

The Silver Wind

Nina Allan

from Interzone #233

Shooter's Hill had a rough reputation. The reforestation policy had returned the place to its original state, and the tract of woodland between Blackheath and Woolwich was now as dense and extensive as it had once been in the years and centuries before the first industrial revolution. The woods were rife with carjackers and highwaymen, and scarcely a week went by without reports of some new atrocity. The situation had become so serious that there were moves in parliament to reinstate the death penalty for highway robbery as it had already been reinstated for high treason. During the course of certain conversations I noticed that local people had taken to calling Oxleas Woods by its old name, the Hanging Wood, although no hangings had occurred there as yet. At least not officially.

There was still a regular bus service out to Shooter's Hill, although I heard rumours that the drivers rostered on to it had to be paid danger money. I made up my mind to call on Owen Andrews in the afternoon; the evening curfew was strictly enforced in that part of London.

"How on earth do you manage, living alone out here?" I said to him. "Don't you get nervous?"

He laughed, a deep inner rumbling that seemed to shake the whole of his tiny

being. "I've lived here for most of my life," he said. "Why should I leave?"

Owen Andrews was an achondroplastic dwarf, and as such he was subject to all the usual restrictions. He could not marry, he could not register children, although I supposed that this question was now academic, that he had been sterilised or even castrated once he had passed through puberty. Everyone had heard of such cases, and to knowingly pass on bad genes had been a custodial offence ever since Clive Billings's British Nationalists came to power. There was a photograph on the mantelpiece in Andrews's living room, a picture of Owen Andrews when he was young. The photograph showed him seated at a table playing cards with a pretty young woman. The woman was smiling, her fingers pressed to her parted lips. Andrews's face was grave, his head bent in concentration over his cards. He had a handsome profile, and the camera had been angled in such a way as to conceal the most obvious aspects of his deformity. There was something about the picture that disturbed me, that hinted at some private tragedy, and I turned away from it quickly. I asked him again about the Shooter's Hill Road and about the carjackers, but he insisted the whole thing had been exaggerated by the press.

"This place has always had a history to it, and history has a habit of repeating itself. If you don't believe me read Samuel Pepys. People feared the Hill in his day too. You'll find Mr Pepys particularly eloquent on the subject of what they used to do to the highwaymen." He paused. "Those of them they caught up with, that is."

I first learned about Owen Andrews through one of my clients. Lewis Usher had once been a rich man, but when the Americans abandoned Europe for China he lost everything more or less overnight. His wife was Zoe Clifford, the film actress. She died giving birth to their daughter, or from complications after the birth, I'm not sure which. The child was taken away by relatives of Zoe's and Lewis Usher was left alone in an enormous rambling house at the top end of Crooms Hill, less than half a mile from the centre of Greenwich. The place would have been worth a fortune in the old days, but it was far too big for him, and after the crash he could no longer afford to maintain it. In spite of its poor condition it was the kind of property my agency specialised in and I was able to negotiate a very good price with an independent pharmaceuticals company. They were attracted by the council tax rates, which were still much lower on the south side of the Thames. The firm's representative, a Hugo Green-love, said they were planning to turn the house into a re-search facility. He rattled on excitedly, making exaggerated arm gestures to demonstrate how rooms might be divided and walls torn down, and although I thought it was tactless of Greenlove to talk that way in front of the house's current owner Lewis Usher seemed completely unmoved. Once Greenlove had left he told me to get rid of the lot, not just the house itself but everything in it. He didn't say as much but I had the impression he was planning to use the proceeds of the sale to

get him to America. I imagined he had contacts there already.

“You really want to sell everything?” I said. In spite of my sympathy for Usher I was excited by the prospect. The house was stuffed with things I could move on for a handy profit, paintings and small bronzes and so on, and my files back at the office were stuffed with the names of people who would be happy to buy them.

“There are some things of Zoe’s I want, but that’s about it,” he said. There were framed photographs of his wife everywhere about the place, detailing the course of her career from stage to screen. She had been a tall, angular woman with a crooked mouth and a wide forehead but the pictures hinted at a deep sensuality and a striking emotional presence. Usher was still very much in mourning for her, and I think it was the fact that I was also a widower that made him trust me. He said I could have first refusal on anything I wanted from the house, and when I tentatively mentioned a few of the things that caught my fancy he named a price so low I felt filthy with guilt even as I agreed to it. Usher must have seen some of this in my expression because he thumped me hard on the shoulder and began to laugh.

“You’ll be doing me a favour,” he said. “It’s surprising how little you need, when you come right down to it.”

He laughed again, the laugh quickly turning into a painful-sounding cough that made me wonder if there was something more than grief that was consuming him. This could certainly account for his indifference to his material possessions. Yet when a couple of moments later I pointed to a small brass travelling clock and

asked him how much he wanted for it his whole demeanour changed. An excited light came into his eyes and he looked ten years younger.

“That’s an Owen Andrews clock,” he said. “Or at least it’s supposed to be. I’ve never had it authenticated. I accepted it *in lieu* of a debt. I’ve had it for years.”

He looked down at the clock approvingly, his face registering the sort of pride that suggested that even if he had not made the clock himself it was people like him, people with money and influence, that made such things possible, and I glimpsed for a moment the man who for twenty years had been on the directorial board of a successful multinational company.

“Who is Owen Andrews?” I said. I knew little about clocks and their makers, just as I knew little of furniture or scrimshaw or glass. I had never counted myself as an antiques expert. I was an estate agent who indulged in a little antiques trading on the side. I counted my successes as luck, and the willingness to let myself be guided by instinct rather than knowledge.

“Owen Andrews is a dwarf,” Usher said. “He makes alchemical clocks. More popularly known as time machines.”

It was my turn to laugh, a trifle uneasily. “You’re not serious?” I said. “You don’t believe in that rubbish, surely?”

I had watched several TV documentaries on the subject of the new physics but I had never taken any of it very seriously. It was my wife Miranda that was interested. Miranda had been like that, fascinated by the unknown and always

wanting to believe in the impossible. It was this openness to experience that had convinced her she could help her father, even when the doctors had warned that he might be dangerous. Her faith in the possibility of miracles was one of the things I loved most about her. I wondered if Usher was trying to set me up in some way, trying to make the clock seem more valuable by spinning an elaborate yarn around it. Why he would do this when he seemed willing to more or less give away the other items I had specified I had no idea. I glanced at the clock again. Its case gleamed a dull ochre. It was only a small thing, and quite plain, but the more I looked at it the more I wanted to buy it. I had already made up my mind not to sell it on afterwards, that I would keep it for myself. But if Usher named some ridiculous price then the game was over.

Usher shrugged. "I think it's all nonsense," he said. "I happen to believe that time is like water pouring out of a tap, that once it's been spilled there's no calling it back again, not for love nor money nor any of these new-fangled gadgets. The man who gave me that clock offered it to me because he thought it was valuable but I accepted it because I liked it. I thought it was beautifully made."

"But surely he can't have believed it was a time machine? It looks like an ordinary carriage clock to me."

Usher smiled. "How else would you describe a clock if not as a time machine?" He narrowed his eyes, locking them on mine for a moment as if challenging me to a duel then glanced off to one side, shaking his head. "But in the way you mean, no,

it's not a time machine. From what I gather it's one of his 'dry' clocks, designed to tell the time and nothing more. It's accurate of course and rather lovely but the case is brass, not gold, and in today's market that makes it practically worthless. If you like it that much you can have it for nothing. The deal you just did on the house has solved a lot of problems. Call it a little extra bonus on top of your fee."

My heart leapt. I had to concentrate hard to stop myself snatching the clock right off the shelf there and then, just so I could feel its weight in my hand.

"Is the maker still alive, this Owen Andrews?" I said instead.

"I have no idea," said Usher. "I know nothing about him other than what I've told you."

I think it was in that moment that I made my decision, that I would seek out Owen Andrews and discover the truth about him. I told myself that this was because the little brass clock had been the only thing to excite my interest since my wife died. There was more to it than that though. Somewhere deep inside me I was nursing the crazy hope that Owen Andrews was a man who could turn back time.

"Are you sure you want to get involved with this man, Martin?" Dora said. "He's bound to be under surveillance." She dragged on her cigarette, leaning to one side to knock the ash into the chipped Meissen saucer she kept permanently at her

elbow for this purpose. I had long since given up going on at her about her smoking. Like Samsara perfume and the fake leopardskin coat she wore it was simply a part of her. She was wry and canny, with the kind of piercing, analytical intelligence that had sometimes caused me to wonder why she had left her job with the Home Office. The freelance legal work she did now earned her a steady and fairly comfortable income but it was hardly big money and only a fraction of what she was really worth. Once in the early days of our friendship, when for a brief while I imagined there might be the possibility of romance between us, I got drunk and asked her about it.

“I can’t work for those people any more,” she said. “I don’t believe in doing deals with the devil.” She laughed, a brisk ‘ha,’ then changed the subject. Later that same evening I found out she was married to a chap called Ray Levine, an ex-airline pilot who now grubbed around for work shuttling government ministers to and from their various conferences and crisis summits.

“Ray’s a bit of an arsehole, I suppose,” Dora said. “But we’ve known each other since we were kids. We used to smoke roll-ups together in the teachers’ toilets. That’s something you can’t replace. I don’t care what he does on those trips of his, just so long as he doesn’t bring it home with him. I learned a long time ago that trust is a lot more important than sexual fidelity.”

I first met Dora when I sold her her flat, a three-room conversion in Westcombe Park occupying part of what had once been a private nursing home. It

was an attractive property, with high windows, a stained glass fanlight, and solid oak parquet flooring, but it had serious disadvantages, most crucially the access, which was via a fire escape belonging to the neighbouring property. I knew this could pose legal problems if she ever wanted to sell, and because I found myself liking her I broke all the usual rules of the business and told her so. The forthrightness of her reaction surprised me but as I came to know her better I realised it was typical of her.

“I can’t make a decision to buy something based on whether I might want to get rid of it later,” she said. “This is about a home, not a business investment. This is where I want to live.”

Then she smiled and told me she was a lawyer. She knew all about flying freehold and compromised access but she was adamant she wanted the flat, as she was adamant about a lot of things. After she moved in I took the liberty of contacting her and asking if she was interested in doing some freelance contract work. Within a year she was working two full days a week for me, clarifying the deadlocks and stalemates that occasionally threatened to upset some of our more lucrative sales. She had a genius for finding a loophole, or for finding anything, really. It was for this reason that I asked her if she could help me track down Owen Andrews. I didn’t go into any details and Dora being Dora didn’t ask questions. A couple of days later she called me at home and asked me if I could come round to her place.

“I’ve got things to show you,” she said. “But it’s not the kind of stuff I want to bring into the office.”

She opened the door to me dressed in a pair of Ray’s old camo pants held up with elastic braces. “Andrews is alive and well,” she said. “Would you like a drink?” She poured Glenlivet and wafted Samsara, the kind of luxury items that were often difficult to find on open sale but readily available if you had the right contacts and I supposed the whisky and the perfume came via Ray. Levine himself was rarely at the flat. Dora said he spent most of his nights on airbases or in the bed of whichever woman he was currently trying to impress.

“It’s like being married to your own younger brother,” she said. “But to be honest I think I’d kill him if he was here all the time.”

I occasionally wondered what would happen if I tried to spend the night with her. The prospect was tantalising, but in the end I suppose I valued our friendship, not to mention our business relationship, too highly to risk ruining it through some misconceived blunder. Also she had liked Miranda.

She handed me my drink then pushed a small stack of papers towards me across the table.

“Here,” she said. “Have a look at these.”

The papers comprised a mixture of photocopies and typed notes, with markings and annotations everywhere in Dora’s spiky black script. There were photocopies of a civil service entrance exam and a standard ID card, together with a

passport-sized photograph and a copy of an article from a magazine I had never heard of called *Purple Cloud*. The photograph showed a swarthy, rather handsome man with a high forehead and heavy brows. It was just a head shot, and offered no clue to his stature, but his ID gave his height as 4'10", with the note that between the ages of nine and fourteen he had undergone four major operations on his legs. His address was at Shooter's Hill, just a couple of miles east of where we were sitting but its reputation for violence and the fact of the night-time curfew meant that in terms of current reality it was half a world away. In his civil service entrance test Andrews had scored ninety-eight percent.

"This is amazing," I said. "Where did you get all this stuff?"

"There's more," Dora said. She pulled some papers from the stack and riffled quickly through them until she found what she wanted. "He worked for the MoD on classified projects. That means they could have wiped his whole ID if they'd wanted to, or altered it in some way, anything. The really weird thing is that he was dismissed from his post but left alone afterwards. That never happens. Normally they'd have you in prison, at least for a while, at least until the work you were doing was no longer relevant. The fact that Andrews is still out there means he's valuable to them in some way, or that he's a spy. The very fact that he was working for them at all is some kind of miracle. He's a dwarf, a non-person. It's getting harder for people like him even to be granted a work permit." She paused and stubbed out her cigarette. I caught the sweet reek of Marlboro tobacco. "The thing is, they'll have

their eye on him. If you go near him they'll have their eye on you, too. Is that what you want? This isn't a very good time to be getting yourself on somebody's blacklist."

"I just want to talk to him."

"So you say. And I've read that article. What's all this about, Martin?"

"It's not about anything. I have a clock he made, that's all. I was just curious."

"Well, you know what they say about curiosity killing the cat."

It should have been funny, but it wasn't. We sat side by side at the table, neither of us saying anything. I wanted to reassure her in some way, to at least thank her for what she had done for me, but neither of these things seemed possible. I realised we were on new ground, the unstable territory that springs into being whenever the conversation between two people begins to trespass beyond its usual limits. Politics was something that didn't get discussed much, not even in private.

"Can I take all these papers with me?" I said in the end.

"Please do. I don't want them. I had to use my old passwords to get hold of some of that stuff. I'd be instantly traceable, if anyone had a mind to go looking. It's a ridiculous risk to take. God knows what I was thinking." She ran her hands through her hair, making it stand out about her head like a stiff black halo. "It was fun, though. It beat the shit out of verifying leasehold clauses."

She smiled, and I knew we were back on safe ground. I knew also that the subject of Owen Andrews was closed between us, that whatever fleeting thrill she

had gained from hacking into Home Office files she wanted no further part in what I was doing. Doubtless she had her reasons. I had no wish to know what these were, just as she had no real wish to know what had interested me in Owen Andrews in the first place. I walked home the long way round, skirting the boundary of Greenwich Park, which was kept locked after sundown and was sometimes closed to the public for months at a time. The captive trees made me think of Shooter's Hill, an outpost of an imaginary realm shrouded in a rough twilight. I wondered what Andrews was doing right at that moment, and the strangeness of it all made my heart turn over. One thing I had noticed and not mentioned to Dora while glancing through his papers was that several of the documents gave contradictory information about his birth date. Neither was it simply a matter of a couple of days. His birth certificate had him a whole fifteen years younger than his ID card. His medical records showed him as ten years older. I guessed that bureaucratic errors like this must happen constantly. But still, it seemed unnervingly peculiar.

When I got home I read the article Dora had copied from *Purple Cloud*. It was an essay about how the previous government had made use of what the writer called 'time-bridge technology' to try and alter the course of the war in the Middle East. It had the smack of conspiracy theory and sensationalism I associated with the kind of magazine that specialises in UFOs and the so-called paranormal and I found myself not believing a word of it. According to the article Owen Andrews was significant as the pioneer of something called the Silver Wind, a mechanical

time-stabiliser that certain military scientists had subverted to their own purposes. Apparently Andrews also had connections with the German firm of Lange und Soehne, who had made watches for everyone from Adolf Hitler to Albert Einstein, as well as being pioneers in the field of atomic engineering.

I knew I would have to go and see him. It was not just about the clock any more, and after reading the flimsy article in *Purple Cloud* my doubts about the feasibility of time travel were stronger than ever. It was the very fact of Owen Andrews now that fascinated me. The fact that he was a non-person, and yet seemed somehow immune to political reality. The fact that he seemed to have three different birthdays. The fact that he lived in a place where no one but the outlawed and the desperate could reasonably survive. I felt as if I had stepped on the edge of something and felt it move, as if I had been coming down the street and tripped over a loose paving stone, only to discover that it was in fact a secret hatchway into an underground city.

It sounds insane to say it, but I had never really questioned the world I lived in. I remembered the hung parliaments, the power shortages, the forced deportations of the millions of blacks and Asians from the city ghettos to the vast factory ships built to transport them to the so-called 'home-states' of Nigeria, Botswana and the near-uninhabitable wastelands of the exhausted Niger delta. I remembered the fire on board the *Anubis*, mostly because a teacher of ours, Kwella Cousens, was one of the three thousand deportees who died in the blaze. She taught Business French for

a time at the college where I was studying but lost her work permit during the tax revisions and so was forced to take a place on one of the transports. I remembered these things, as generations before me might have remembered the moon landings or the Kennedy assassination, as news flashes and photographic images. They happened when I was in my late teens, busy with college work and desperate to lose my virginity.

The truth was, I remembered them as things that had happened to other people. The new employment laws affected mostly black people and immigrants. If you were white and had a UK ID card you could mostly go on with your life as if nothing had changed. I had seen what happened to people who made a fuss: the small number of students from my college who joined the demonstrations and the dock pickets, the pamphleteers who for a time had littered the streets of the major cities with their *samizdat* scandal sheets had all spent nights in jail and some of them had had their grants suspended. One young man who chained himself to the railings of Buckingham Palace even had his national insurance number revoked. They bundled him off to Niger with the blacks. I remember thinking what a fool he was, to get mixed up in something that didn't concern him.

Up until now the biggest decision I had ever made about my life was the decision to ask Miranda to marry me. As I got into bed that night I realised I was on the verge of making another decision of that same magnitude and perhaps greater, a decision that could change my life in ways I would not know about until it

was too late to recant: I was about to start asking questions about things I had previously discounted as none of my business.

I lay in bed, listening to the steady ticking of Owen Andrews's clock on my bedside table and the distant phut-phutting of the wind-powered generators across the river on the Isle of Dogs. As I drifted off to sleep it seemed to me that the clock and the generators had somehow combined forces to form a great silver wheel, its shafts and spokes catching the moonlight, casting its radiance in a hundred different directions.

The bus was ancient, its wheel arches pitted with rust. It was full of soldiers. Their rambunctious, raucous presence made me nervous, although I realised this was illogical, that there was nothing unusual or sinister in their behaviour, and that the presence of forces personnel was entirely to be expected. Shooter's Hill was a restricted zone. Civilians could enter, and the shops and small businesses that had serviced the area prior to its closure were allowed to keep running as usual, at least partly for the benefit of the new influx of military. But after sundown any movement into and out of the village was strictly prohibited. There was a military checkpoint, and it was said that the woods behind the old hospital were alive with snipers, that the turf battles between the military and the carjack gangs that used

Oxleas Woods as a hideout had taken on the dimensions of guerrilla warfare.

Officially the place was a shooting range and assault course, like Dartmoor and Romney Marsh, but everyone knew there was more to it than that. There were rumours that the rundown hospital buildings had been turned over to one of the specialist divisions as a testing laboratory for biological weapons. I had always thought the idea was far-fetched, just gossip really, but as the bus pulled up Maze Hill and into the forest I began to wonder. Passing into the forest felt strange, almost like crossing the border into another country. The starkly open expanse of Blackheath Common gave way abruptly to massed ranks of oak and ash and beech, the trees growing so closely together that it was as if we had entered a tunnel. The lowest branches scraped the roof of the bus, linking their gnarled green fingers above our heads. Rough tarmac and dirt tracks branched off from the road at regular intervals, and between the trees I could make out the rectangular masses of houses and apartment blocks. I wondered who would choose to live out here. I knew that much of the housing in the vicinity of the hospital had been demolished by order of the government.

Aside from one burnt-out car at the side of the road I saw no overt signs of violence but in spite of this I found the atmosphere oppressive. The forest seemed unending, and its green stillness unnerved me; I felt as if something was lying in wait, just out of sight.

We passed through a set of traffic lights, then came to a standstill beside the

two fluted granite columns that marked the entrance to the hospital. The main building was mostly hidden behind a high stone wall topped with metal spikes and coils of barbed wire. Armed sentries stood on guard beside a swing barrier. The soldiers on the bus all rose to their feet, jostling each other impatiently as they crowded towards the front. Once outside they formed a straggling line, waiting to be admitted. I saw one of them rummaging in his knapsack, presumably for his entrance pass or some other necessary document.

I pressed my face to the window, watching the soldiers go through their ID check. As the bus pulled away I caught a glimpse of narrow windows and blotchy grey walls. Now that the soldiers were gone the bus was almost empty. Towards the rear sat two men in business suits and a stout, middle-aged woman with a wicker basket on her knees. The basket contained three live chickens. On the seat across from me sat a teenaged girl. Her pale face and wispy fair hair reminded me a little of Miranda. She glanced past me at the soldiers in the road.

“That’s the loony bin,” she said to me suddenly. “They guard it to stop the loonies getting out. Some of them have killed people.”

I stared at her in silence for a moment, unsure of what I should say. When I looked back towards the road the hospital and the soldiers were already some distance behind us. I had vague memories of the place from my childhood, when Oxleas Woods had been unrestricted and carjackings less prevalent. The hospital was derelict then, a forgotten eyesore. We used to pretend it was haunted, or

believed perhaps that it really was, I was no longer sure. In either case, the gates had always been kept firmly secured against intruders, and the high wall that ringed the perimeter meant that the grounds were impenetrable, even to the most resourceful and daring among our company. Its gloomy edifice had always been a source of vague dread to me. It was not ghosts I feared so much as the building itself. I hated its barred windows, the frowning façade that always made me think of dungeons and prisons. I could never escape the idea that terrible things had happened there.

I was amazed and strangely gratified to find that the intervening years had done little if anything to moderate my dislike of the place.

“Do you know what the soldiers are doing there?” I said to the girl. I had taken her for about thirteen, but now that I looked at her closely I saw she was older than that, eighteen or nineteen perhaps. It was just that her thinness and her sullen, rather vacant stare made her look much younger. She did not really resemble Miranda, other than in the colour of her hair. The girl pressed her lips tightly together and shook her head vehemently from side to side. She seemed startled, even frightened that I had spoken to her, even though she had spoken to me first. It crossed my mind that she might be retarded.

“I’ve been inside,” she said. She glanced at me from beneath her colourless lashes, as if checking to see that I was still listening. I felt certain that she was lying. I turned away from her and back towards the window. We were coming into the village. Shooter’s Hill had never been much of a place, and the encroachment of the

forest made it seem even less significant. I saw a general store and a post office, a church and beside that a recreation hall or perhaps a school house. One side of the dusty main road was flanked by houses, a mixture of small flint cottages and slightly larger Victorian terraces. On the other side of the street the forest began, stretching in an unbroken swathe as far as the Carshalton Reservoir and beyond that the Sussex Weald.

The bus ground to a halt beside the Bull Inn. As I rose to my feet the fair-haired girl scampered past me, darting along the pavement and then disappearing down an alleyway between two of the houses. The bus coughed once and then lurched forward, bearing the chicken woman and the suited businessmen on towards the dockyard at Woolwich. The silence closed itself around me, so complete it seemed material, green in colour and with the texture of house dust. I looked back the way I had come. Somewhere to the north of me lay the boulevards and tramlines and bomb sites of central London. I hesitated for a moment in front of the pub then headed off down the road. On my left was the water tower, a renovated Victorian structure that I guessed would serve all the houses in the village and probably the hospital too. It soared above the rooftops, its brick-built crenellations weathered to the colour of clay. Owen Andrews's house was on Dover Road, one of a terrace of eight Victorian villas and directly in the shadow of the water tower. The houses were shielded from the road by a thin line of trees. Fifty years ago and as a main route into London the road would have been seething with traffic. The

universal tax on private vehicles had changed everything and so had the closure of the woodlands. Dover Road was now a forest byway frequented mainly by logging trucks and army vehicles. Weeds spilled through the cracks in its tarmac. For the first time since setting out that morning I wondered properly what on earth I was doing there.

Andrews's house was approached by a short pathway, a couple of paving slabs laid end to end across a yellowed patch of pockmarked turf. I stepped quickly up to the door and pressed the bell. I heard it ring in the hallway beyond. I stood there waiting for what seemed an age. I had no doubt there were unseen watchers, and whether this would have repercussions was something I would only discover later. I bent down and peered in through the letterbox. I caught a glimpse of cream walls and wooden floorboards and then the door was opened, so suddenly I almost went flying.

"Can I help you?" said Owen Andrews. "Are you lost?"

"No," I said, staring down at him. "At least I don't think so. It was you that I came to see."

"You'd better come in then," said Andrews. "I don't get many visitors these days." He retreated inside, moving with a slow rolling gait that was almost a waddle. He seemed unsurprised to see me. I followed him into the house. Things were happening so fast they had begun to feel slightly unreal.

He took me through to a room at the back. The room was steeped in books, so

many of them that the ochre-coloured wallpaper that lined the room showed though only in oddly-spaced random patches. Glazed double doors overlooked a narrow strip of garden. A set of library steps on castors stood close to one wall. Andrews heaved himself up on to a battered chaise longue, which from the multitude of books and papers stacked at one end I guessed was his accustomed reading chair.

“Sit down,” he said, waving at the chair opposite, an upright wing chair upholstered in faded green velvet. “Tell me why you’re here.”

I lowered myself into the chair. “I’m sorry to turn up uninvited like this,” I said. “But I bought a clock of yours recently and I wanted to ask you about it. I wanted to talk to you as soon as possible. I hope you don’t mind.”

“A clock of mine? How fascinating. Which one?”

He leaned forward in his seat, clearly interested. He was classically dwarfish, with foreshortened limbs and a head that seemed too big for his body, but his torso was powerful and upright and he carried himself with such dignity that it is true to say that within this first five minutes of meeting him I had already forgotten his diminutive stature. His force of personality was tangible. I thought he was probably the most extraordinary man I had ever met. I described the clock to him, telling him also how I had come by it.

“I know the one,” he said at once. “The case was made from old bell metal.”

He grabbed a sheet of paper from the pile at his feet and began to draw on it,

sketching in rapid strokes with a blue Bic biro. He gazed at his work appraisingly, tapping the blunt end of the pen against his teeth then handed me the paper. His drawing captured the likeness of my clock in every detail.

“That’s it,” I said. “That’s amazing.”

Andrews smiled. “I find them hard to let go of,” he said. “It’s a weakness of mine. But you didn’t come all the way out here to ask me about an old clock. A simple telephone call would have dealt with that. Why don’t you tell me what you came for really?”

I could feel myself beginning to blush. The man’s forthrightness startled me, and now that I was about to put it into words the thing I had come to ask seemed ridiculous, dangerous even. But I had come too far to turn back. And the fact was that I trusted him. I believed that Owen Andrews would tell me the truth, no matter how difficult or unpleasant that truth might be.

“My wife died,” I said at last. “Her name was Miranda. She was killed in a car accident. Her father drove his car off a cliff into the sea and drowned them both.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Andrews. “That’s a terrible story.” His eyes were clouded with concern, and I was surprised to see that he really was sorry, not just interested as most people were when they first discovered what had happened to Miranda. I didn’t blame them for being interested. The story was shocking and dramatic, a breakdown in normality that had never become entirely real to me, even after the wreck was salvaged and the bodies recovered. Who would not be

interested? It is all but impossible for one man to climb inside another man's sorrow. But I could see from his face that Owen Andrews was at least trying. I guessed he was more practised than most in enduring heartache.

"I read about you," I said. "About the work you did for the army. I read about the Silver Wind."

His dark eyes flashed, his expression changing so suddenly it was almost as if my words had thrown a switch inside him.

"You're asking me to bring back your wife? That is what you're saying?"

I nodded and looked down at the ground. I felt smaller than an insect.

"Do you have any background in physics?" he said.

"Not in the least."

"Well, if you did you would know that what you are talking about is impossible. For one thing, the time sciences are in their infancy. We have about as much control over the time stream as a Neanderthal over a steam train. But mainly it is just not possible. A layman such as yourself tends to think of time as a single thread, an unbroken continuum linking all past events together like the beads on a necklace. We are discovering that time isn't like that. It's an amorphous mass, a rag bag if you like, a rag bag of history. The time stasis might grant you access to what you think of as the past, but it wouldn't be the past that you remember. You wouldn't be the same and neither would she. There's a good chance you wouldn't even recognise each other, and even if you did it's unlikely that you would have any

sense of a shared history together. It would be like that feeling you get when you meet someone at a party and can't remember their name. You know you know them from somewhere, but you can't for the life of you think where from. It would be an alternative scenario, not a straight rewind. And Miranda would still probably end up dying in that car crash. We've found that the pivotal events in history still recur, even if the cause and effect are subtly different. It's as if the basic template, the temporal pattern if you like, is ingrained somehow. It's hard to eradicate."

He folded his arms across his chest, as if to indicate that this was his last word on the matter. I felt once again the power of his personality, the force of his intellect, and it was as if we were fighting a duel, his knowledge against my despair. I knew the battle was lost, but I could not deny myself one final, miserable onslaught.

"But I would see her again? She would be alive?"

"No. It might be possible to transfer to a version of reality where a version of Miranda is not dead yet. But that is all."

"Then that is what I want. I have money."

"No you don't," said Andrews. "And this has nothing to do with money." He fell silent, looking down at his hands, the fingers short and neat, pink as a baby's. I sensed that he was troubled, that such brutal candour was not something he enjoyed.

"I'm sorry," I said in the end. "I've been very stupid."

"Not at all," said Andrews quickly. "And at least what you asked for is harmless,

beautiful even, the kind of wish one might almost be tempted to grant if it were possible. I've had far worse propositions, believe me. Fortunately they've been equally impossible."

"You're talking about the army? The government?"

Andrews nodded. "I must warn you that this room might be bugged. I've given up bothering about it. They know my views and I have nothing to hide. But I wouldn't want to cause any unpleasantness for my friends." He paused, as if giving me the option to leave, but I stayed where I was and waited for him to continue. I realised two things: firstly that my pilgrimage to Shooter's Hill had always been about Andrews's story rather than mine, and secondly that I felt properly alive for the first time since Miranda died.

There was also the fact that Owen Andrews had called me his friend. I took this as a mark of trust and a gracious compliment but strangely it also felt *true*. For a brief instant something flickered at the back of my mind, a sense that there were some facts missing, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, and then the curtain of logic descended and it was gone. I liked Andrews, and felt a kinship with him because of that. That was all.

"What's the matter?" Andrews said. His anger seemed vanished, and an amused smile tweaked at the corners of his mouth. I wondered what secrets my face had given away.

"Nothing," I said. "Go on."

He shifted his position on the chaise longue, sitting upright and hugging his knees. He was wearing green velvet slippers and grey schoolboy socks. The combination was both amusing and moving, and I was reminded of images I had seen in books, paintings by Velasquez and Goya of the court dwarfs of Spain. They had been the playthings of the nobility but in some cases they had actually been the secret power behind the throne. “Do you know about the hospital?” he said.

“I’ve heard the rumours,” I replied. “What about it?”

I was surprised to hear him speak of the place, I suppose simply because it was the source of so much ignorant tittle-tattle. I thought of the strange girl I had met on the bus, and my heart sank. If Owen Andrews went spinning off in some similar tale of murderous lunatics it would make me start to doubt everything he had told me.

I was wrong, of course. The girl had not been completely deluded either, although I did not think of her again until much later.

“It’s always been a military hospital,” Andrews said. “It was designed and built by Florence Nightingale’s nephew as a centre for the study and treatment of shell shock. It was the first hospital in the country of its kind.”

“I’ve heard it’s being used to test chemical weapons,” I said. “Is that true?”

Andrews shook his head, seeming to dismiss the idea out of hand. “You said you read about the Silver Wind,” he said. “What did you read, exactly?”

I hesitated, unwilling to reveal that the only hard information I had on

Andrews's research had been gleaned from a UFO magazine. "Something about time-bridges," I said in the end. "The article I read said that the army were trying to change the outcome of the Saudi war by stealing technology from the future. It all sounded rather improbable. I wasn't sure what to believe."

Andrews nodded. "Do you know what a tourbillon regulator is?"

"I have no idea."

"It was invented by Louis Breguet, in the eighteenth century. He became famous for making watches for Napoleon and Marie Antoinette. His grasp of mechanics was extraordinary and at least a century ahead of his time. He discovered a way of making time stand still. Please excuse me, just for one moment. It's better if I show you."

Andrews slid from the chaise longue and shuffled out of the room. A minute later he returned, bringing with him a small wooden box.

"Here's one I made earlier," he said with a smile. He flipped open the lid, and I saw there was a watch inside. Andrews lifted it out, laying the box carefully to one side on the floor. The watch was quite large, a facsimile of a gentleman's pocket watch from the nineteenth or early twentieth century. I was familiar with such articles, having bought and sold them on several occasions. This one had a silver case. Even to my untutored eye it was a thing of quite exceptional beauty.

"I studied Breguet's diaries for many years," said Andrews. "He died an old man. A lot of people thought he was crazy in his final years, suffering from

Alzheimer's disease or some other form of dementia. It is true that he did lose some clarity of expression at the end, but that may well have been due to the complexity of the ideas he was struggling with. A lot of it is brand new science." He thumbed a catch, opening the back of the watch. I caught a glimpse of wires and levers, a mass of mechanical circuitry that glimmered as it rotated. Andrews cradled the watch in his left hand, using his right to point to first one of the gleaming internal wheels and then another. I quickly lost track of them all. Fortunately his words were somewhat easier to follow.

"The tourbillon is like a cage," he said. "It rotates the whole mechanism about its own axis. Breguet discovered this as a way of preventing gravity from dragging on the mechanism and making the watch run slow. In effect he made the mechanism weightless. The time stasis is simply a more advanced version of this idea. It makes time null and void within the area of its operation. The stasis creates a kind of temporal anteroom. Think of it as the lobby of a large hotel, with doors and lifts and corridors opening off it. Once you get through the entrance and into the lobby you can go anywhere you like within the building. It's the time stasis that reveals the entrance. Do you see?"

"Some of it." I paused. "It's what the article I read called the time-bridge."

"Yes. But I've never liked the term 'time-bridge.' Once again it's too linear. The lobby image is better, and useful, too. You know how easy it is to get lost in one of those big hotels. All the corridors look the same after a while."

By then I was struggling to make sense of it all. “But what use could this be to the army?” I said. “You’ve already told me that it’s not possible to travel in time in the way people usually imagine it, so where’s the point?”

“There isn’t any. But the government refuse to believe that. They’ve set up a stasis field around the hospital and they are conducting experiments there, forcing people through into other realities and trying to control the future before it happens. And I’m not just talking about weapons. My guess is that they have glimpsed something up ahead they don’t like, somewhere in one of the alternative futures, and are trying to eradicate that as a possibility. Think about it, what Hitler might have done if he had seen what would happen when he invaded Russia, or if Reagan had changed his mind over North Korea. It’s insane, of course, like trying to do brain surgery with a pickaxe. They have the idea that I could help to refine the mechanism for them, and that is the single reason they leave me alone. They think I’ll come round eventually to their way of thinking. They’ve offered me some marvellous inducements.”

“But if they can’t succeed where’s the harm in it?”

“In the harm they’re doing to people, for a start. They snatch people after curfew and then blame it on the carjackers. They snatch carjackers, too. They send them through the stasis, hoping that with time they’ll be able to control their experiments more closely and through them begin to control the time stasis. As is the case of all dictatorships, they believe that individuals are expendable. Some of

the people they send through never come back. Some never seem to leave, but their contact with the stasis seems to alter their substance. They're incomplete somehow; like underdeveloped photographs their colours are muted. They flicker in and out of existence, like ghosts. I have even begun to think that they *are* ghosts, or rather that the manifestations people think of as ghosts are not the spirits of the dead at all, but are actually the living products of unsuccessful experiments with a time stasis, conducted from a time-stream lying parallel to ours. Then there are the mutants, those occasional unfortunates that experience the stasis as an allergy, a chemical reaction that forces their physical substance into hideous aberrations. There's nothing that can be done for them. The soldiers simply release them into the forest. They don't mind if someone catches a glimpse of one of these poor creatures once in a while because they're better than any amount of barbed wire and electric fencing for discouraging intruders. I've no doubt that this is how the chemical weapons stories started. And if the mutants start causing trouble then the army simply go out and use them as target practice."

"But that's terrible."

"There are a lot of terrible things going on these days." He looked at me hard, as if holding me personally accountable for the transports and for the Saudi wars, for what had happened aboard the *Anubis*. "No doubt there have been the usual speeches about omelettes and breaking eggs. What none of them seem to realise is the harm they could be doing, not just with these local atrocities but on a wider

scale. The stasis is a weak point, a lesion in time that if allowed to consolidate itself could undermine the stability of our own reality. The breach should be closed, at least until we understand its implications. There are people that have an idea of what is happening and want it stopped, but they have a tendency to disappear.”

“A resistance, you mean?”

“I don’t talk about that. I do still have some shreds of a private life, and I intend to hang on to them. I suppose it is true, that everyone has his price.”

A clear image came to me of the woman in the photograph, the smiling girl with the pretty mouth. Andrews folded the watch in his hand, pressing it shut.

“How long did it take you to make that?” I said.

“A long time,” Andrews said. He smiled to himself, as if at some private joke.

“Can I offer you something to eat?”

I stayed, and we talked. I told him about Miranda, and he told me about his childhood in Devon, his first encounter with a Breguet watch, at the town museum in Exeter. Some details of his stories seemed disconcertingly familiar, and several times I experienced that same feeling I had had earlier, that there was a wider sense to everything, just out of sight.

Andrews got up to put a lamp on. It was only then that I realised how late it was.

“I should be going,” I said. “It’ll be getting dark soon.”

I had no idea what time the last bus went. In the light of what Andrews had

told me the idea of breaking curfew was unthinkable.

“You’re welcome to stay,” said Andrews. “There’s a spare bed upstairs.”

“No, thank you,” I said. For some reason the idea of spending the night there unnerved me.

“Then at least say you’ll come again. It’s been just like the old days, having you here.”

I laughed to show I knew he was joking, but his face remained serious.

Suddenly I was anxious to leave.

“I will, I’ll come soon,” I said.

“See that you do. Mind how you go.”

He waved to me from the doorway. I wondered if he ever got lonely. Dover Road stood silent, a ghost place. With the dusk approaching and to my increasingly anxious mind the place seemed to me like a mock-up, a stage set for some elaborate deception.

It was growing dusk. The forest loomed before me, its greens leached to lavender by the approaching twilight. In the Bull Inn the lamps were already lit, and further along the road towards the village there were lights showing in the windows of most of the houses. It was not long till curfew, but I reasoned that as long as I could get

myself on a bus within the next half hour there would be nothing to worry about. I set off in the direction of the High Street, walking briskly in what I hoped was a businesslike fashion. I had just come in sight of the bus stop when I saw something terrible: a roadblock had been set up outside the post office. There were four soldiers manning it; all of them were armed with rifles. I stopped in my tracks, ducking sideways into an alleyway lined with dustbins. My heart was racing. There was no question of approaching the barrier. Even though I had not breached the curfew and it was still my legal right to pass along the street I knew beyond any doubt that in practice this would count for nothing, that the soldiers would find some pretext to arrest me. What might happen after that was something I did not care to think about.

The safest move was to go back the way I had come, to return to Owen Andrews's house and take him up on his offer of spending the night there. I hesitated, knowing this was the logical course of action but still reluctant to take it. I trusted Andrews completely; the place I did not trust at all. As the dusk came steadily onwards, seeming to curl out from beneath the trees like tendrils of smoke, I realised I had a horror of it, that for some reason the thought of spending the night at Shooter's Hill was almost as impossible for me as the idea of confronting the soldiers at the barricade.

I felt horribly trapped. I cowered in the alleyway, staring at the trees opposite and knowing I had to make a decision in the next few minutes or risk breaking the

curfew. It was then that it came to me there was a third option: I could bypass the checkpoint by cutting through the forest. The idea seemed simple enough. I was actually within sight of the checkpoint, and less than half a mile from the village boundary. I could walk that in less than fifteen minutes. I would not need to go far into the woods, just enough to keep me out of earshot of the soldiers. I should emerge on the Shooter's Hill Road somewhere between the hospital and Blackheath.

I ran quickly across the road, hoping that one of the soldiers down by the barrier would not choose that moment to turn his gaze in my direction. I slipped in between the trees, my feet crunching through leaf litter. The slope down from the road was steeper than I had imagined. I tripped against an exposed root and almost fell. In less than a couple of minutes I had completely lost sight of the road.

I had imagined there would be a pathway, some kind of track to follow but there were none, or at least none that I could find, and in the oncoming darkness it was difficult to see clearly for more than a couple of yards. I kept going, fighting my way through the underbrush in what I hoped was a westerly direction. There were no landmarks to guide me, no sounds other than the scuffling of my feet in the leaves and my own rapid breathing. I stopped moving, straining my ears for the rumble of a logging truck or even for the voices of the soldiers at the barricade but there was nothing. I could not have been more than a mile from the lighted windows of the Bull Inn, yet it was as if I had unwittingly strayed into some other

universe. I could smell the trees all around me, the pungent odour of tree bark and rising chlorophyll. I remembered something from my schooldays, that it was during the hours of darkness that plants released their pent up stores of oxygen, and it seemed to me that I could feel their exhalations all around me, the collective green-tinged sigh of a thousand trees. The dark was growing, spreading across the forest floor like marsh gas. From somewhere further off came the echoing melancholy hooting of a night owl.

I walked for what felt like hours. I could no longer see where I was going, and had no idea of whether I was even vaguely headed in the right direction. I was very afraid, but the state of high nervous tension that had taken me over when I first realised I was lost had worn itself out, blunting my terror to a dull background hum, a mental white noise that drove me incessantly forward whilst slowing the actions and reactions of my brain. Finally I came to a standstill. The woods seemed to close in around me, shuffling forward to block my escape like some vast black beast that knows its prey is all out of running. I slid to the ground where I stood, the dampness settling at once into my clothes. Until that moment I had not realised how cold it was. I began to shiver. I knew that if I was to spend the night in the open I had to get under cover somehow, but I was too exhausted by my flight through the woods to make any decisions. I closed my eyes, thinking confusedly that this might make the darkness less terrible. When I opened them again some minutes later it was to the sight of a yellowish glow, moving slowly towards me from

between the trees. I could hear something also, the soft shushing sound of someone or something doing their best to move quietly across a ground that was ankle-deep in twigs and dry leaves.

I moved from a sitting to a lying position, stomach down in the dirt, never taking my eyes from the pale light that though still some distance off appeared to be coming closer with every second. I was torn by indecision. I did not wish to fall into the hands of soldiers or carjackers, but on the other hand I was desperate to be out of the forest. At that moment the thought any human company seemed better than none. As the light came closer I was able to discern amidst the surrounding darkness of trees the deeper, blacker bulk of a human figure: somebody carrying a torch, and coming my way.

In the end the simple need to hear a human voice outweighed my misgivings. I scrambled to my feet, extending my arms towards the figure with the lamp like a blind man trying to feel his way across a crowded room.

“Hello!” I cried. “Hello there. Wait for me!”

I moved forward, my attempt to run reduced by the darkness to an unsteady lurch. I crashed through the treacherous underbrush, stray twigs clawing at my hands and face. The figure stopped dead in its tracks, the torch beam wavering gently up and down. Its light was weak but my eyes had grown used to the darkness and were temporarily blinded. The figure took a step backwards, crackling the leaves underfoot. It seemed that it was as much afraid of me as I was of it.

“I’m lost,” I said. “Do you know the way out of here?”

I could hear its breathing, slow and heavy, as if it was about to expire. There was a rank odour, a smell like burning fat tinged with underarm sweat. I was by now convinced that the figure was a fugitive, a lone carjacker perhaps, or an immigrant without a work permit, someone on the run from the police. None of that mattered to me; all I cared about was getting out of the woods.

“I’m not going to report you,” I said. “I just want to find the road.” I grabbed at its sleeve, anxious in case the figure tried to bolt away from me. It was wearing padded mittens, and a padded anorak made from some shiny nylon-coated fabric that was difficult to get a grip on. My fingers tightened involuntarily about its wrist. The figure moaned, a low, inhuman sound that made me go cold all over. I knew I had made an awful mistake. I released the figure abruptly, pushing it backwards. As it flailed its arms to retain balance the torch beam darted upwards, lighting its face. Until that moment it had been shrouded in darkness, its features concealed by the large, loose hood of the nylon anorak. Now I saw something terrible: the thing’s face was disfigured in some way, quite literally *de-formed*, squeezed apart and then rammed back together again in a careless and hideous arrangement that bore as little resemblance to an ordinary human face as the face of a corpse in an advanced stage of decomposition. The skin was thickly corrugated, set into runnels as if burned by acid. The mouth, a lipless slit, was slanted heavily to one side, dividing the face’s lower portion in a raw diagonal slash. One of the eyes was sealed shut,

smearred in its socket somehow like a clay eye inadvertently damaged by its sculptor's careless thumb. The other eye shone brightly in the torchlight, gazing at me in what I instinctively knew was sorrow as much as fear. The eye was fringed with long lashes, and quite perfect. The creature standing before me was a woman.

I screamed, I could not help it, though it was more from shock than from fear. I knew that I was seeing one of the mutants Owen Andrews had spoken of, one of the worst victims of the army's clumsy experiments with the time stasis. Andrews had called these creatures unfortunate, but his words had barely scratched the surface of the reality. In my traumatised state I could not grasp how this thing could survive, how it did not just *stop*, how the terrible damage inflicted allowed it still to go on living. The face was an apocalypse in flesh; it was impossible to know what further ravages had been unleashed upon the rest of her body and internal organs.

Her mental torment I could not bear to imagine.

My scream made her flinch, and she stumbled, dropping the torch. She dropped to her knees, sweeping her hands back and forth through the leaves in an effort to retrieve it. But either the padded mittens hampered her efforts or she no longer had proper control of her hands because it kept skidding out of her grasp. I saw my chance and made a lunge for it. Suddenly the torch was in my hand. The mutant girl howled, flinging herself at me as if she meant to topple me into the dirt.

I began to run. The girl picked herself up off the ground and began to follow. She was no longer crying, but I could hear her breathing, the raw panting gasp of it,

and I felt sick with revulsion. The thought of having to fight her off, of having her ruined face pressed in close to mine as she battled me for the torch did a good deal to keep me moving. I knew the very fact of possessing the torch made me easy to follow, but there was no help for it. I pointed it ahead of me, panning the ground at my feet and lighting the way ahead the best that I could. The beam was weak, a feeble yellow, barely enough to see by. I kept expecting to bash into a tree or worse still to catch a foot in some pothole or crevice and twist my ankle and I have no doubt that one of these two things would have happened eventually.

In the end I was saved by the soldiers. I climbed a shallow rise, tearing my hands painfully on brambles in the process, and then I was in the open. I could sense rather than see that there were no more trees around me, and I guessed I had reached the edge of a woodland meadow. I shone the torch frantically about me, trying to work out which was the best way to go. Suddenly there were more lights, broad and penetrating beams of white radiance, strafing the ground and dazzling my eyes. They were approaching from the side at a full-on run.

“Halt!” someone screamed. “Get down.”

I threw myself to the ground, covering my head instinctively with my arms. A stampede seemed to pass over and around me. Then there was more shouting, a single wild cry that I knew was the girl, and then a burst of gunfire. I covered my ears, cowering against the ground, and the next minute I was being dragged upright, pulled back down the rise and into the trees. My mind froze and went

entirely blank. I felt certain that I would die within the next few seconds. Someone shoved me from behind and I almost fell. The crisscrossing beams of powerful torches showed me a half-dozen men with blackened faces and wearing combat fatigues. The girl's body lay face down on the ground; a dark irregular stain was spreading across the back of the padded anorak. One of the soldiers kicked her, flipping her on to her side with the toe of his boot. The anorak shifted slightly, revealing a portion of the clothing beneath, a tattered woollen smock over filthy jeans.

Now with her face turned away from me she looked like any other dead girl. I felt my guts heave. I thought if I couldn't be sick I would choke, but I was terrified to be sick in case these men shot me for it.

"Frigging disgusting," said one of the men. I had the confused impression that he was referring to my weak stomach, then realised he was talking about the girl. "What do you think would happen if they started breeding?"

"Shut up, Weegie," said another. The tone of authority in his voice left no doubt that he was in charge. Then he turned to me. "What the fuck are you doing out here?"

My throat gave a dry click, and I felt once more the gagging reflex, but in the end I was able to answer.

"I came off the road," I said. "I got lost."

"ID?"

For a second I panicked, thinking I had lost my wallet somewhere or even left it behind at Andrews's place, but miraculously when I reached into my jacket pocket it was there. I handed it over in silence. The officer flicked through it briefly, letting his eyes rest for a moment upon my photograph and national insurance number, then amazingly handed it back.

"Bloody civvies," he said. "Do you *want* to get mistaken for one of these?" He nodded down at the girl's lifeless body. I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak.

"You'll have to come with us. It's for your own protection. I suggest you get moving." He nodded to the man he had called Weegie, who grabbed me by the upper arm and pushed me into line behind the others. I stumbled a couple of times, but with the soldiers' powerful search beams to see by the going was actually much easier. Now that it seemed they were not going to kill me or at least not immediately my panic had subsided somewhat. I thought back to the night before, when I had lain comfortably in bed contemplating my forthcoming visit to Andrews and the state of my political morals. It seemed impossible that a mere twenty-four hours could alter my life so completely. I felt inclined to agree with the officer: I had been bloody stupid.

We marched through the forest for about an hour. I was exhausted by then, my mind empty of anything but the desire to stop moving and lie down. At last there were lights, shining to meet us through the trees. The forest ended suddenly at a

barbed wire perimeter fence, and I realised we had arrived outside the hospital.

I was too tired to be afraid. I was marched through a set of iron gates then led along a green-tiled corridor that smelled faintly of damp clothes and disinfectant. Unbelievably it reminded me of school. I caught glimpses of a kit store, and a rec room, where soldiers sprawled on bunks watching a televised boxing match. At the end of the corridor a short flight of concrete steps led down to what was clearly a cell block. The officer-in-charge nudged open one of the mesh-strengthened doors and gestured me inside.

“I’d get some kip, if I were you. I’d bring you some grub, only the mess will have shut up shop, so you’ll have to hang on till morning.”

I stepped through the door, which was immediately banged shut behind me. I heard the sound of a key being turned in the lock and then the soldier’s footsteps trudging back up the stairs. Then there was silence. I stood where I was for a moment, wondering if anything else would happen. The room I was in was small, although curiously it still had the wallpaper and curtains left behind from the time before the soldiers had taken over. The way the wainscoting and ceiling architrave had been divided made it clear that the cell had been partitioned off from a much larger room, possibly the doctors’ lounge. There was a bed pushed up against one wall, a metal-framed cot of the kind that is usual in hospitals. In the corner was a bucket and basin, crudely screened from the rest of the room by a section of cotton sheeting strung from a pole. The windows behind their curtains were barred from

the outside.

I relieved myself in the bucket then lay down on the bed. It bowed heavily under my weight, the springs weary from decades of use. The room was lit by a single bulb, a bald, enervating glare that I supposed would be left burning all night, although when I tentatively pressed a switch by the bed the light went out. In contrast with the alien blackness of the forest I found the darkness of the room gave me a feeling of being protected. I lay under the threadbare blanket, listening to the silence and wondering what was going to happen to me. I was a prisoner, but what was I being imprisoned for? If it was a simple matter of breaking the curfew then I could expect a hefty fine and perhaps three months behind bars, as well as the wholly undesirable possibility of finding myself under continued surveillance. This could lead to all sorts of problems at work, not just for me but for my colleagues. Certainly it was no laughing matter, but it was at least a situation with navigable parameters. The thing was, I knew my situation was not that simple. I had witnessed a murder, the gunning down in cold blood of a defenceless and vulnerable woman. The frightful injuries that had been inflicted upon her before that hardly served to make things less complicated.

There was also the fact of my visit to Owen Andrews, a troublemaker who by his own admission had been repeatedly in conflict with the state.

What if all things considered it seemed simpler just to get rid of me? Now that Miranda was dead there would be few who cared enough to risk asking questions.

Dora might ask, she might even look for me, but in the end she would weigh up the cost of the truth about a dead man and the price of her own safety and Ray's and find the balance wanting. I did not blame her for it.

Asking questions was out of fashion in our day and age.

I wondered if they would simply shoot me, or if perhaps they would use me in one of their time travel experiments. I presumed the latter. To shoot me would be a waste of valuable resources.

I thought of the mutant girl in the forest, twisted and bent by her exposure to the time stasis almost beyond the bounds of her humanity. I still found it difficult to contemplate her isolation, the loneliness and horror she must have suffered at the moment of her realisation of what had been done to her. It came to me that there were fates worse than shooting. I even wondered if her death at the hands of the soldiers had been for the best.

All at once the darkness of the room seemed oppressive rather than soothing. I put the light back on and got up from the bed. I paced about my cell, examining the barred window and testing the door handle, wondering if I might discover some means of escape but for all its ramshackleness the room was still a prison. I placed my ear against the door and listened, straining for any sound that might give a clue as to what was happening in the rest of the hospital but there was nothing, just a deep, eerie silence that suggested I was completely alone there. I knew this had to be nonsense: I had seen the rec room, the soldiers on their bunks watching television

and playing cards. I supposed the cell had been soundproofed somehow. The thought was not exactly comforting.

In the end I decided the only thing for it was to take advantage of the silence and get some rest. Now that my life was not being directly threatened I found I was ravenously hungry – it was hours since the meal at Andrews’s house – but there was nothing I could do about that. I drank some water instead from the tap in the corner. It had a peaty taste and was unpleasantly tepid but it helped to put something at least inside my stomach. After drinking I lay back down on the bed and covered myself with the blanket. I thought I would lie there awake for hours but I fell asleep in less than five minutes.

At some point during the night I was woken by the sound of shouting and running footsteps but no one came to my door and I decided I must have dreamed it. I closed my eyes, hovering on the boundary between sleep and waking, a citizen of both nations but unable to settle permanently in either. I saw sleep as an immense blue forest that I was afraid to enter in case I never found the way out again. Then I woke with a start to bright sunlight, and realised I had been asleep all along.

My watch had stopped, but from the position of the sun in the sky I could tell it was already mid-morning, getting on towards midday even. It struck me as curious to say the least that I had been allowed to sleep so long. Surely by now whoever was in charge here would have wanted me either interrogated or – out of

their way? The second strange thing was the sun itself, its insistent presence. The day before had been overcast with the promise of rain, a typical day in late March. The sky that was now on the other side of the barred window was spotless, the heady azure of June or July.

I knew it was impossible, but the vagueness and confusion of mind that so often accompanies a sudden waking suggested to me that *I had been forgotten*, left locked in this room for weeks, that no one was coming now, ever.

I leapt from the bed, relieved myself once again in the stinking bucket, then crossed to the door, prepared to rattle it and shout until someone came. I seized the handle, twisting it sharply downwards.

The door opened smoothly and silently in my hand.

I eased it open a crack and peered out into the corridor. I was prepared for a burst of shouting or even of gunfire, but there was nothing, just the silence of my room, magnified in some queer sense by the largeness of the space it now flowed into. There was nothing in the corridor, just a single plastic chair, as if once, many days before, someone had stood guard there but had long since become bored or assigned to other duties and wandered away. The doors to the other cells stood closed. I stepped out into the corridor, my footsteps echoing on the bare cement floor. I tried the door to the room next to mine, and like mine it swung open easily. I was afraid of what I might find on the other side, but what I found in fact was nothing at all. The bed had been stripped of all its furnishings, including the

mattress. There was a slops bucket but it was empty and perfectly dry. Beside it stood a pile of old newspapers. I glanced down at the one on top. The headline story, about Clive Billings losing his seat in a by-election in Harrogate, did not make sense. The paper was brittle and yellow from sun exposure and dated two years previously. I could remember the by-election to which it referred – who could not? It was the by-election that effectively made Billings prime minister – but it had happened more than two decades ago, just as I was about to enter university. Billings had taken the seat with a huge majority.

Looking at the headline made me feel odd, and the idea of actually touching the paper made me feel queasy, off-kilter in a way I could not properly explain. I felt that touching the newspaper would connect me to it as an object, that I would somehow be ratifying the version of reality it was presenting to me, a reality I knew full well had never happened. It would be as if I were somehow negating my own existence.

I left the room quickly, passing up the short stone staircase into the rest of the hospital. The place was empty, not derelict yet but certainly abandoned. The soldiers' rec room was stacked with refuse, dismantled beds and plastic chairs like the one I had seen in the corridor. There were signs everywhere of encroaching damp and roof leakage, peeling wallpaper and buckled linoleum. One more winter without proper attention and the place would sink inexorably into decay.

The main doors had been boarded over but after hunting around for a while I

found a side entrance and made my escape. The hospital grounds were a wilderness, the paths choked with weeds and many of the smaller outbuildings partially hidden by stands of rampaging bramble and giant hogweed. Beyond the perimeter wall the trees loomed, whispering together with the passing of the breeze. In spite of the emptiness of the place and the fact that I was plainly alone there I felt exposed, watched, as if the trees themselves were spying on me.

The army checkpoint at the entrance had disappeared and the place was unguarded but the high gates were chained shut and it took me some time to find an exit. The perimeter wall was too high to climb without assistance, and I was just starting to think about going in search of a ladder when I discovered a rent in the small section of chain link fencing that blocked off the access to the service alleyway at the side of the building. The torn wire snagged at my clothes, and in spite of everything I smiled to myself, thinking how the breach was most likely the work of schoolchildren for whom this place now as then would be a realm of dares and bribes, of dangers both imaginary and real. I felt glad that they had broken through, that some of them at least had been braver and bolder than I.

I came out of the alleyway and wandered down to the main road. I tried to look nonchalant, not wanting to draw attention to my soiled clothes and general unkemptness. There was a bus stop by the hospital gates, just as before, and after only ten minutes of waiting a bus drew up to it. I got on, swiping my Oyster card. The sensor responded with its usual bleep. The driver did not look at me twice. I

noticed with a start that she was black; I could not remember the last time I had seen a black face in *any* position of public service in this country. The bus was full of soldiers, their London accents blending noisily together as they exchanged ribald jokes and squabbled over newspapers and cigarettes. They were white and black and Asian, as racially mixed as the cowed hordes of deportees in the television broadcasts of my adolescence. I stared at them, barely understanding what I was seeing.

“Lost something, mate?” one of them said to me. “Only if you have, then one of these has probably already nicked it.” He looked Middle Eastern in origin. One of his eyebrows was pierced with a diamond stud. The rest of his company erupted in laughter, but it all seemed pretty good-natured and they had soon forgotten me. The bus grunted then lurched off along the road. The woodland seemed to sing with colour and light.

When I arrived at my house on Frobisher Street the key would not fit in the lock. By then I was not surprised. I had even been expecting something of this kind. I rang the bell, and after a minute or so the door was opened by a young woman. Her hair looked uncombed, her eyes dark from fatigue. A child clung to her knees, a boy of perhaps four or five. In contrast with the woman’s scruffy housedress the toddler

wore a cleanly-pressed playsuit in a cheerful mix of blues and yellows.

“Yes?” she said. “Can I help you?”

I peered over her shoulder into the hall. The black-and-white tiles had been replaced by a dun-coloured carpet. Piles of washing stood heaped at the foot of the stairs.

“How long have you lived here?” I said. The woman took a sudden step backwards, almost tripping over the child. She ran a hand through her hair, and I saw that all her nails were bitten.

“We’re registered,” she said. “We’ve been here almost two years. I’ve got all the forms.” Before I could say anything else she had darted away inside the house, disappearing through the door that had once led to my own living room. The toddler stared up at me, his green eyes wide with fascination.

“Are you from the prison?” he said.

“Not at all,” I replied. “This used to be my house once, that’s all. I wanted to see if it had changed.”

He continued to gaze at me as if I were a visitor from another planet. As I stood there wondering whether to stay or go the woman returned. “Here you are,” she said. “They’re all up to date.” She thrust some papers at me. I glanced at them briefly, long enough to see that her name was Violet Jane Pullinger and she had been born in Manchester, then handed them back.

“It’s all right,” I said. “I’m not from the council or anything. I used to live round

here, that's all. I was just curious. I'm sorry if I scared you. I didn't mean to."

The little boy looked from me to the woman and slowly back again. "He says he's not from the prison, mum. Do you think he's my dad?"

"Stephen!" She touched the boy's hair, her face caught somewhere between laughter and embarrassment. When she looked at me again she looked younger and less frightened. "I don't know where they get their ideas from, do you? Would you like to come in? I could make us a cup of tea?"

"That's very kind," I said. "But I've taken up too much of your time already."

I knew I could not enter the house, that to do so would be a kind of madness. I said a hurried goodbye then turned and walked back to the High Street. I thought about looking to see if my office was still there but my nerve failed me. I went to the cashpoint outside my bank instead. I inserted my card in the machine and typed in my PIN. I felt certain the card would be swallowed or rejected. If that happened I was not only homeless, I was penniless too, aside from the couple of notes that were still in my wallet. I peered at the little screen, wondering what I would do if that happened, but this was one decision I did not have to make. My debit card, apparently, was still valid. When the machine asked me which service I required I selected cash with on-screen balance, then when prompted I requested twenty pounds. It seemed a safe enough amount, at least to start with. I waited while the note was disgorged, staring intently at the fluorescent panel where my bank balance was about to be displayed.

When the figure finally appeared I gasped, inhaling so sharply that it set off a fit of coughing. The amount I apparently had in my account was four times the sum that had been in there the day before. It did not make me a rich man by any means, but for a weary time traveller without a roof over his head it certainly provided a measure of temporary security.

I went to the nearest shop, a corner newsagent's, where I bought a newspaper and a wrapped falafel. I ate the falafel where I stood on the street, wolfing it down in three bites then wiping my fingers on the greaseproof paper. Then I headed for the Woolwich Road and a hotel I knew, an enormous Victorian pile that had always been frequented mainly by travelling salesmen and had something of a dubious reputation. Its reputation mattered very little to me right then; what I needed was a bed for the night, some time to think in a place where I would not be noticed.

The hotel was still there and still a hotel. It looked more down-at-heel than ever. Some of the rooms on the ground floor appeared to have been converted into long-stay bedsitters. There was a pervasive smell of cooking fat and stewed tomatoes.

"I don't do breakfast," said the landlady. "You get that yourself, out the back." She was huge, a vast whale of a woman in a flowered print dress with the most extraordinary violet eyes I had ever seen. I told her that was fine. She looked vaguely familiar, and I wondered what she would look like with her hair down. I shook my head to clear it and headed upstairs. The upper landing was sweltering

and my poky little room was no better but I didn't care. I sat down on the bed, which creaked alarmingly; it seemed strange how much this room, with its faded wallpaper and antiquated washstand, resembled the hospital cell where I had spent the previous night.

As well as the bed and the washstand there was a battered mahogany wardrobe and a portable television set with an old-fashioned loop aerial. I opened the window, hoping to let some air into the room, and then switched on the TV. The six o'clock news had just started. There was footage of a refugee encampment like those I had seen previously in Tangier and Sangatte. I was amazed to learn that the camp, a ragged shanty town of tents and standpipes and semi-feral children as skinny as rails, was situated on the outskirts of Milton Keynes. A delegation from the camp had delivered a petition to Downing Street, and the prime minister himself appeared on the steps to receive it.

The prime minister was black, a slimly-built, earnest-faced man named Ottmar Chingwe. I had never seen him before in my life.

I watched the broadcast through to the end. Some of the items covered – the famine in Russia, the blockade in the Gulf – were familiar or at least they seemed to be at first but other events, reported in the same matter-of-fact tone, were like passages from some elaborate fantasy. The newspaper I had bought was the same. I felt dazed not so much by the scale of the changes as by their subtlety. There were no miracle machines, no robots, no flying saucers; in many ways the world I had

entered was the same as the world I had left. What I saw and felt and observed was a change not in substance but in *emphasis*.

Was it this that the Billings regime had learned of, and sought to reverse? Certainly Billings's world view – his 'Fortress Britain,' as he had proudly referred to it – was everywhere conspicuous by its absence. This new England seemed more like a gipsy encampment, a vast airport lounge of peoples, chaotic and noisy and continually on the move. There seemed to be no overall plan.

Yet commerce was active, the homeless were being fed. People of all shades of opinion were expressing those opinions robustly and at every opportunity.

It was like the London I remembered from when I was young.

I watched TV for about an hour then went down to the curry house opposite and ordered a meal. I ate it quickly, still feeling conspicuous, although none of the other diners paid me the slightest attention. Once I had finished I returned to the hotel. There was a pay telephone in the hallway. I inserted my card and dialled Dora's number. The phone rang and rang, and was eventually answered by a woman with an Eastern European accent so strong I could barely understand what she was saying. Silently I replaced the receiver.

After a moment's hesitation I lifted it again, this time dialling Owen Andrews's number, reading it off the slip of paper in my wallet. The phone clicked twice and then went dead. I climbed the stairs to my room and watched television into the small hours, trying to gather as many facts as I could about my new world.

Eventually I turned out the light and went to sleep.

I had to keep reminding myself that this was not the future. That is, I had lost three months somewhere but that was all. The year was the same. The TV channels were more or less the same. The Shooter's Hill Road was still rife with carjackings, only now there was no talk of reinstating the death penalty. The increase in my finances I put down to some lucky quirk, an error in accounting, if you like, between one version of reality and another.

Once my initial nervousness had begun to wear off my biggest fear was meeting myself. It was the kind of nightmare you read about in H.G. Wells, but Owen Andrews had not mentioned it and in any case it did not happen. I began to wonder if each reality was like Schrödinger's theoretical box, its contents uncertain until it was actually opened. I thought that perhaps the very act of me entering this world somehow negated any previous existence I had had within it.

Such thoughts were unnerving yet fascinating, the kind of ideas I would have liked to discuss with Owen Andrews. But so far as I could determine Andrews did not exist here.

I returned to what I was good at, which was buying and selling. I was still nervous in those early days, afraid to expose myself through some stupid mistake,

and so instead of applying for a job with an estate agent I decided to set up by myself selling watches and clocks. I enjoyed reading up on the subject and it wasn't long before I had a lucrative little business. I had learned long ago that even during the worst times there are still rich people, and what do the rich have to do but spend their money on expensive luxuries? I had never lost sleep over this; rather I made good use of it. I was amused to find that some of my clients were people I knew from before, men whose houses I had once sold for them, or their sons or daughters, or people who looked very like them. None of them recognised me.

The only thing I had left from my old life was the photograph of Miranda that I had always carried in my wallet. It was a snapshot taken of her on Brighton beach soon after we married. Her topaz eyes were lifted towards the camera, her heart-shaped face partially obscured by silvery corkscrewed wisps of her windblown hair. It was like an answered prayer, to have her with me. There were no traces of her death now, no evidence of what had happened. All that remained was my knowledge of my love for her and this last precious image of her face.

One evening in September I left a probate sale I had been attending in Camden and walked towards the tube station at St John's Wood. It was growing dusk, and I stopped for a moment to enjoy the view from the top of Primrose Hill. The sky in

the west was a fierce red, what I took to be the afterglow of sunset, but later, at home, when I put on the radio I discovered there had been a fire. The report said that underground fuel stores at the old army hospital at Shooter's Hill had mysteriously ignited, causing them to explode. The resulting conflagration had been visible for twenty miles.

The Royal Herbert was a listed building, said the newscaster. It was originally built for the Woolwich Garrison at the end of the eighteen eighties and was most recently in use as a long-stay care facility for victims of war trauma.

The police suspected arson and had already sent in their teams of investigators. I wished them luck in their search. I supposed they would find something eventually, some loose circuitry or faulty shielding, but felt certain that unless they were experts in tracking a crime from one region of reality to another they would never find out the real truth of what had happened.

What I believed was that the resistance fighters Andrews told me about had finally found a way to destroy the hospital. The blast had been so strong it had ripped through the time stasis, wiping the building off the map in all versions of reality simultaneously.

Or in the neighbouring zones, at least. For a moment I had a vision of the great hotel lobby of time Andrews had spoken of. Alarm bells clamoured as a line of porters shepherded the guests out on to the front concourse and a fire crew worked to extinguish a minor blaze in one of the bedrooms. The fire was soon put out, the

loss adjusters called in to assess the damage. By the end of the evening the guests were back in the bar and it was business as usual.

Some old biddy's cigarette, apparently, said one as he sipped at his scotch.

We're lucky she didn't roast us in our beds, his companion jabbered excitedly.

D'you fancy some peanuts?

I supposed that my escape route, if there had ever been one, was now cut off for good. Perhaps this should have bothered me but it didn't. The more time passed, the more it was my old life that seemed unreal, a kind of nightmare aberration, a bad photocopy of reality rather than the master version. The world I now inhabited, for all its rough edges, felt more substantial.

I had no wish to return to the way things were. I uncorked a bottle of wine – the dreadful rough Burgundy that was all you could find in the shops at the time because of the flight embargo – and drank a silent toast to the unknown bombers. I thought of the soldiers in their rec room, their harmless card games and noisy camaraderie, and hoped they had been able to escape before the place went up.

It was not until some years later that I stumbled upon the picture of Owen Andrews. It was in a book someone had given me about the London watch trade, a reproduction of a nineteenth century daguerreotype that showed Andrews at his

work bench. He was wearing a baggy white workman's blouse and had his loupe on a leather cord around his neck.

The caption named him as Mr Edwin Andrews, the 'miracle dwarf' who had successfully perfected a number of new advancements in the science of mechanics and with particular reference to the Breguet tourbillon.

It was him, without a shadow of a doubt. I studied the picture, wondering what Andrews had made of being called a miracle dwarf. I supposed he would have had a good laugh.

The text that went with the picture said that Andrews had held a position in the physical sciences department at Oxford University but that he had resigned the post as the result of a disagreement with his superiors. He had come to London soon afterwards, setting up his own workshop in Southwark.

Sometimes, on those light summer evenings when I had finished all my appointments and had nothing better to do, I would make my way to Paddington and eat a leisurely supper in one of the bars or cafes on the station concourse. I watched the great steam locomotives as they came and went from the platforms, arriving and departing for towns in the north and west. A train came in from Oxford every half hour.

I knew it was futile to wait but I waited anyway. Andrews had said we would meet again and I somehow believed him. I sipped my drink and scanned the faces in the crowd, hoping that one of them one day would be the face of my friend.

END

Along with 'Wilkolak,' which appears in the current issue of *Interzone's* sister magazine *Crimewave* (#11, subtitled *Ghosts*), 'The Silver Wind' is firmly rooted in the wilds of South East London. Nina is very much in love with her immediate neighbourhood, and feels it to be unjustly neglected – although some may say her skewed perspectives are unlikely to bring the tourists flocking any time soon. The story also reunites readers with Martin, the hero of 'My Brother's Keeper' from *Black Static* issue 12.