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## The Time Machine

by Ivor John

Feeling a jolt as the train slowed suddenly, she looked up from her book to gaze out of the window at the views. Fields with rich little girls riding ponies around leafy Surrey Villages. Then the beautifully tended gardens around Farnborough were abruptly replaced by the backs of warehouses, builder's yards with broken down trucks and untidy piled up scaffolding. Then as the train slowed and they moved towards the station, the backs rows of terraced houses. Shabby, bearing the grime of countless years of railway traffic and neglect. The ponies, replaced by shoddy trampolines, shrouded with nylon netting, budget patio sets and do-it-yourself decking, all revealing more about the occupants than they would imagine.

A young woman sitting opposite appeared to be looking at her. Avoiding eye contact, she pulled the sleeves of her cardigan down, to cover the faint, white lines of scar tissue on her forearms.

The programmed voice on the public address announced that they would shortly be arriving at Basingstoke Station and all around her, people stood up, rummaging in the overhead luggage racks, doing up anoraks, grabbing noisy children as they moved unsteadily along the carriage, lurching with the train, queuing to gain a few seconds advantage at the ticket barriers.

Sighing, she looked at her watch, it was six thirty. In November it was dark and she could see that it was drizzling, though not hard. A misting of damp raindrops covering the windows. Congratulating herself on having had the prescience to have brought her overcoat, she pulled it on, over her jacket and sat down, to wait for the aisles to clear. She put her book in her handbag, thought for a moment but then left her newspaper on the seat, somebody else would probably read it, even though it wasn't a red top and had more words than pictures.

Taking her ticket from her purse and doing up her coat she stepped off the train.

'The old town looks the same,' she thought to herself, amused by her allusion to the Tom Jones Song. The drizzle had turned to rain as she walked out towards the taxi rank. Doing up her and holding up the collar, she walked quickly the first of the row of black cab parked along the rank. She remembered exactly when she had left Basingstoke. Twelfth of September 2004, a Sunday. Seventeen years ago, she had not been back since. She remembered exactly how upset she had been.

Having packed a few clothes, and her few most important possessions into a small suitcase. She had hoped that the few other weekend travellers she saw, would not notice her tears. She hoped they wouldn't notice that she was holding back sobs as she spoke. She had a friend in Manchester and was sure she would be able to stay with him. At least for a while until she could find something else.

It was at eight o'clock for the appointment at the Crown Plaza where she was to meet her cousins to spend the evening with a meal and probably to talk about their memories. She hadn't wanted to come, and had taken some persuasion. She had always got on well with her aunty Pauline, and even though she hadn't spoken to her for years, she was sad to hear that she had died. The funeral, would be tomorrow at 10:30 at the crematorium. She was anxious about who else would be there, but felt she should go.

Climbing into one of the black cabs, she put her small case beside her on the wide back seat. The driver, put out a cigarette, and finished the conversation he had been having with another driver, before getting into the driving seat.

"Matlock Way," she said, 'I will only be a few minutes there if you can wait, then the Crown Plaza."

"They're opposite directions love, that is going to be a few quid, OK?"

He started the meter and they pulled off the rank, out of the station and into the Hampshire rain. It only took a few minutes to get to Matlock Road. It looked different to how she remembered. The 1960s houses now had smarter cars parked in front of them. Wooden shutters and wheely bins.

"Whereabouts do you want?"

"Go slowly, its not far up on the right, I'll tell you when."

She could feel her stomach turning over, her heart raced. She managed to avoid

crying, but then, she was standing in front of her childhood home. The home she had left seventeen years ago. Upset and frightened. It was very different, but unmistakably the house she had lived in with her mother, younger sister and him, Ian, her stepfather. It was as if the time machine, the time machine that kept bringing her back to her memories had brought her back, back to her childhood.

She knew it had been a mistake. But she couldn't avoid the time machine.