

## Jennifer Jones and the Corridors of Time

A Novel by Wynford Wilde

### The Beginning

Jennifer Jones sat quietly on the wooden bench at the bus shelter. Her bus was almost always the last to leave, but she didn't mind. It gave her a few moments of peace and quiet before getting back to Mrs Thacker's, and the long list of chores to be done. These included chopping firewood, sweeping the house, cooking dinner, doing the dishes, and any other jobs Mrs Thacker had thought up during the day. She wrote the chores on a piece of paper which she stuck to the fridge. Jennifer had to check them off as they were done, and was not allowed to read or go to bed until every task on the list was completed.

Today she was sharing the bus shelter with someone else. That was unusual. A man, someone she had never seen before, sat in a wheelchair at the other end of the bench. Jennifer thought he must be the oldest person she had ever seen. He was badly scarred around his forehead, and some of the fingers on his left hand seemed to be missing, though she couldn't see clearly, and it was rude to stare.

Jennifer had been taken from her real parents when she was four, and had hardly seen them since. She often wondered whether she had done something terribly wrong, so her parents no longer wanted her. For the last seven years she had lived with Mrs Thacker. Doris Thacker was about sixty, and spent most of the day smoking and watching television. When she wasn't watching TV, she was talking about what had happened in the programmes she watched, or even crying over the cold-hearted way Brad had broken off his long term relationship with Tiffany, or whatever else had happened in *The Bland and the Boring* that day. Jennifer could not understand how Mrs Thacker could get so emotional about people who were not real, when she showed no emotion or concern for the people around her.

Mrs Thacker had told Jennifer that she was a troubled girl, and that no one else would put up with her. But her children's services worker, Anne Beauchamp, told

Jennifer that was not true. She had done nothing wrong. It wasn't her but her parents, who had done things which made it impossible for Jennifer to stay with them. But no one ever told Jennifer what her parents had done wrong. They never came to visit her, and now she could hardly remember them. Whatever they might have done, it was hard to believe that living with them could be worse than living with Mrs Thacker. Anne had promised she would try to find a new home for Jennifer, but she had been promising that for the last three years, and Jennifer had given up hoping that anything might change.

As Jennifer sat in the bus shelter, rain patting gently on the roof, she saw a group of four older girls walk up behind Ivan Leaver. Ivan was waiting at the bus shelter across the road, and the girls were gathering around him from behind. They looked like a group of sharks. Ivan was intellectually handicapped. He was slow in everything. He walked slowly, ate slowly, talked slowly. He was also slow to get angry. When he did get angry, it was spectacular. He would spit and scream and throw whatever he had in his hands. But best of all, for those who enjoyed teasing him, he would cry.

A small stone smacked into the back of Ivan's head. It stung badly. Ivan looked around, confused. The group of girls giggled amongst themselves, but smiled and waved, as if they were his best friends. Not knowing what to say, he turned back to watch for his grandmother. His grandmother was a kind woman, but seemed to have no sense of time. Some days she would arrive at school half an hour early and walk into the classroom wanting to know why Ivan wasn't ready. Other days, like today, she would be half an hour late, or even an hour, and Ivan would have to wait.

One of the girls - Jennifer thought her name was Louise - asked Ivan whether he would like a piece of cake. He loved food, and answered politely.

"Yes, please."

"Catch it then."

She threw a lump of something dark and soft. It hit Ivan on the left side of his face and crumbled. Jennifer couldn't see whether it was chocolate cake or dirt or something worse. Ivan looked at the girls, who now laughed openly at him.

"You should pass food nicely," he said.

The girls moved in closer, and began to rub the cake, or whatever it was, into Ivan's hair and clothes.

Jennifer left her schoolbag on the bench in the bus shelter and stood up.

"Stop that!" She called.

The girls ignored her. Two of them had taken Ivan's schoolbag and were emptying the contents onto the ground. One of the others had started pulling Ivan's hair, then darting out of reach.

"Stop that!" Jennifer was angry now, and her anger made her voice loud and clear.

Two of the girls turned their attention from Ivan to her. Louise called back.

"Oh! It's little miss clever. So clever her own parents don't want her. We even have a rhyme for you. Do you want to hear it?"

"I want you to leave Ivan alone." Jennifer looked around for a teacher, but the teachers on bus duty left a quarter of an hour after school finished. There were no adults nearby.

All of the girls were now looking at Jennifer instead of teasing Ivan. They shouted across the road:

"Jennifer Jones is a bag of bones

and a belly full of fat

and when she cries she shuts her eyes.

Now what do you think of that?"

Jennifer didn't know how to react. It sounded like a skipping rhyme, and she thought it was silly. For one thing, it wasn't true. She was not fat. And anyway, how could one person could be a bag of bones and fat at the same time? The comment about her parents hurt, a lot, because she thought the same thing – her parents didn't want her. But she wasn't going to cry, whether shutting her eyes or not. If she did, the girls would have won, and then they would start on Ivan again.

As Jennifer hesitated, one of the girls picked Ivan's bag up off the bench in the bus shelter and threw it at her. It was a pathetic throw. The bag landed about two thirds of the way across the street. Ivan had been sitting wriggling on the bench, picking bits of food off his clothes. Now he got up, and without looking, ran out onto the road.

Just at that moment, a car came around the corner about fifty metres from the bus shelters. It sped up, and Jennifer could see that if both Ivan and the car kept moving at the same rate, the car would hit him.

"No! Ivan, stop!" She shouted. But he was fixed on his bag, and neither heard nor saw anything else. Jennifer looked again, all of this taking only a couple of seconds. Ivan's shuffling run was not much faster than most people's walk. If she moved quickly, she might be able to stop Ivan before he crossed the centre line and the car arrived. The driver still had not seen him.

Jennifer raced into the road. The driver suddenly saw her dart from his left, and swerved to his right, straight into Ivan. The road was wet and greasy, and as the driver thrust his foot onto the brake pedal, the back of the vehicle slid around and hit Jennifer with a horrifying crunch. She fell, and the car went over her.

## Chapter One

### A Very Strange Place

Jennifer felt as if she had been picked up by a giant hand and thrown against a wall. She was badly winded. She gasped for breath, feeling like she was falling, and then suddenly realised she was standing up. She felt a steadying hand on her arm, and looked up to see Ivan next to her.

“Hello Jennifer. Thank you for trying to help me.”

Was it Ivan, she wondered? If so, there had been a dramatic change since a few minutes ago. There were no crusted remains of dribble around his mouth, no lumps of snot hanging from his nose, and he was speaking without the nasal whine that always made him so difficult to understand. Even more surprising, he looked at her as he spoke, something he had never done before.

“Ivan?”

“Yes,” he said. “Take a minute.”

She looked around. They were in what seemed to be a huge building, although she could see no walls and no ceiling. The floor was like slate in colour, but as smooth as marble, without any cracks or joins. All around her were people. She had never seen so many people in one place before. They seemed to be lining up in queues, but there were lines in every direction, criss-crossing one another for as far as she could see. She and Ivan were still wearing their school uniforms, but they were faded, as if they had been put through the wash too many times.

“Where are we? What is this place?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” answered Ivan.

“How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know that either. It seems like days. You’ve been here the same length of time.”

Jennifer was amazed.

“But I’ve only been here a couple of minutes.”

“No. You were here when I woke up here. You haven’t said anything. It’s almost like you’ve been empty up until now. As if your body was here but you were somewhere else”

Jennifer thought about this for a few minutes. She was still utterly confused. Ivan was the only familiar thing, and even he was very different.

“What happened to you?”

“You mean, why am I different now?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know any more than you. But all my life I have felt as if I have been swimming through jam, while everyone else was swimming through water. My mind worked so slowly I could only think about one thing at a time. Now...”

He hesitated, shaking his head, as if he still could not believe it.

“Well, it’s as if all the blockages have gone - like going from riding a rusty bicycle to driving a racing car.”

“I’m glad for you,” said Jennifer, and she was. Not only for him, but for herself. It was comforting to have someone familiar nearby, and now that Ivan was more... normal, he would be a friend instead of a burden. She immediately rebuked herself for that thought. He had never been a burden.

She looked around again. Although there were so many people, hardly anyone was speaking. She could catch a whisper every now and then if she listened hard, but otherwise there was complete silence. As she looked behind her, she saw another familiar face.

“Is that Louise?”

“Yes.”

“How long has she been here?”

“Before us, I think. She was here when we got here, anyway.”

“Then why is she behind us in the queue? Where are these queues going, anyway?”

Suddenly Jennifer’s thoughts turned back to the events that seemed to her to have taken place only a few moments ago. She was still angry with Louise and her friends.

“I don’t understand what’s happening, but whatever it is, it’s because of Louise and her friends. I’m going to go and talk to her.”

By “talk to her” Jennifer meant “tell her off severely.”

“Speak to her if you want,” said Ivan. “But she’s here because she tried to help me, just like you.”

“I don’t believe it!” Jennifer burst out, but then stopped. Ivan wouldn’t have said this unless he believed it to be true. He certainly had no reason to stick up for Louise.

“Well then, what happened? Can you tell me?”

“I can show you, I think,” said Ivan.

He put his hand on her arm, just as he had when he reached out to steady her earlier. Suddenly her mind felt clouded, as if every thought had to be pushed through piles of sludge. Jennifer saw what Ivan had seen, and felt what he had felt. She was single-mindedly focussed on one thing – a bag lying in the street. Part of Jennifer’s mind stood back and watched while what seemed to be another part of her moved towards the bag, unaware of anything else. She heard a voice call out “Ivan, stop!” It was her voice, but Ivan, confused, only stopped for a second and looked behind him before continuing across the road. What Jennifer saw as Ivan looked back could not have surprised her more. Louise, looking stricken with guilt, had stepped out onto the road just behind Ivan. She raced towards him, and reached him just as the car swerved and struck them both.

Ivan removed his hand, and Jennifer’s thoughts flowed freely again, as if the brakes had been taken off.

“How did you do that?” she asked.

“I think I’ve always been able to,” said Ivan. “But I didn’t understand how or what it was till now. It’s happened couple of times by accident with my grandmother. I don’t think she understood it either. Perhaps that’s why she got so confused sometimes.”

“I can see why,” said Jennifer. “And I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“For not understanding what it was like for you. Or even worse, not really caring about it. I’ve thought unkind things about you, just like the other girls.”

“Yes,” said Ivan. “But you didn’t say them. You were always nice to me.”

Jennifer turned to look at Louise again.

“Shall we both go and talk to her? Perhaps it would be good if we were all together.”

Ivan nodded, and they began to move backwards through the line of people. Most people in the queue stood on their own, although some were in groups of two or three. Occasionally there were much larger groups. Coming to one of these, Jennifer and Ivan tried to move out of the line and walk around the tightly packed group. They were only just able to do so. As they stepped out of line, it felt as if a strong piece of elastic was pushing them back. The further away from the line they got, the stronger the pressure was. They were close to Louise now, and walked in between others in the line for the remaining few yards.

“Hi Louise,” said Jennifer.

There was no response. Jennifer touched her lightly on the shoulder.

“Louise.”

Louise turned towards her, and her eyes gradually seemed to focus.

“I’m not sure...” she said, as her voice trailed away. “I don’t... did you say something?”

“Yes. It’s Jennifer Jones. This is Ivan. Are you OK?”

Louise did not seem to be OK. She still stared blankly, dazed, and seemed only vaguely to recognise Jennifer and Ivan. When they tried to talk with her again there was no response. Her eyes closed, as if she were dozing. They waited for a while. There was nothing else to do anyway.



After what seemed like a couple of hours, Jennifer noticed that the queue that crossed through theirs about twenty yards further back from Louise seemed to be moving. It was hard to judge objectively, because there were no walls or other objects by which to measure motion. But people in that line were walking. Slowly, but definitely walking. There had been no movement in their queue at all.

Ivan had noticed this at the same time as Jennifer.

“I don’t know where we’re going,” he said. “But we might as well try to get there. What do you think about changing queues?”

“I’m not sure,” Jennifer replied. “Perhaps we’re meant to be in this line. Perhaps they go to different places.”

“If they do, and that one goes somewhere we don’t want to be, we can always just come back. We already know we can go backwards in line if we want to.”

Jennifer hadn’t thought of this, but agreed. They might as well be doing something. She spoke to Louise.

“Louise. Louise!” She waited a second. “Louise, we’re going to try another queue. Do you want to come with us?”

There was still no response. Jennifer tried to take her hand and lead her, but Louise seemed to be glued in place, and Jennifer could not budge her. She thought for a moment and then turned to Ivan.

“Can you do... whatever you do? Can you make her understand? We can’t just leave her here.”

“I’ll try.”

Ivan placed his hand on Louise’s arm. A moment later she shuddered suddenly, as if waking out of a deep sleep, and opened her eyes again.

“Oh,” she said. “Yes. All right. I’ll come.”

## Chapter Two

### Lines and Rules

Just behind the three children was a large group of people, all of whom seemed to have arrived at the same time. Rather than shove her way through the knotted crowd, Louise tried to walk across the diagonal, directly from their queue to a place in the other. She was pushed back into line with such force that she almost knocked Jennifer and Ivan over.

“I don’t think you can cross between lines like that,” said Ivan. “The further you get from the line, the more it pushes you back.”

“What pushes you back?” said Louise.

“I don’t know. Jennifer and I tried to get out of line before. You can go a little way, but then you get pushed back.”

“But why? Does that mean someone is watching us? Or is just, I don’t know, set up that way?”

Neither Ivan nor Jennifer knew the answers to those questions, but Louise, who had never had much regard for rules, had a suggestion.

“Why don’t we try it all together? The three of us running in the same direction at the same time? It can’t do any harm.”

Neither Ivan nor Jennifer was so sure about that. It was not always clear, even in the world they knew, what the consequences of words and actions would be. Even the best plans sometimes had unintended outcomes. Here in this place, they did not know what the rules were, or why those rules existed. But after a short discussion they decided to try it. Although whatever had pushed them back into line had done so with force, it had not seemed to wish them any harm.

Holding hands and charging at full speed, they got further across the space between the queues than any of them had before. Just before they were flung back into line, Jennifer saw a shimmering ribbon that extended about six feet up from the floor, and which only became visible as they pressed against it. The ribbon strained, almost to

the point of tearing, and then flexed back. This time they did not land on their feet, and it took a few moments for them to catch their breath.

“I won’t try that again in a hurry” said Ivan.

“But did you see the ribbon?” asked Jennifer. They had.

“It almost broke, I’m sure of it. I think we could do it, especially if we began from where it starts to push on the other side to get some speed up, and ran into the ribbon shoulder first.”

“Even if we could,” said Ivan “I’m not sure it’s the right thing to do. We don’t know why those barriers are there. They could be there to protect us.”

“Yes,” said Louise. “Or we could be in some sort of gigantic spider’s web, slowly being funnelled into some horrible place where we’re all going to be eaten.”

“I don’t think that’s right,” said Ivan. “And I’m not ready to try that again. We don’t know enough about this place to go breaking the rules yet. I vote we just keep going up the line, and see if we can change to the other queue where it crosses this one.”

“And get to where we’ll be eaten sooner,” said Louise sarcastically. “What a great idea.”

“Look,” said Jennifer. “We don’t know. If there’s something bad ahead then we can come back. Why don’t we just go on up the queue together? If we get stuck and we need to try to get across between the lines, we can do that when we need to.”

But getting through the knot of people was not as easy as they hoped. No one objected to their moving back in the line. No one spoke at all. But all the people were all glued in place, as Louise had been, and it was impossible to move them. After what felt like several hours, the three children finished clambering through the group, and reached the point where the queues crossed. They turned easily into the new line, and began to move with all the others towards some unseen and far off place.

Progress was painfully slow. They could only judge how fast they were going by the number of steps they took – about one every half hour – and by the distance between

them and the queue they had just left. Quite suddenly, if anything could be sudden at that speed, their queue stopped, and the one they had just left began to move.

“I knew this was a stupid idea,” said Louise. “You don’t have any idea what you’re doing.”

“Why was it a stupid idea?” said Ivan. “You’re the one who was worried about going faster. Getting to where we’ll be eaten, you said. You should be happy we’re going nowhere.”

“I want to go back to the queue we were in before,” said Louise.

“Why don’t we just try going forward?” said Jennifer. “No one minded when we went backwards in line. Let’s see what happens when we go forward in line.”

“Why not?” said Ivan. “I don’t care what we do, as long as we’re not standing around doing nothing.”

Going forward was just as easy, or hard, as going back had been. No one spoke or complained. After about half an hour, they began to feel they were making some progress, though they were no wiser about what it was they were progressing towards. But then, emerging between the legs of a group of about a dozen people, through whom they had wriggled and squirmed, they heard a voice.

“It’s not a good idea to go forward in the queue.”

A tall, distinguished looking man was standing facing them. That was a first. He was looking in the wrong direction – everyone else they had seen had been facing towards what they all assumed was the front of the line. He looked as if he had been waiting for them, and in fact, that was exactly what he had been doing.

“Why not?” said Louise. “We’re not just going to wait around forever.”

“Hmm..,” said the man. “I don’t think it would be forever.”

“Well, I don’t care,” said Louise “I’m not just waiting around for whatever. I have rights. I’m entitled to know what’s going on.”

“Are you? Then you’re entitled to more than I am.” He looked closely at her. “I don’t think so. But it’s not my job to argue with you. I am just a messenger. It’s not a good

idea to go forward. If you stay where you are in line now, there will be no trouble. But if you don't..."

"If we don't, what?" said Jennifer. "Are you threatening us?"

"Not at all. The opposite. I'm warning you."

"About what?" Jennifer asked. "What could go wrong?"

But at this, the man simply smiled and walked away – between the lines – and was gone.

"Did you see that?" said Ivan. "He did it. He walked between the lines."

"Yes," answered Jennifer. "But he obviously belongs here, or works here, or something."

"I don't care," said Louise. "I didn't like him. I don't see any reason why we should stop just because he said so." With this, she started moving forward again.

"Wait, Louise," said Ivan. "We need to think about this. I'm all in favour of moving forward, but whoever that guy was, he knows more about this place than we do, and we don't have any reason to think he wants to hurt us."

Jennifer agreed with Ivan, but Louise was determined and would not stop. They followed her, walking slowly through the line as they spoke. As they weaved in and out of other people, they did not notice they had turned into another queue. They continued to argue, not noticing what was happening around them.

Ivan stopped.

"Something's wrong. Stop".

Jennifer stopped, but Louise kept moving doggedly forward.

"Louise, stop. Look around."

She did. In the other queues they been in, the people looked more or less normal. As normal as they could look when stuck on the spot or shuffling forward in silence. But here the people were talking. They spoke in different languages, but all their words

were angry, full of spite, cursing and blaming, spitting and raging, eyes glaring, looking for escape.

“What is this?” said Jennifer. “What’s happened?”

“Up ahead it’s worse,” said Ivan. “Look. Listen.”

They still could not see the end of the line, but from this point on there seemed to be no other lines crossing this one. The further ahead they looked, the more motion there was. This group of people was not quiet, reflective, absorbed as the others had been. They were loud and active. They screeching and complained, striking each other, pulling each other’s hair, kicking those closest to them. They seemed to hate and fear everything and everyone around them. Even worse, over the chaotic sounds of the people in the queue the children could hear other sounds, frightening sounds. Faintly but chillingly from the distance came screams of pain and terror.

## Chapter Three

### A Narrow Escape

Trying to avoid being noticed by the angry and violent people around them, the children kept still and talked quietly about what they should do.

“All right,” said Louise. “I was wrong. This is bad. We should have stayed where we were.”

“It’s not your fault,” said Jennifer. “We all came along. But what do we do now? Wherever these people are going, I don’t want to be there.”

“I suggest we stop talking about it, and just get moving,” said Ivan. “We just need to go back to where the lines crossed, and get to where we were before.”

But this proved harder than they thought. It soon became clear that only they, of all the people in this line, could move backwards and forwards by their own will. The others were driven relentlessly forward, and even though they could move from side to side, if they tried to move backwards, they slipped and fell as if the floor was covered in oil. As Jennifer, Louise and Ivan stepped around and between them, they raged and yelled and clawed at the children, demanding to know what was so special about them, threatening to strangle them, or worse, if they got their hands on them.

They knew they had not travelled far from the intersecting line where they had accidentally turned off. Dodging backwards and forwards, they soon reached a point where they could see the place where the lines crossed. Laughter of relief passed between them.

This brief happiness quickly changed to doubt and fear. Moving on further, they saw that a group of at least a hundred people had passed the intersection and was between them and any hope of return. Even if the group had been still and quiet it would have been difficult to struggle through, but these people were densely packed together, striking and lunging at each other with contorted faces.

As the children approached, one of the men in the group, a tall, long fingered man with a sharp, scarred face, noticed the children. Ignoring his neighbours he began to

call to them. His voice was gentle and encouraging. They could not understand what he said, but somehow his intention seemed make itself clear in their minds. He meant them no harm. He had been caught up with these vile people through no fault of his own. He was terribly afraid. The children could help him, and he could help them. He knew a way out, but needed other people to reach it. None of those with him would co-operate, and anyway, he did not know them.

He spoke softly, and almost without noticing, the children moved closer to catch his words. Ivan was almost within reach when the man smiled. Jennifer was the only one who saw this, and she snapped back, dragging the others with her.

“What are you doing?” demanded Louise. “I want to hear.”

“No you don’t,” said Jennifer. “You don’t want to hear at all. He’s not what he seems to be. We’ve got to get away. Now.”

“What’s the problem?” asked Ivan. “He seems all right to me.”

“No! He smiled.”

“Oh! Well that’s shocking,” said Louise. “Smiling, imagine that.”

“Seriously, Jennifer,” said Ivan. “Why shouldn’t he smile, especially if he thinks he’s found some friends, or at least, some people to help him?”

“No.” Jennifer’s voice was urgent now. “It wasn’t that kind of smile. It was the kind of smile you see on a crocodile the moment before it drags a deer under the water. It was horrible, hungry.”

Jennifer would probably have lost the argument. Both Ivan and Louise were determined to go back and listen more closely to the man’s voice, to words as soft and delicious as the best chocolate ice cream. If he had kept his temper just a few more minutes the children would have been his. But as they were talking, his face changed. He became angry, savage, like a junkyard dog whose food is snatched away. The words he used now spun through the space between them like weapons. They had power in them, as if they were more than just words. The air crackled around the children, and their ears rang and prickled. But if his words really were weapons, as he seemed to mean them to be, then the force in them to break or hurt was somehow diminished in this place.



“Let’s go!” shouted Jennifer. “We’ve got to do it. We’ve got to try to break through the ribbon.”

There was no disagreement now. Even though the man’s ability to use words to coax or destroy was drained to a shadow, all of them knew he was dangerous and intended them harm. What that harm was they did not know, but he wanted to use or consume them somehow. The other two shared Jennifer’s horror. They were determined to get away.

They raced to the side of the line furthest from him, and holding hands, pushed against the ribbon till it became visible, a shimmering wall of light about six feet high. Using the extra push of the wall, they accelerated to the other side, turning their shoulders into the ribbon as it began to press against them. It began to tear, and a different kind of light was visible on the other side. Jennifer began to press through the gap, the others pushing from behind. Somewhere far off an alarm began to sound, but they were almost through.

Ivan was last. He forced his head and shoulders through. The girls were pulling on his arms and body from the other side. Just his legs to go. Suddenly a long fingered hand grabbed his ankle. Ivan kicked and struggled, but could not shake loose. Hard bony fingers dug into his flesh and dragged him back with tremendous force. At the same time the gap they had torn in the ribbon seemed to be closing of its own accord. The girls fought to hold on, and they and Ivan struggled furiously, edging further into the other side. One leg through.

Ivan was in terrible pain. The ribbon closed around his ankle. He and girls gave one last desperate pull, and then everything changed. The ribbon seemed to tear again. The alarm rang through urgently from the other side, but was overshadowed by a roar of triumph. Ivan’s ankle came through, a hand still clutching it viciously. Then the ribbon faltered, its rainbow colours blurring as if its strength was gone, and the man, sharp and scarred and sinewy, tumbled through after them and stood up.

The skin on Ivan’s ankle was raw where he had gripped it, with three deep gashes extending up his calf. Drops of blood dripped onto the ground. The man reached down and wiped them up with his hand. He licked the blood off his fingers. He sighed, as a man dying of thirst might sigh when he is handed a glass of water. Once again he spoke, but this time, the dark power in his words crashed down on the

children like an avalanche. The other two staggered, but Jennifer was the object of his attention. She collapsed and could not move, as if pressed down by a great weight.

The man bent towards her, smiling the same hideous, hungry smile she had seen before. Then he stopped. A look of shock and recognition flickered for a moment, and was instantly replaced by anger. He reached out, fingernails like claws, sharp and stained, grasping at her face. Ivan and Louise stood frozen in place, wanting to help but paralysed by fear.

Just at that moment, the alarm they had heard on the other side began to sound here. The man leapt up and looked around, with fear and rage twisting his face. He glared at the children with such malice that they flinched. They had done nothing to hurt him, yet Jennifer saw as clearly as if he had written it on paper, that he marked them in his mind, remembering them for revenge if their paths ever crossed again. Then he was gone, racing down the queue, shoving people aside as if they were twigs.

It took them several minutes to recover. They had been touched by something of surpassing evil, and shock and dismay sat heavily on them. They sat pale and still.

This queue was not one they had seen or been in before. They could see now that every queue was different – the people in each one had something in common, though it was not always easy to see what. They also realised that what they saw, or thought they saw, through the ribbon or wall between the lines, was not necessarily what was actually on the other side.

People moved slowly past them as they sat and talked and thought. Finally Ivan asked:

“Well then. What do we do now?”

“People have walked past since we’ve been here,” said Jennifer. “I think it would be OK to move forward till we catch up to where we were. Except I don’t think I would recognise any of the people who’ve gone past us. I wasn’t paying that much attention.”

“So you wouldn’t know where we were in the queue.” said Louise. “Neither would I. I vote we just keep going anyway. But we watch where we’re going this time.”

“I don’t think it’s that easy,” said Ivan.

“Of course it’s easy,” said Louise, who sounded irritated, as she always did when someone disagreed with her. “If we’re happy being on this queue, we just make sure we don’t turn off it.”

Eventually, the other two agreed. Jennifer would find the way ahead, looking for gaps between people whenever they encountered a group. Ivan and Louise would watch for intersections and make sure they did not accidentally turn into the wrong line.

## Chapter Four

### The End of the Line

After they had been moving for about an hour, the children began to feel more confident. There was none of the desperate spite and blaming on this line that they had heard and felt so strongly only a couple of hours before. People moved only occasionally, and then only a couple of steps forward at a time. But they seemed not to mind when the children moved past them. Some even stepped or leaned out of the way to let them pass more easily.

No one spoke to them. This was not unusual. The only people who had spoken to them at all had been the man who had warned them not to move forward in the queue (and whose advice they were now again ignoring), and the man who had seemed intent on using or destroying them.

Then Jennifer heard a voice.

“Can I come with you?”

She looked around, but could not see who had spoken.

“Stop,” she said to Ivan and Louise. “I heard someone speak.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Louise. “No one speaks here except us. I don’t know what’s wrong with them.”

“I wouldn’t jump to the conclusion there’s anything wrong with them,” said Jennifer. “Maybe there’s something wrong with us. Maybe they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

The voice came again.

“Will you take me with you?”

This time Ivan and Louise heard it.

It’s a little boy,” said Ivan. “And he’s near.”

They checked they were not near an intersection, careful that none of them would turn off and be lost, and spread out to look for the owner of the voice. Louise went back a little, Ivan ahead a little, and Jennifer stayed in the middle, making sure that both the others were always in sight.

Louise found him and called to the others. It was a little boy, perhaps ten years old, but small for his age. He was very pale, with short very shiny dark hair and large brown eyes.

“Did you call us?” Jennifer asked, bending down slightly so as to be at his level.

“Yes. Are you angry? Will you take me with you?”

“No,” said Jennifer. “I mean, no, we’re not angry. Why do you want to come with us? We don’t know where we’re going.”

“I’m scared.”

“Why? Don’t you know anyone else here?” Jennifer suspected she knew the answer, because although the boy was standing near a group of adults, he did not seem to belong with them.

“No. I did. My sister was here. But she went.”

“What do you mean “went”?” asked Ivan.

“With the tall man. The bad man. He took her. I chased them, but he was too fast.”

Jennifer, Ivan and Louise looked at each other. There was no doubt in their minds who the bad man was.

“Do poor Tom some charity, whom the foul fiend vexes.” said Ivan, but the others had no idea what he was talking about.

“Yes, you can come with us, if you want.” Jennifer said. “We could try to find your sister. What’s her name?”

“Clare.”

“And what’s your name?”

The boy looked embarrassed. “Tarquin.”

“Tarquin!” said Louise. “That’s just about the most stupid name I’ve ever heard.”

“I know,” said Tarquin “It’s not my fault. My father is a clergyman. Some of my friends call me Tarkus.”

“Tarkus – that’s even worse,” said Louise. “I’m not calling anyone Tarkus.”

“Tarquin was the last king of Rome,” said Ivan. But he wasn’t a good king. What about Quintus? We could call you that. There were some brave generals called Quintus.”

Louise looked at Ivan with astonished contempt.

“You may have gotten brainy all of a sudden, but you’re still a retard. Who would want to be called Quintus?”

Jennifer leaned down to Tarquin’s height again.

“What would you like us to call you?”

“What he said before,” said Tarquin, looking at Ivan.

“You mean Quintus?”

“No, the other one. Tom.”

“Well. Tom it is. Hello Tom. I’m Jennifer. How long have you and your sister been here?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps... We’ve both been sick for a long time.”

“How long?” asked Ivan

“Well, since Christmas, anyway.”

Since it was only January now, and school had just started, this did not seem long at all.

“You mean since this Christmas – 2007?”

Tom looked astonished.

“Do you mean the year 2007?”

“What else would I mean?” said Ivan.

“No.” said Tom, looking completely confused. “Last Christmas - 1886.”

“Whoa. Then, how old are you?”

“Twelve.”

“You’re small for twelve.”

“Look,” said Jennifer. “This is all very interesting, but if we are to have any hope of catching up with Tom’s sister, we need to start moving now.”

“But wait a minute. One hundred and twenty-one years is a long time to be sick.” said Ivan.

“But it’s not,” said Tom “It’s only a couple of months.”

“Tom is obviously a retard as well.” said Louise. “Two retards for the price of one.”

“I don’t think so,” said Ivan. “You’re English, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” replied Tom. “We live in London.”

“Who is the Prime Minister?”

“Mr Salisbury.”

“I thought it was Gladstone.”

“No, Mr Gladstone lost the election.”

“He’s right,” said Ivan. “I believe him.”

“How come you know so much?” said Louise.

“I’ve spent most of my life just listening. I couldn’t understand everything. Hardly anything, in fact. But it’s all still in there, all that information, and now I can find it if I need to.”

Jennifer was getting a little impatient by now, and reminded everyone again that they would need to get moving if they were to have any chance of finding Clare. They began to move, but Tom looked despondent.

“We won’t find her,” he said. “He moved so fast, and she’s only little.”

Jennifer and Ivan felt responsible for having brought the man through with them. Louise didn’t. She would have said, if anyone had asked her, that it wasn’t their fault and they had no choice, it was just bad luck that he had grabbed onto Ivan, and anyway, Ivan should have been more careful, and it was nothing to do with her.

But no one did ask her, and the children pressed on, looking ahead with mixed feelings of hope that they might see Clare, and dread that finding her would certainly mean another encounter with the angry man.

They followed the same system as before – Jennifer leading the way, holding Tom’s hand, while the others watched at every turn to make sure they did not accidentally slip into another queue. After a short time they were astonished to see they were almost at the end of the line. About fifty people ahead of them they could see a wall, the same colour as the floor. It stretched up as far the eye could see, and off to the sides until, well it was impossible to know, because what you thought you saw through the ribbon, through the space between the lines, was not necessarily what was actually there. In any case, here there were no other queues to be seen in any direction.

Set in the wall were two archways. In each archway was a set of double doors that opened inward. At least, there were no hinges on this side of the doors, so Jennifer and Ivan both assumed they opened inward. The archways were marked with letters and symbols that none of the children recognised. The letters glowed slightly with a moving light, which made them seem almost alive. In front of the doors sat a man at a desk. The desk was piled high with papers. There were three trays, and each of these was overflowing. There was also a small cupboard, a hat rack and a writing desk off to the right.

As they drew closer, the children could hear a conversation between the man at the desk, and another man who had reached the end of the queue, and stood in front of the desk.

“Name?” asked the man at the desk.

“Nicholas Freeman.”



The man at the desk opened a huge book and began to leaf through the pages.

“Freeman, Freeman,” he muttered to himself. “Yes! Or is that Freemann with two ‘n’s?”

“Freeman with one n,” answered Mr Freeman.

“Good. Well done. Just a form RHH 201, and if you wouldn’t mind filling in one of our customer satisfaction surveys. Take a pen,” he said, handing him one, “and I’ll see you when you’re done. And don’t lose the forms. They’re numbered, and I have to account for them.”

Mr Freeman went to the writing desk and sat down. He wrote, and wrote, and wrote, page after page.

## Chapter Five

### A Hidden Door

The man at the desk rifled through the piles of papers, occasionally making notes. Jennifer walked up to the desk and coughed gently. The man did not look at her, although Jennifer was sure he must have seen or heard her. There was a name on the desk, written in faded gold print. It said “Mr Alfred Quibble”.

“Excuse me Mr Quibble.”

“I’m busy. Wait your turn.”

“Why can’t you talk to me? Mr Freeman is still filling in his forms.”

Mr Quibble looked up, disbelief and annoyance painted on his face.

“Go away.”

“Please. I’ll only take a minute. I just want to ask some questions.”

“Madam,” he said. “You are not doing yourself any favours by acting in this way. Things have to be done properly. This is a serious business. We can’t afford to make mistakes. People don’t seem to realise how responsible my position is.”

“I don’t want you to make any mistakes. I just want you to tell me what’s happening.”

“What’s happening? How should I know what’s happening? I just do my job. And they should be grateful to have me. But no one ever says so. Never an encouraging word for poor Alfred Quibble.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Mr Quibble.” Jennifer said, as respectfully as she could.

“I’m sure you do a wonderful job. “It’s just, we’re worried about Tom’s sister. Clare is her name. And we don’t know where to find her.”

“Everybody’s got their own worries. No one ever worries about my worries. Look at all this!” he shouted, gesturing at his desk. “How do they expect me to keep up? It’s not fair.”

“Please.” said Jennifer. “In the time you’ve spent complaining you could have told me what to do.”

“No. Can’t see you. Can’t hear you. Too busy.”

As he was saying this he put his fingers in his ears and buried his face in the papers on the desk. Jennifer thought this was possibly the silliest behaviour she had ever seen in an adult. But now Mr Freeman had finished filling in his forms and returned to the desk. He smiled at Jennifer and winked, as if the two of them were sharing a joke. Then he waited patiently. Jennifer moved back to where the others were standing. After a moment Mr Quibble lifted his face a fraction of an inch from the desk and looked around to see if she was still nearby. Seeing Mr Freeman instead, he immediately sat up and assumed an air of efficient busyness.

“Mr Freeman,” he said, glaring at Jennifer. “A pleasure to deal with someone who knows how to keep the rules.” He checked through the two forms laboriously, ticking off every item on every page. Then he went through them again, putting a small blue stamp at the bottom of each page. Then he recorded the serial number of each form in a ledger. Then he put a large red stamp on each form, and placed one in the first tray, and one in the second.

“Just the release slip to compete now.” he said.

He took what seemed to be another half hour to write out a single page in triplicate. None of children could see what the form contained, but it looked complicated - lots of tiny boxes with arrows pointing to other tiny boxes. Finally, Mr Quibble seemed to be happy. He looked again at Mr Freeman, as if checking his identity. He tore the triplicate form off the pad, filed the two top copies in the third tray, and gave the bottom copy to Mr Freeman. Then he put a bright yellow stamp on Mr Freeman’s hand.

“Right. You’re done. Congratulations. Either door.”

Much to the children’s amazement, Mr Freeman thanked him for his efficiency and kindness. Then he looked back at the children and smiled again, before walking to the right hand door. The letters around the archway burst into life, racing in a joyful dance of colour. There was a musical creak, the doors opened, inward as the children had expected, and Mr Freeman was gone.

“Next!” called Mr Quibble, and tapped a brass bell on his desk.

“Hello Mr Quibble,” said Jennifer. “We’re all together.”

It wasn’t their turn at all. But the people who would have been next in line were an elderly couple with rosy cheeks who seemed happy just to be together. They nodded at the children as if to say they didn’t mind at all.

“You again,” said Mr Quibble. He looked at the others. “One at a time. Rules. Not my decision. Nothing I can do about it.”

“We just want to ask you some questions.” said Jennifer.

“Don’t do questions. Not my job. And anyway, I wouldn’t know the answers. No one tells me anything. I just sit here, slaving away, no appreciation - ”

Jennifer cut him off.

“We’re looking for a little girl. Clare. She must have come this way. With a large angry man. We don’t know who he is.”

Mr Quibble looked suddenly alarmed.

“Who are you? Have you been sent to check up on me? It wasn’t my fault. I didn’t give them authorisation. He just charged through the work entrance before I could stop him.”

“Work entrance?” said Ivan. “What’s that?”

“Nothing,” said Mr Quibble, looking at him suspiciously. “Who are you? What’s your name?”

“Ivan Leaver.”

Mr Quibble leaned over in his chair and ran his eyes down a list stuck to the side of his desk, covering it with his hand as if to stop the children reading it.

“Leaver, there’s no Leaver. You’re not one of them at all. You can’t tell me what to do. You’ll be in deep trouble. Pretending to be one of them, it’s very naughty.”

“We’re not pretending to be anyone,” said Ivan. “We just want to know what this place is, and where Clare has gone.”

But Mr Quibble was not listening. He leafed through his massive book again, and then looked at Ivan accusingly.

“You’re not even in my book. You’re in the wrong queue. Or you shouldn’t be here at all.”

He fumbled on his desk.

“Form RQ 312,” he said. “Lost or misplaced person. Fill this in and return it.” He passed a form and a pen to Ivan.

“Is it my turn now?” asked Jennifer. Ivan had given up, and was walking over to the writing desk.

“It is not your turn now. I’m assisting Mr Leaver.”

“But you’re not,” said Jennifer. “You’re not assisting him one bit. He wanted, we want, some answers. You’ve just given him a form to fill in. And anyway, you’re not doing anything while he’s busy, so why can’t you answer my questions?”

Louise had walked to the writing desk with Ivan, and as he began to write, she gazed around at the people waiting, hundreds of them, at Jennifer as she argued with Mr Quibble, at Mr Quibble’s desk, at the doors. Then she saw it. A trapdoor in the floor between the writing desk and the wall.

As Ivan wrote, and Jennifer spoke to Mr Quibble, Louise made her way to the trapdoor. There was a large brass ring attached to it, and she lifted this gently, testing. The trapdoor moved easily. She opened it only a few inches. She could see steps, then darkness, and far off, a silvery light. She closed it again quietly, and returned to where Tom and Jennifer were standing at Mr Quibble’s desk.

Mr Quibble had by this time adopted his former pose of fingers in his ears, face down in the piles of paper on his desk. Jennifer was standing with her hands on her hips, looking exasperated, unsure what to do next. Louise leant over and whispered in her ear.

Jennifer and Tom moved away from the desk to talk to her.

“That must be the work entrance Mr Quibble talked about.” said Jennifer.

“Is that where Clare went?” asked Tom.

“I think so,” replied Jennifer. “It must be.”

“Well I for one have had enough of standing around here,” said Louise. “Let’s go.”

“I agree,” said Jennifer.

They walked to the writing desk.

“Ivan.” He looked up. “Don’t stop what you’re doing. Just keep writing. To your left, behind Mr Quibble’s desk, is a trapdoor. I think that’s where Clare was taken. I’m going back to Mr Quibble to ask him some more questions. When I am sure he’s going to ignore me for a few minutes, I’ll come back here, and we’ll all go through the door.”

Ivan looked around to see the trap door.

“OK,” he said. “We’re not getting anywhere here. I’ll keep looking busy until you come back.”

It didn’t take long. Jennifer returned to Mr Quibble and asked again for information. He did not respond. She banged on the bell. He looked up, then grabbed the bell and hid it under a pile of papers. Finally he put his head down on the desk again, and heaped papers on top.

“Can’t hear you,” he said, his voice muffled. “Can’t see you. Too busy. Go away.”

She did. Walking quickly but quietly, she and Tom and Louise returned to Ivan, and all four of them went to the trap door.

“Go!” said Jennifer. She grasped the brass handle, lifted up the door, and the others disappeared into the gloom below. With a final quick glance back towards Mr Quibble, she too walked down the steps, and pulled the door shut behind her.