I

Salvatore Cavalli, the eldest son of a Piedmontese clockmaker, was celebrating his twenty-seventh birthday in the year 1815 when he learned that the King of Piedmont had decided to remove a large slice of time from the calendar.

This was disturbing news.

For several hours, Salvatore Cavalli's father, Roberto, had not been able to bring himself to pass it onto his son. He found the courage to do so only after he'd drunk several glasses of wine and eaten seventeen chestnuts soaked in brandy at the birthday dinner. Then, Roberto Cavalli wiped his mouth, put an eighteenth chestnut onto his plate, turned to his son, took a breath and said: 'Salvatore, I heard today that the King has ordered a number of years to be erased permanently from recorded time. What are we to make of that, do you think?'

Salvatore stared at his father. He wondered whether the clockmaker, a man of such precision in all his dealings, was beginning to show some inconsistency in his thinking. 'Papa,' said Salvatore, 'nobody can erase time. It's not possible. I think you must have misunderstood.'

But Roberto Cavalli had not misunderstood. With his mouth full with the eighteenth chestnut, he explained to Salvatore and to the assembled birthday guests that the King had been so horrified by the revolution in France and had suffered so miserably in his years of exile during the wars with Napoleon that he now preferred to pretend that none of these events had ever happened. His subjects were ordered to collude with this pretence and to purge their memories and their conversations of all reference to the years 1789 to 1815 inclusive. Punishments for disobeying the edict would be severe. Anyone heard uttering the word Bonaparte would be executed on the spot. The concept of *egalité* was decreed dead and had been officially interred in a dry well in the palace grounds. Worse and more difficult, nothing at all that had occurred during this time – *nothing at all* – was to be publicly recognised or discussed.

'So there it is,' said Roberto. 'The strangest decree ever to come forth, isn't it? And on this day of all days, my poor son. But there's nothing we can do about it. A decree is a decree and all we can hope is that we'll get used to it.'

That night, Salvatore refused to sleep. He stood at a window, counting stars. All twenty-six years of his life had been officially swept away. He existed only in the future – only from this moment of becoming twenty-seven – and all his past was consigned to a void, to a hole in time. He felt outraged. He came from a family whose profession it was to measure time, a family of rational, clever, mathematically-minded people. He found the King's decree absurd, adolescent, unhistorical, unscientific and untenable. He refuted it utterly. His father's cowardly acceptance of it infuriated him. He spoke to the stars, as they paled in the paling of the sky. 'I shall have to leave home,' he said, 'leave home and leave Italy. Leaving is the only honourable solution left to me.'

Salvatore's proposed departure caused anguish in his family. He was already an accomplished assistant in the clockmaker's workshop. Roberto reminded him that their ancestors had started out as humble glass blowers but that for four generations they had been master craftsmen, rivalled only by the great watchmakers of France and Switzerland. 'You may *not* leave, Salvatore!' said Roberto. 'I forbid it. You are not free to abandon the family firm of Cavalli.'

'I have no other choice,' said Salvatore.

'Think of everything that has been done for you,' said Salvatore's mother, Magnifica, crying into a piece of Bavarian lace, 'the start you've had in life . . . '

Salvatore felt choked. He tried to stroke his mother's hair. 'There *was* no start, Mamma,' he said. 'I have no past. I am a day old.'

'Don't be stupid!' said Roberto, 'don't be pedantic.'

'I'm not being pedantic, I'm following orders. The years 1789 to 1815 have been cancelled.'

'In public, in public!' whispered Roberto, as if the King might be standing on the other side of the door, listening to the conversation, 'only in public! In private, they still exist. And this house is full of proof of their existence and yours, and these things can't be taken away: your baby curls in a box, your first prayer book, your tutor's reports, the engraving I gave you of the great Galileo Galilei, the first little clock you helped me make . . . '

'I can't live only in private, Papa,' said Salvatore, 'and anyway, I want to see something of the world.'

'Why?' asked Roberto. 'What's wrong with Piedmont?'

'Everything. A place in which time can be annulled and events denied and history rewritten is not a fit place to be and I pity you and Mamma if you're unable to see this.'

Salvatore felt pleased with this quick and pertinent response, but some days later, lying in the cabin of a ship that reeked of tar, hearing the sea boil all around him and knowing that Piedmont was lost to his sight, he heard the true harshness of his words and, for the first time, regretted them. He thought of Roberto and Magnifica alone with his absence, confused and afraid, and for a while he wished that the ship would turn round and take him back. But it sailed on.

His ultimate destination was England. Rumours had reached Piedmont during the wars that Napoleon had devised two alternative plans for the invasion of England: to fly horses and men and arms over in hot-air balloons; to dig a tunnel, like a mine, held up by wooden planks, under the

Channel, through which his army would pass. But his engineers had informed him that balloons were too fragile for the English wind and the earth beneath the Channel too crumbly for a mine, and so the schemes were abandoned and England had never become part of the Emperor's conquered lands.

It was because of this that Salvatore had decided to sail there. He didn't fear the windy climate. He thought that time, in an unconquered place, would be running normally. He had heard that the English were a finicky people, who did most things by the clock, and so he was confident that his skills would be in demand and that he could make his way in London.

He became quickly acclimatised to sea travel. He let Roberto and Magnifica go from his thoughts. The motion of the ships didn't make him sick; it filled him with a strange exaltation and sense of freedom.

At Lisbon, he fell into conversation with the ship's doctor, who spoke four languages and who began to teach him some words of English – earth, soul, city, morning, river, house, heart, bosom, Putney, ironmonger, fog – and proudly recited to him a poem in English about the beauty of London seen from Westminster Bridge which contained all but the last four of these:

> Earth has not anything to show more fair:
> Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
> A sight so touching in its majesty:
> This City now doth like a garment wear
> The beauty of the morning . . .

From this poem, once the Portuguese doctor had translated it for him, Salvatore formed an image of London as a place bathed in silvery light, a domed place, with silent ships at anchor and all its citizens at rest in the early dawn, watched over by well-oiled and perfectly adjusted clocks.

'I was right to leave Piedmont,' he said to the doctor. 'With the arrival of this new decree, my family skills will no longer be valued there. This follows logically.'