to run a bit faster as its short legs didn’t afford that much of a turn of speed. Greville would preface this burst by pretending to push buttons on his diver’s watch, as if he was doing some sort of interval training rather than running away from a very small, very fierce little dog. There was a kissing gate at the end of the path lined with very sturdy wire mesh and if he could get to the gate ahead of the dog, he could then proceed at a more comfortable speed.

It was amazing, really, that the dog could see him at all, because its dirty-looking, wiry hair covered its eyes so completely that it didn’t appear to have any. It was equally amazing that it managed to be in the park, unattended, every single time Greville came for a run. There was nothing he could do about it though, and so, to his way of thinking, it was best to put an effective work-around into place rather than railing against the unfairness of it all.

He got back to the office and caught the lift to the 6th floor. After having run a good four miles, it would seem logical to do a bit more exercise by climbing the stairs too, but there was a problem with the door that led from the stairwell to the 6th floor. It didn’t always open to the swipe card. There was a bell you could ring to be let in, but Greville didn’t like to draw attention to himself or inconvenience other people, so when the door had once refused to admit him, he’d hung around for a few minutes hoping that there would be someone coming the other way who would let him in. However, not many people in his building used the stairs, so he’d ended up walking all the way back down and then catching the lift back up, so it was easier just to catch the lift and have done with it.

He had a shower and put his work clothes back on, then put his bag of running clothes in the locker and went back to his desk. Running was thirsty work, so he went to get another cup of water, and when he did so, he saw that the notice with the sums had disappeared.

The afternoon passed quickly. He had to write up an audit of the post room. The audit had taken two weeks to carry out, and it had been an unpleasant two weeks. No-one likes being audited, and the post room particularly didn’t like it because for the duration they had to turn up on time, not leave early, only have an hour for lunch and they couldn’t have the television on all day.

They had made sure that he’d spent the entire time perched on the wobbly stool, had ostentatiously left him out of coffee rounds and had responded to his every request with a huff and a rolling of eyes. He’d wanted to see things like the procedures file, the risk register and the records relating to the franking machine, to make sure that everything was in order. Greville liked things to be in order, and no matter how much the inhabitants of the post room muttered about him behind his back or only gave him half the information he’d asked for, hoping that they could intimidate him out of asking again, or tried to wriggle out of answering questions properly, he persisted until he was satisfied.

People being audited didn’t seem to realise that being defensive and getting annoyed only acted as a red flag to an auditor. If Greville himself were to be audited, and if he had something to hide (which he didn’t), he would make certain to be particularly friendly and open, and provide a wealth of information about the area he wanted to hide, and would purposefully be a bit secretive about something that he knew was in good order. And he’d keep the auditor well supplied with tea and friendly banter. Even auditors are human, and if they are exactly balanced between two grades, a certain amount of rapport can incline them towards the higher grade. And even if the auditors *aren’t* human but instead are creatures of pure reason, then it would still be reasonable to suspect that an unfriendly department was hiding more than the auditor has been able to uncover, justifying a lower grade.

The staff in the post room had made the mistake that lots of people made when meeting Greville, in thinking that he could be bullied. He was tall and thin, and wore glasses. He didn’t wear fashionable clothes and he didn’t have a fashionable haircut. He was the sort of person who managed to look slightly disorganised and untidy, even when he was wearing a suit. The knot on his tie was never a thing of beauty. His sleeves and his trouser legs were never quite long enough. His glasses sat somewhat askew. His hair had just enough curl in it to stick up, especially if it was growing a little long. He stooped forward when he walked, maybe to make his height less conspicuous. All these things added together to mark him out at a glance as one who was towards the bottom of the pecking order.

In actual fact, he was possessed of a quiet, unassuming kind of determination, and it was very rare for him to allow himself to be deterred by mere trifles such as unpleasant behaviour. He had never really experienced what it felt like to be popular or to command respect, and so was undismayed when he was unpopular and disrespected. These things are completely useless as weapons when the person against whom they are directed is perfectly accustomed to them.

Greville finished his report, which was extremely thorough and scrupulously fair. He had noted the discrepancy between the number of items of post which had been franked and the number which ought to have been franked. (This discrepancy tended to be higher at Christmas, or when the wife of the head of Facilities was running a promotion for her personal training business.) He had noted that there was no satisfactory emergency contingency plan for unexpected staff absence. He had noted that some of the furniture was wobbly and needed to be replaced. However, he always liked to read a report through with a fresh pair of eyes before he sent it to the head of compliance, so he saved it for the morning and closed down his computer.

One or two people had already gone home; a few were left.

‘Good night everyone; have a good evening,’ he said, and received several similar responses in return. Although in terms of the general population, Greville was perceived as being towards the bottom of the pecking order, in terms of those who were auditors, he was rather closer to the top. He didn’t live with his mum. He didn’t wear tank tops or brown polyester trousers. He could drive and had his own car, so didn’t have to catch the bus. He was also a reliable and conscientious person. If this is written on a person’s school report, it is seen as a bad thing because there are other qualities, such as being lively and enthusiastic, or even popular, which are far more desirable. But in terms of people who work in compliance, being reliable and conscientious is prized. If someone asked one of Greville’s colleagues what they thought of him, and they said, ‘well, he’s very conscientious’, then they would be bestowing praise of the highest order, not dispensing sarcasm.

Greville fetched his gym bag so that he could swap the sweaty clothes for fresh ones when he got in, and took the stairs down to the car park in the basement. It was perfectly safe to take the stairs down because the sixth floor door was never difficult about letting people *out*; only about letting them *in*. His car was parked in its allocated spot, and the reason it had been allocated to him was because it was rather a tricky space. The turn off the snaking causeway was awkward, and there was a concrete pillar in an unhelpful position. It didn’t cause Greville any consternation because he’d learnt a long time ago to expect to be allocated the leftovers that no-one else wanted. He treated the whole situation as an opportunity to improve his parking ability. He had an understanding of geometry, and it had only taken him a few days to work out which part of the pillar to line up with which part of the wheel arch when he was looking in his mirror to glide into the space with no trouble at all.

He drove up the exit ramp and into the sunshine. His car was a few years old, and was the sort of car that a person with a young family might drive. It was of medium size, rather nearer to the bottom of the range’s performance rather than the top. People would buy it for its fuel economy and the readiness with which parts were available and because it had the kind of upholstery that they would not lose sleep over when it came into contact with sticky fingers or dog hair. It wasn’t exactly the car that he would have chosen, but when he’d gone to the car showroom, it had been the one that the salesman had steered him towards. Maybe because he knew that the car would be difficult to sell to someone else. Someone who wanted something more exciting. Someone whose standards were higher.

Greville hadn’t exactly bought the car because he felt sorry for it, although that had perhaps been a component in the decision as this was the sort of car that would be treated carelessly by another owner. He’d managed to negotiate a discount which was rather more than the salesman had anticipated, having marked Greville down fairly early on as a soft touch. Quite often, people thought that they could easily push him into doing whatever they wanted, and equally often, they found that they had in fact considerably compromised their position without really being exactly sure of how they’d ended up so far from their original goal. He would make a suggestion in his gentle, unassuming way, then the other person would concede because it was, after all, a small point in the general scheme of things. What was the cost of a set of footwell mats when compared with making a sale on a car that didn’t have a lot going for it? And surely this stooped, awkward-looking man wouldn’t make any further demands, so it would be quicker and easier to accede to this one with good grace.

Then he would make a perfectly reasonable request for a modest reduction in price for a small scratch on the driver’s door, and another for a dent on the front bumper, then he’d want a worn tyre replaced and a tank of fuel, and by this stage in negotiations the salesman had invested so much time and effort into making the sale, and was so fully apprised of the car’s defects that it seemed expedient just to agree to one more thing in order to have done with the whole business.

Greville treated the car with a consideration that others might have reserved for a worthier recipient. He kept it clean and polished. He drove it well within its capabilities. He made sure that it was serviced at the appropriate intervals. In return, it rewarded him with consistent if uninspiring service.

He drove home smoothly, affording a degree of courtesy to other road users that they didn’t necessarily deserve, and parked in the drive. He lived in a nearly new house on a modern estate. It was an unremarkable dwelling, constructed from breeze blocks and plasterboard like many thousands of houses on many thousands of estates up and down the country. You couldn’t really hang anything on the walls because they weren’t strong enough, and the doors looked like wood but were actually hollow and were made of something similar to cardboard. Even now, the house smelt new – a fragrance of plasterboard, industrial glue and new carpet.

It had two bedrooms, or three if you counted the bedroom that wasn’t really big enough for a bed, and a small odd-shaped garden wedged between the neighbouring gardens. There was just enough room for an eight-slab patio, a rotary washing line and a triangular handkerchief of lawn. There was nothing wrong with the house – the magnolia walls were perfectly smooth; the garden was neat; everything worked – but somehow there wasn’t a lot right with it either. The arguments in its favour were compelling on paper. It was well insulated and not too big, so it wasn’t expensive to heat. It was convenient for work. It was still covered by the builders’ warrantee. There were none of the unexpected and usually expensive problems associated with old houses. Things like subsidence and dry rot and unwanted tenants in the form of insects and rodents.

Greville stood in the living room and looked out through the net curtains at the identical row of houses on the opposite side of the road. He often found himself doing this. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for. He certainly never saw anything that satisfied his restless gaze. He went into the kitchen-diner to start preparing dinner.

The sound of a key in the lock heralded the return of Poppy. They’d been living together for just over a year, and the situation had crept up on him incrementally. Their first date had been arranged via a dating website, and had left Greville with insufficient data on which to base a decision regarding whether there was a future in the relationship. The only way to proceed was to arrange a second date and then a third, and while he was still analysing the accumulating data, a more permanent arrangement appeared to have established itself. There were no strong reasons for calling a halt to the situation, and so it had continued until the current status quo had been reached.

‘I’m home!’ called Poppy. She hung up her coat and took her empty lunchbox out of her bag. She hung up her bag and carried the lunchbox through to the kitchen. Theoretically, Greville would have found it difficult to have lived with someone who liked disorder, and the mutual tidiness resulted in the house always being in showhouse condition. Which was surely a good thing.

‘Did you have a good day?’ Greville asked. Poppy was an accountant, and stories about her day involved either things that wouldn’t add up, things that *would* add up, or sometimes things that *hadn’t* added up until she’d spent quite a lot of time investigating. She was always very thorough in her recounting of the detail.

He wondered whether to mention the puzzle on the noticeboard. It might add a note of interest to the evening. However, Poppy had no liking for things that didn’t make sense. She preferred things that added up, particularly if they could be persuaded to do it both vertically and horizontally. Somehow, it would take the shine off the puzzle if she denigrated it as a mistake or someone’s idea of a joke, when actually he was hoping that there might be more to it. So instead he asked whether she had got to the bottom of the discrepancy in the writing down allowance in the Bri-Ag account, and the evening continued to follow the well-worn tracks.

On the next day, Greville went straight to the notice board to see if the implied second part of the puzzle had materialised. It hadn’t. He kept half an eye on the notice board throughout the morning, but it was difficult to monitor effectively because it hung on a three quarter height wall which was designed to give a degree of privacy to his section, so they weren’t disturbed by every person who walked past. Also, his attention was being taken up by the writing of a business case explaining why the compliance department deserved a more reliable printer. There was still no puzzle by his second cup of water, but by his third, there it was. Part two of three.

Greville went hastily to get his pad as he knew from experience that the puzzle might not be there for long. It was in a similar format to the previous day’s except that the example and the required number were longer – six digits instead of four. He went back to his desk. This time, there were more possibilities, and each possibility had more possibilities, but eventually he worked through them all and came up with the answer. He underlined it twice and filed it with the first. By the time he headed out for his lunchtime run, the puzzle on the notice board had vanished again.

The following morning, he spent more time watching people disappearing behind the walled section and reappearing at the end than he did on his report about whether the compliance department ought to alter its practices in line with some recently published research. He wanted to see whether anyone was carrying a piece of paper, and whether it seemed that they had stopped for long enough to have attached it to the notice board. No-one seemed even to break stride on their journey, yet page three of three materialised mid-morning as if by magic. This time it was a word puzzle. There was a seven-letter word at the top and a different seven-letter word at the bottom. Underneath the top word was a six-letter word which was an anagram of the first, only with one letter missing. Under that was five blank spaces where a word could be written, then four, then three, then widening a space at a time to six blank spaces above the second seven-letter word. There was an arrow pointing to the six blanks, with a question mark on the other end.

Greville sat down with his note pad and set to work, and he hadn’t got very far when he was interrupted by his neighbour.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Peter. Normally, all the compliance auditors pretty much kept themselves to themselves, but Peter was always very concerned to ensure that no-one did anything that they shouldn’t. He liked to remind people whenever they’d breached any rule, however minor, like leaving their coffee cup in the sink, leaving the cupboard doors slid open or not telling the stationery monitor (which was Peter) when they’d taken the last of a particular colour of highlighter. To be fair, the compliance department did have a higher requirement than most other departments for markers in particular colours as they needed to be able to highlight different transgressions in different colours for ease of reference, but really, Peter was unnecessarily officious about the whole thing.

‘Nothing,’ said Greville. Peter peered over, screwing up his eyes to get a better look as he couldn’t really point out the error of Greville’s ways until he was completely certain of what they were.

‘That’s not nothing,’ complained Peter, showing the beginnings of the irritating tenacity that made him spectacularly good at some aspects of his job.

Greville crossed his fingers, but very subtly. ‘It’s for the acronym competition. I thought that if I could win, then we could all share the prize.’ He flashed his piece of paper at Peter, which so far bore various scrambles of letters, written in circles to help him re-order them.

The head of admin had launched a competition to think of a new name for the pensions technical department – a name which could be shortened to a pleasing, snappy anagram. Initially, the prize for the winning entry had been a coupon for a free meal in the canteen, not including a drink which would have to be paid for in the usual way. Accordingly, the first few entries had been inventions such as Pensions Installation Special Service and Pensions Office Organisational Help. After a few weeks of this, the prize had been raised to a case of supermarket wine, which had had the effect of applying people’s minds more seriously to the task.

‘I wouldn’t bother,’ said Peter. ‘I’ve got it pretty well sewn up. I thought of a really good one, but I can’t tell you what it is.’ He tapped his freckled nose with a pudgy finger.

‘You’re probably right,’ said Greville. ‘I just thought I’d give it a go for a few minutes.’

Peter nodded condescendingly and went back to what he was doing, which was sticking brightly coloured page markers on the pages of a file every time he found something which disgusted him. So far, the file was positively bristling with little plastic squares.

The third puzzle was trickier than the other two, but it eventually yielded to the same combination of logic and trial and error. Greville had his six letter word, and that word was ‘demise’. He got out his other two pages. There had been no instructions on any of the notice board documents. Perhaps some would be posted tomorrow, or perhaps an email would be sent round which would shed light on the whole thing. Except he had the funniest feeling that there was more to this than met the eye. His compliance sixth sense.

He laid his answer sheets next to each other and looked at them as a whole. A four figure number. A six figure number. A six letter word. The first number started with a one. Greville kept looking from page to page, trying to see the connection. While he looked, he went back to the first page and absently wrote in the zero which rightly belonged at the front of the decimal, and made the decimal point larger by going over it a few times. And now he had a five figure number which started with a zero and then a one. It was a telephone number.

Greville picked up his phone, dialled nine for an outside line and then dialled the number. It rang five times, then a robotic voice instructed him to leave a message after the tone. The tone sounded. ‘Demise’, said Greville, feeling rather foolish. At the other end, there was a series of whirrs and clicks. Then the robotic voice spoke again.

‘Come to 21A Bridge Street, tomorrow, at noon. Don’t be late.’ The line went dead. Greville replaced the receiver slowly and thoughtfully, then put away the pieces of paper and turned back to his work.