“Zounds! What in God’s name are you?”


“Madam, what proof do you have? That is unheard of!”

“I just materialised out of thin air – what more proof do you want?” The absurdity of the situation was beginning to dawn on her.

That seemed to subdue the three gasping men; one was clutching his heart. The whirring of Red’s contraption died down while the three men still looked on with mild terror.

“Are you – that is, who … Are you human?”

“Of course I am,” Red muttered, wandering around the workshop, picking up a few trinkets here and there. History was infinitely more interesting when she could live it herself, she thought. The men said nothing. She whisked round to face them once more.
“Do you want help with that thing?” Red pointed to the construction of loops and an extravagant dome.

The most verbal man stiffened and thrust his chest out.

“Actually, we were just commencing some preliminary trials before you, ah, appeared.”

“Mm, I know, I’ve seen ’em. Go ahead, don’t mind me,” Red said, noticing the men’s gaping expressions. Red jumped up on a protesting workbench. She was getting a kick out of this.

“Hey, quit staring! Make something happen already. I didn’t travel all the way here to watch you guys get palpitations about a girl – good heavens! – wearing pants.”

The men glanced at each other, rather affronted. This woman had just entered their private property. This woman had just spoken in highly disrespectful tones, quite unbecoming for any lady, and commanded them, grown men, to start their tests!

“By the way, I’m Red,” she continued, and pointing at two of them, “and you’re Louis and Auguste Lumière. But I don’t know you,” Red said as she turned to the most vocal of the three.

Louis and Auguste started violently, fearing the fact this lady knew their names. The third man decided to attempt manners and said:

“I apologise, Miss, er, Red. I am Leon. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Leon was glad he had managed to recover his courtesy. No matter how undignified the lady, he should always maintain polite conversation. He went on:

“We would be honoured for you to be present. Perhaps you may le – ah – find it interesting.”

Red knew that Leon had just narrowly escaped saying ‘learn something’. She was finding their attitudes amusing. She also knew exactly how this turned out.

Leon, Louis and Auguste started to tinker with their machine, completing last-minute checks.

“Ready on your side, Auguste?”
“Ready. And you, Leon?”

“All right. Recording on film?”

The shutter started clicking ferociously as Louis wound the cinématographe handle. The scene played out exactly as Red remembered it from the museum archive.

Grey-scale film evoked a sense of nostalgia in Red’s heart. She was trawling through the archives, preparing the Museum of Invention for a unique exhibition: The Tricentenary of Cinema.

This task may have seemed boring to many but Red was fascinated by the history of those earliest films. She worked in a museum, after all. At the moment she was busily searching for original Lumière Brothers films. Each of the little clips, while silent, told a different story. But Red came across one film that was different. She leant forward in her chair and focused on the centuries-old film in front of her.

A man sat in a very odd-looking item. One could almost call it a sleigh but for a stylised dome placed vertically on the back. The man was talking to someone behind the camera while turning dials and whacking buttons. He slammed the bars on either side and got out. Another man walked over and started calming the angry one. Red recognised the new man excitedly as Louis Lumière, joint inventor of true moving pictures. That must mean – yes – there was Auguste. This confused Red, though. The cinématographe, the Lumière’s film camera, needed an operator to wind it at all times. Who was really behind the camera?

Red pondered for a while, watching the unfolding scene with amusement. The Lumières and the other man continually held up title cards, naming the tests:

1896, January 13th, Time Machine, Trial 1
‘Trial 6.’ Louis returned behind the camera. The frame shook a bit and it looked like the filming changed hands. Red watched intently trying to glimpse any sign of the operator. None came.

‘Trial 8.’ There was a flick of a shoe from a workbench nearly out of frame. Red paused, rewound and replayed in slow motion. She caught the exact moment the shoe extended. That didn’t look like a Victorian shoe, she thought. At all. Red resumed the viewing, now eyes only on the corner with the workbench.

‘Trial 11.’ Another flick of the shoe, this time attached to a leg. Again, the leg didn’t look Victorian. The clothing actually looked familiar, like something from Red’s era.

‘Trial 13.’ Red nearly fell off her chair. A face popped into frame. Her face.

“You saw – you? In the past?”

“Yes! Victorian era. In a shed with the creators of film.”

Red’s old science professor slumped with his head in his hands.

“You know, as soon as you walked into the first lecture I knew I was in for trouble. Are you saying that we have to first invent a time machine, so that you can then go back into the past to be in one video?”

“I have no idea how that moment or my even being there may have affected time. Anyway, why the hell hasn’t someone already made a time machine? This is the future! We have floating cities but no time travel? Are you serious?!?”

“Red, you have to consider this. Time just can’t reconstruct itself if you make a mistake when you go back into the past. We have no idea about what you did,” the professor said, exasperated.

“You said ‘when’ not ‘if’! So it’s possible?”
“I guess we could make some sort of time travel happen.”

“Sweet.”

Months of collaboration went on between Professor Erfinder and Red. They went to the government for permission on the project, whose only condition was the destruction of the machine and a Level 10 security-and-secrecy plan for the blueprints. The consequences of widespread time travel would be exponential.

The construction continued, Red’s only real confidence stemming from seeing herself in that film. She knew Erfinder was incredible and that her own scientific knowledge was sound. She also knew that the team of science majors with her had a bucket-load of nonsensical words about relativity and time dilation and chronology protection conjecture, which they kept sighing to each other about.

But after a year the team, which had grown from two to sixty, finalised the project. It only needed someone to sit and attempt time travel. Naturally Red volunteered.

“May as well be me if we can do it first time, eh? Means we don’t have to keep coming backwards and forwards to get the right person,” Red said, looking assuredly at Erfinder.

“Hm. I guess you’ll do. You don’t work for me, so I don’t lose an employee if you can’t be bothered coming back.”

Red knew their talk was jocular but it didn’t stop her from wondering. She was obsessed with the past and history. What if she did never come back? Maybe she would like living in the past. The future was a bit disappointing, anyway.
The professor saw Red’s expression and immediately regretted mentioning the possibility. He had thought it himself, that the time machine might only work one time. He had also thought that to fulfil history, Red might have to stay at that point in time.

“As soon as you enter the past, you have an obligation not to change anything. There is no way to tell what could happen if you messed anything up. You have one chance to go back, and I'm only allowing this because you say you definitely saw yourself, and you may have played an important role in events. Replicate exactly what you saw and do no more. If you’re not sure, play your instincts. That’s most likely what happened. You. Must. Not. Change. Anything. Clear?”

This speech made Red more nervous than ever. Her professor was intimidatingly smart and knew full well the implications this journey might have. It truly felt like history was in her hands. She hopped into the sleek machine, remembering all the last-minute adjustments.

Just do what you saw yourself do in the video and get out, she thought. But why hadn’t those men ever talked about a visitor from the future? Red, are you kidding? They would have been sent to an asylum. Why didn’t you leave yourself some sort of sign that you would get back? Last-minute doubts and questions riddled her brain. If she could go back in time, would time pass in her life? Would it stand still? Would time dilation mean she returned to dead comrades and forgotten friends?

All the questions she hadn’t thought of during the entire process nearly made her vomit with anxiety. But now was not the time to fret. It was time to go back and fulfil her role in the time line. The machine whirred. Erfinder looked on with dread. They could be sending her to her death. This was just stupid and based on speculation. But Red was resolved and it was happening right now and the machine sounded like it would break and then it was gone.
“Zounds! What in God’s name are you?”

Red realised she hadn’t thought how she would explain this to three men, who had just watched someone appear out of nowhere.

“Sorry, I – I just came back, from 2195.”

Aware of the weight she might be carrying, Red mimicked her own appearances on camera to-the-letter. The rest was up to her.