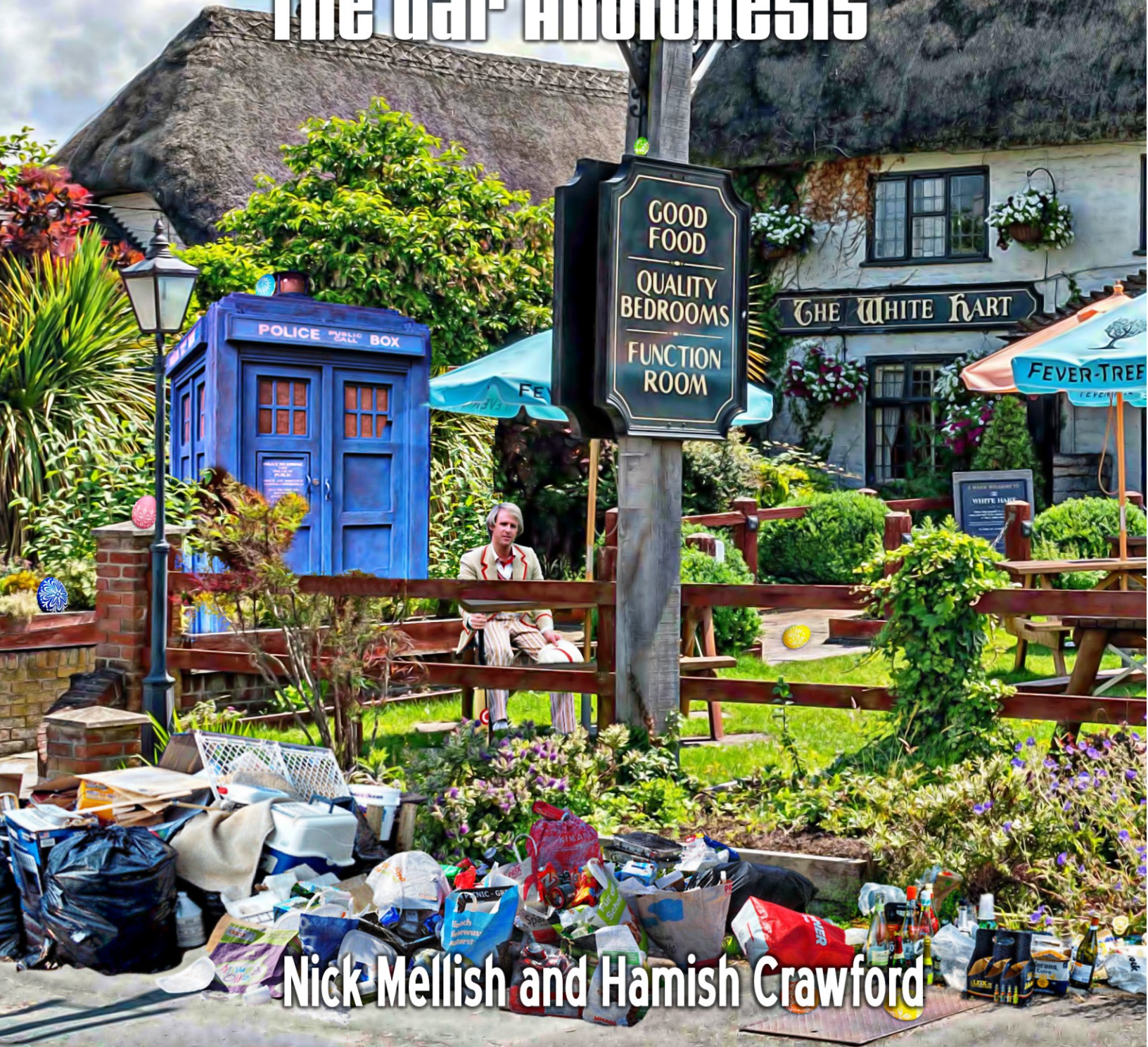


BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

The Gap Antithesis



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Phyllida Wynters looked from the converted windmill that was her home out onto the balmy winds and blazing sunshine of the Whitstable coast. She tramped down the path, finding an inconspicuous nook for the gaily-painted Easter egg. A few steps away, she pinned a yellow arrow to a tree, the riddle written on its opposite side. This should be a challenge to the village children.

What a lovely day for an egg hunt, she thought. What could spoil it?

A moment later, she answered her question. A lager can on the path, the dent in its side evidence of the careless violence with which it had been discarded.

Phyllida would not pick it up. She had picked up the rubbish on the coastal path before, and the litterers took it as an invitation to discard even more. If only the council did something about it, and got after the delinquents who ruined this lovely bit of countryside. If only people around here worked as a community.

The windmill's sails tilted in the wind, and Phyllida felt the sunlight suddenly change.

Travis Groyleston ducked into the wood, seeing the prim middle-aged lady on her warpath. His edge of malice had been sharpened by the numb haze of drunkenness he increasingly relied on to get through the endless, pointless days.

But when he saw her with her basket of painted Easter eggs in hand, Travis suddenly felt ashamed, saddened to have spoiled her day with his littering. Sad that he could only find purpose in spoiling other people's fun.

Travis thought back to Easters of his childhood as he opened the bottle of malt liquor. The simple A to Z: following the clues, getting to the end, accomplishing a task. On days like that, life made sense. There weren't many days like that in his adulthood.

Travis took a long, bitter swig and hid in the shade, closing his eyes against the painful oblivion of the drink, barely noticing the light from the sky had changed.

The Doctor rested his hands on the TARDIS console and stared straight ahead, the rhythmic gyration of the ship in flight barely registering.

It had been only a month or two (give or take, relatively speaking, and by her Tellurian calendar) since Tegan had left and things still felt off without her. Regeneration and companionship, he mused, were entwined in a way that even he found hard to define. Wasn't he the one who was meant to have all the answers? So Tegan often insinuated, anyway.

"Rabbits," he muttered self-consciously, noticing for the first time the gentle hum of the time rotor, bleep of the computers, and the more distant and inexplicable sounds of the TARDIS. This ship was much quieter without her around. He laughed inwardly, all too aware how she might respond to that.

Yet the TARDIS was too quiet. Kamelion remained barely functional, and prone to mental and physical collapse. Most days the Doctor would find him slouched in a corridor, artificial eyes rolling around in the silver sockets of his head, clearly suffering but unable to find the cause. He hoped he would be able to help, but his mechanical friend had struggled to assert his own personality, and the strain of outside environments on his mind had forced him to stay in a spare cupboard plugged into various TARDIS databanks.

As for Turlough, the Doctor found the young fellow difficult to connect with. They could talk shop adroitly, and his protégé was becoming adept at controlling and repairing the console. But he was aware Turlough remained uncomfortable travelling with him, and tight-lipped about where he came from and why he was stuck on Earth. Tegan's absence made him realize how much of their conversation was directed not to each other, but with her. Without her, they seemed two gooseberries.

"Still adrift?" came a voice. The Doctor looked up to see Turlough standing in the doorway to the control room, his school blazer slung over one shoulder. "Oh, I know that look. Tegan again."

Since that abrupt departure in a Wapping warehouse strewn with Dalek-blasted corpses, the TARDIS had been to Raghi in 2371, Earth's moon in 1878, then the Matasian Pleasure Rings, Restoration London, the ruins of Paramount City, and Mount Gysis. And after each adventure, whether restful or hectic, Turlough would enter the console room the next morning to find the Doctor staring ahead pining for that irritating, fascinating Australian.

"We'd been through quite a lot, Turlough. Though I doubt she saw it that way. For her, it was only a few short years. For me ..." He thought back, through the haze of a particularly traumatic regeneration, to their first meeting at the Barnet Bypass. "A lifetime. She was quite the force to be reckoned with." The two men shared a knowing smile.

"Where are we going?" asked Turlough.

"Not sure," confessed the Doctor. "I set her to drift and land when the mood took her. Thought I'd give the old girl a rest."

"At least that way there's no one to blame if we miss our destination," observed Turlough, purposely avoiding the wounded look upon the Time Lord's face. "Not that *I* ever would!" he insisted.

Silence descended; silence that Tegan would have unhesitatingly filled with complaints about the unruly navigation or concern for her vast extended family back home. Neither man could claim to understand her, but both had to admit she brought a lot of colour to their life in the TARDIS.

Turlough threw his blazer down on a nearby wicker chair. He stared at the uncomfortable, drab garment, seeing in it all his insecurities externalized. It occurred to

him that he hated his uniform so much, but had never bothered to look for an outfit he preferred. Instead, it had become a ritual that when he got back to his cabin in the TARDIS, he would wash and don it anew, wearing it as a prisoner wears their stripes. Duty, penance, arguable guilt. The full extent of his burden he dared not share even with even the Doctor, who was as close to a friend as Turlough ever knew.

Perhaps it was time to end his punishment, Turlough ruminated, leaving for the wardrobe.

The Doctor did not even notice he had left.

"Mother calling Mother Three."

"Mother Three receiving. Concern of call?"

"Temporal disruption approaching the area."

"But experimental grid has been activated?"

"Confirmed."

"Advise and report, Mother. Viability of Gar thesis is of utmost importance."

"Now come back here!" Phyllida called. She saw the young vagrant, the same one who always lurked about these woods. He appeared to be in his twenties; she thought he might have been a local boy once upon a time. She might once have felt sorry for him, but she put aside such feelings and focussed on her objective. "Come back here and pick those up!"

Travis ran through the brush, ducking down, but he knew the trees were not dense enough to conceal him. Ultimately she would catch him, and then ...

When the stiff-necked middle-aged woman passed, he backed away. The woods felt unfamiliar today, clearer and smaller. He was sure if he kept his head up, she would see him.

Travis now found himself by a riverbank. There was no sign of Phyllida Wynters, to his relief. Across from the babbling brook, there was a children's park, a few benches and parasols, and a white-painted Tudor pub.

Seeing the empty park made Travis look despondently at his trail of cheap liquor, the pain in his head more acute as he thought again of a time in his life when there seemed to be possibilities and meaning.

He jumped as a hand touched his arm. For a moment it felt unsettling, a trapping grip. But then he looked up and saw two dowdy spinsters, looking on him with lofty, but kindly, concern.

"You don't look quite the ticket," the brown-haired woman said.

"No, not the ticket at all."

"I ... I ... someone's after me ... that snotty lady who lives in the windmill ..." Travis felt self-conscious about his drunken slurring, but the two ladies didn't seem to notice.

"We'll make sure she doesn't find you," her grey-haired friend said. They led him to the pub.

The Doctor looked up as Turlough returned, choosing not to remark on the striped blue beach shirt and corduroy jeans his companion had selected. Close enough to his usual clothes but different, too. The Doctor wondered why, just as he had wondered why the boy obsessively clung to that drab and increasingly odd-smelling Brendon School blazer. Still, it had never occurred to the Doctor before, but *he* tended to wear variations on the same outfit himself, clinging to similar coats, scarves, and now a near-identical roster of cricket jumpers, like a frightened boy nursing a safety blanket.

Before he could mention any of this to Turlough, the TARDIS groaned its way to a landing. The scanner showed white cliffs, distant hills and sunshine, trees and grass, blowing in a gentle breeze, which also tilted the sails on a sturdy windmill.

"Earth!" he smiled.

The image flared creepily. The energy fizzing behind this flare erupted into violently strobing lines of colour. But this lasted only an instant, and once again the countryside and windmill appeared.

"Better." The Doctor grabbed a crisp stick of celery from the bowl by the hat-stand and shrugged on his coat, while Turlough pulled the door lever.

Phyllida looked at the police box standing between her windmill and the woodland. The two men who emerged were pale and fair, wearing light-coloured, old-fashioned clothing: straw hats and stripy tops. She wanted to call out to them, but something seemed to stop her voice. She reached out, but felt rooted to the spot, her lovely home and the walk along the cliff-side separated, as if stuck under a plate of glass.

"There is no need to fear," a voice trilled soothingly in her ear.

"These visitors will test our thesis."

"Thesis?" Phyllida repeated.

"The thesis," the other voice clarified, "*you* have inspired us to execute."

The Doctor stretched his arms wide and smiled as the sun basked down. Turlough sneezed as the sun hit his eyes and he shielded its glare with a hand as he looked around.

"Earth. Spring or summertime in England, I believe," expounded the Doctor, already marching onwards.

"How can you tell?"

"The scent! The windmill, the hills, and the sun."

Turlough muttered ruefully, "Summertime was never like this when I was at school. It usually rained more than ever."

"Your knowledge of seasons might be awry," commented the Doctor slyly. "Were you on Earth long enough to experience them?"

"I played rugby and nearly got trench foot in August," retorted Turlough, then stopped as his foot brushed against something. He stooped to pick it up. It was an egg, decorated with an ostentatious ribbon and bow.

"There's another one," said the Doctor, pointing over to beneath a bush, "and one there."

"Summertime?"

"Easter," conceded the Doctor with a sigh. "One thing you've taught me, Turlough, though I'd rather you hadn't, is that perhaps a little cynicism is not a bad thing."

A backhanded compliment it may have been, but Turlough thanked him graciously. They continued into a forest of rugged English oaks, noting more hidden eggs and the occasional arrow printed upon yellow cards fixed upon the trees.

"Two new humanoids detected, Mother Three, according to static local scan."

"Noted, Mother. It is believed they are related to temporal disruption. Mother Two to confer over next steps."

"It has been proposed that, as outsiders, they will be ideal subjects to allow us to put the Gar Thesis to the test."

The sun beat down, but the Doctor and Turlough found themselves cooled by the breeze and shade of the woodland. The path's twists and turns seemed maliciously designed to put roots and jutting rocks in their way.

"Do you think the Easter egg hunt is still going on?" Turlough asked.

The Doctor shrugged. "Not much sign of it ... or of anyone about ..." Something ahead on the path caused him to frown and tut. "Well, *there's* a sign of life, albeit hardly a pleasant one." He squatted to pick up a discarded crisp packet and an old tall can.

"Old Speckled Hen ..." Turlough read from the label.

Less than a foot away, they found a bin. This momentary victory turned to defeat when a few yards away, they walked across more rubbish.

"Humans," they said simultaneously, both chuckling at the thought.

As the walk went on, Turlough began to relax. Even the litter, despite marring the scenery, became a source of enjoyment: almost unconsciously, he began competing against the Doctor to find more litter before the next bin. In a way, it had supplanted the Easter egg hunt.

"I wonder where this path will take us," Turlough mused.

"I'm not sure," admitted the Doctor, trying to keep the pair of beer cans downwind. "Civilisation will pop up soon enough though. It always finds a way." The Time Lord's grimace at the cans made clear he used the word 'civilisation' sarcastically.

"There's less rubbish now," Turlough observed, looking at his measly packet of salt and vinegar crisps.

"But more frequent recycling bins," replied the Doctor. "Suggests more people nearby saw greater need." He walked up to a bin and they offloaded their findings in relief. "Ah, there we have it!"

The woodland abruptly ended, feeing into a river. On the opposite bank stood a sturdy white-walled Tudor building, a couple of benches adorned with parasols, and a play

park for children. For all its tranquillity, it looked oddly mournful to Turlough, with no one sitting at its benches or playing on the swings.

"A good old-fashioned pub," beamed the Doctor. "Nothing lovelier than a bucolic English scene, I think."

"Don't you find that odd?" Turlough asked. "That you should have this sentimental attachment to such a mediocre planet as Earth?"

"Mediocre? Dear me Turlough, I hoped you'd get over your judgemental streak by now."

"But why should 'Ye Olde English Pub' make you so misty-eyed?"

"They don't go in for real ale on Gallifrey," the Doctor noted. "If they did, it would be some dreary nutritional syrup. No, give me a decent alehouse any day. Perhaps with a dartboard, billiards table ... a touchstone to society and history, a foundation for community, and a jolly good place to slake one's thirst. Drink?"

"Well, we'll have to agree to disagree on Earth, but right now I definitely see the appeal of a cold drink."

"Vessel's occupants now entering area."

"Noted Mother. All prepared?"

"Confirmed, Mother Three."

"Noted, Mother."

"Confirmed, Mother Three."

"Noted, Mother Two."

Travis Groyleston watched, helpless, as the two unsuspecting men sauntered toward the pub. He could not even move. He looked from them to the indescribable horrors watching over them, a perverse glee masking their neutral-toned voices.

The Doctor and Turlough stooped to get through the pub's sunken door. The interior was wooden and spacious with long tables adorned with beer mats and menus. A dartboard, pock-marked from many previous battles, was fixed to one wall, and a full-sized snooker table sat close by. A careworn 1970s television set hung opposite, switched off. The birdsong outside and the whistling of a middle-aged man behind the bar were all that punctuated the silence.

Two ladies at the bar turned to the visitors. Turlough identified them as the Earth subculture known as 'pensioners', nearly identical save that one had grey hair, while the other's brown curls were flecked with white.

"Good afternoon," smiled the Doctor, raising his hat to them.

"Good afternoon. So polite," noted the brown-haired lady.

"Polite indeed," echoed her friend.

"Manners cost nothing."

"No money at all."

"Indeed."

This back and forth, with each lady's words barely finished before the other's begun, bemused both time travellers. Turlough avoided their gaze, while the Doctor gave them a complaisant smile and turned to the barman.

"Enjoying the nice weather?" enquired the barman.

"Very much so," the Doctor answered. "A splendid day."

"So nice," chirped the lady with grey hair.

"Splendid indeed, that's just the word," added her companion. They seemed to take personal pride in the weather.

"It's very hot," butted in Turlough, eager to stop these oddly inane back-and-forth comments. "And I am definitely thirsty."

"We've had a long walk," explained the Doctor.

"Drinks it is, then," said the barman. "What'll you have?"

"Lemonade," the Doctor ordered eagerly. "A pitcher, I think. With plenty of ice."

Turlough felt more adventurous. "A pint of cider for me."

"Now that's more like it," the barman said mischievously.

The two men sat by the window and leant back in their chairs, the first sips of their drinks sinking pleasantly.

"This," smiled Turlough, feeling an enchanting tingle from the cider, "is just right."

"Isn't it?" agreed the Doctor, clearly equally stimulated by his lemonade. "No rushing, no danger, no hostility."

"I wish it could be like this every time," said Turlough.

The Doctor sipped ruminatively. "I know what you mean. Sadly, my privilege to step through time comes at the cost of my obligation to help. And as Tegan pointed out, perhaps I'm unfair to expect my friends to feel the same way."

These words struck Turlough. He thought of himself before he met the Doctor: selfish, murderous, swayed by villainy. Even knowing those weaknesses, the Doctor offered him friendship and a chance to improve himself. And he had. Though he had not travelled in time and space for long, Turlough felt totally different from the feckless schoolboy he had been.

"Not at all," Turlough declared. "It's reassuring to think you'll always stand up for us mere mortals. Ever the Doctor."

"So I am led to believe." The Doctor smiled, distantly. Turlough hoped he didn't misconstrue the comment as mockery. He and Tegan were apt to tease the self-righteous Time Lord. "You should read my thesis. Borusa marked it down ruthlessly, said it was too worthy. Perhaps it was. I was much older back then."

"And the times after as well," said Turlough, remembering those other men from the Death Zone, who were somehow also the Doctor. Sensing the Time Lord growing ruminative, Turlough gazed around the pub. "Doctor, does your prowess on the cricket pitch extend to billiards?"

"Picking those bottles seems to have aroused your competitive streak," he noted.

"Aha! So you noticed."

"Only because I lost by three soda bottles and one crisp packet," the Doctor admitted ruefully.

"Who's counting?" Turlough chuckled.

They sat in silence for a while—not the sombre silence that filled the TARDIS, but a peaceful idyll backed by the barman’s whistling and birdsong. The sun beat through half-open windows, bathing the wooden walls in a golden shimmer. Turlough could see dust motes and smell distant beer and meat. He could feel his stomach rumble in sympathy.

“Food?” both men asked in synchronicity and smiled.

“You’ll need your strength,” the Doctor teased, “if you stand a chance against me at billiards.”

Turlough approached the bar. The barman was polishing a glass. He was seemingly cleaning it on loop since they came in, and looked pleased to put it down.

“What can I get you? Another cider perhaps?”

Turlough scanned the menu and ordered a pair of ploughman’s lunches and two salads for good measure. He knew instinctively that the Doctor would want some greenery: he was that sort of doctor. Turlough just hoped he didn’t pin it on his jacket lapel along with the celery.

“You look tired,” said lady with grey hair.

“So tired,” added her friend.

Turlough had not initially noticed the women were still there. The resumption of this eerie two-headed conversation disconcerted him anew. He looked over at them and offered a prim smile.

“Need a rest.”

“Good long sleep.”

He turned from their unwavering gaze.

“Perfect day for sleep.”

“Perfect weather. You’ve earned a rest.”

The barman smiled with undeserved indulgence at their babble. “That it is, ladies, that it is. Anything else?”

“How much do I owe you?” Turlough rooted around in the unfamiliar trouser pockets for change, but the barman shook his head.

“On the house, lad. You’ve done us a great service.”

“Such a service,” piped in the brown-haired lady.

“Helpful,” said her grey-haired friend.

“And hopefully you’ll continue to help.”

“With such reward, how could he not?”

Turlough mumbled some confused thanks and backed away, shuddering at the two ladies with their joyless fixed grins. Back at the table, the Doctor was looking out of the window wistfully. There, in the distance, some locals were kicking a ball around, the sound of it trailing the visuals by a couple of seconds.

One player blocked a goal, then the other knocked it in. One would trip his opponent, only to tumble over himself. These same routines remorselessly repeated. And yet even this distant, disturbing illusion was not as troubling to the youth as the behaviour of these patrons.

Had the Doctor noticed? He indicated the scene. “You could work wonders with some good weather and a green like that. Reminds me of Stockbridge ...”

“Doctor,” whispered Turlough. “The ladies at the bar ... maybe I’m imagining things, but there’s... something about them. Something wrong.”

"Just local folk," the Doctor said as he beamed at them. They looked back and smiled in return. "Limited conversationalists perhaps, but nothing to worry about."

Turlough thought back to their long silences, unblinking staring, and eerie bursts of witless banter. "I'm not sure. Something about all this doesn't feel right."

"Don't overthink it," advised the Doctor. "One of the liabilities of my life of do-gooding. I may have made you look for danger at every corner."

Turlough gave a half-hearted nod.

"Or perhaps you're just hungry," suggested the Doctor. As if on cue, the barman set the sumptuous platter before them.

The bread was hearty and crusts light. Cheeses, pickles, and piccalilli heaped bountifully. The mixed salad glistened and crunched, the cured meats were juicy and rich. The drinks were the perfect accompaniment to wash it all down. Their surroundings seemed once again peaceful. Perhaps Turlough was getting paranoid. Facing the evils of the universe will do that to a fellow.

After he had eaten his fill, the Doctor sighed with utter bliss and Turlough couldn't help but agree. It was far easier to be at ease with food this nice inside his belly.

Or so he thought.

The two ladies now stood at their table, gin and tonics swilling in their hands, those unvarying, uncanny smiles on their thin painted lips. Turlough did not hear them approach and their sudden, unwelcome presence caused him to jump in fear.

"Nice food?" asked the lady with grey hair, oblivious to the shock she had caused.

"Marvellous," said the Doctor.

"Oh yes, marvellous," said the lady with brown hair.

"Everything's so tasty here," chimed in the lady with grey hair.

"So tasty, yes."

"The chef's a marvel."

"A *marvel*! That's the precise word. Takes English pub food to another level." The lady with brown hair looked down at Turlough. "You seem tired still."

"Well, you two certainly woke me up, creeping about like that," Turlough grumbled under his breath.

They blinked quizzically. Minute frowns spread across their emotionless faces.

"Maybe I am a bit tired," conceded Turlough. "Lazy day, a long walk, and I've just eaten. To say nothing of the ill effects of alcohol ..."

"Long walk," she replied.

"Hot weather," added her friend.

"Unseasonably hot for the time of year."

"Quite so. Makes you tired."

"So tired."

"Yes..." drawled Turlough, finding himself again in the ladies' peculiar thrall and looking to the Doctor for help. For his part, the Time Lord's pleasant, open face was staring wide, trying to read between the lines and fathom the sinister ambience the ladies had brought with them.

"Ummm, yes, we picked up litter along the way," the Doctor explained. "Keep Britain tidy, as someone once said."

"We heard about that. Good fellows," said the barman from afar. "Every little bit helps."

"We must work as a community," agreed the grey-haired lady.

"I have to wonder if there wasn't someone who does it for a living," mused Turlough aloud. "Like a road sweeper."

The air hung heavily.

"No need," said the barman. "You can do it now."

"It's community," chimed in the lady with brown hair.

"Community," agreed the lady with grey hair.

"Communities help each other," noted the barman.

"Everyone together," said the lady with brown hair.

"Together," echoed the Doctor.

"Together," said the two ladies and the barman all at once in unison, and then fell quiet. They all exchanged looks of concern, as if they'd make a mistake.

"Doctor..." muttered Turlough, but the Doctor was already on his feet, his Panama hat clamped atop his blond hair.

"It's been a pleasure, but my friend and I should be off. Come along, Turlough."

"Off," said the barman.

"Departure," said the lady with brown hair.

"Leaving. Goodbye!" said her friend.

"Good day," said the Doctor, doffing his hat one last time as he hurried Turlough to the door. The barman had deftly moved in front of it, blocking their way.

"Why can't you pick up the litter?" demanded the barman.

The Doctor and Turlough took a step back and smiled nervously. No threats had been made, no outright danger appeared, and yet the atmosphere was as tense and fearful as Turlough had ever experienced.

"It's not exactly our line of work," he said glibly. "I'm afraid I find it difficult to hold down a job, and as for my friend ... well, he's barely out of school."

"But he says someone should do it," said the barman, indicating Turlough. "Why not you two?"

"Oh, yes, well, *different* people, different lives, different viewpoints, but locals no doubt. We're just passing through after all," gabbled the Doctor, glaring at Turlough to compel him to avoid talking.

The boy misinterpreted the expression, and opined, "I thought it was customary on Earth to have other people do those jobs. Gainful employment."

"Employment. Work. A job," rattled off the barman.

"Purpose," said the ladies in unison, again standing right behind the Doctor and Turlough, making them both jump. They seemed satisfied by the reaction this time.

"Purpose is good," agreed the barman.

"Community is strong."

"Work together."

Something in this feedback loop of stock phrases itched at Turlough's mind, and he longed to figure out the end of this train of thought. "But what if there aren't any jobs?"

"Turlough..." hissed the Doctor. "Don't antagonize them."

"How is that antagonistic? Look, I'm just saying there may be no other jobs around."

"Find one," said the lady with brown hair.

"Look harder," said the lady with grey hair.

"Work harder," finished the barman.

"I'm sure Turlough here meant no disrespect," said the Doctor soothingly. "Now, we really must be on our way."

"Stay!" ordered the barman, his voice suddenly deep, thundering, with a stereophonic quality, which Turlough realized came from all three of the pub's peculiar occupants, bellowing as one—and something else behind that too ...

The barman raised a hand and all went black.

"Occupants unconscious, Mother Three."

"Noted Mother. Not an optimal ending to our programme."

"Visitors had seen through the simulation. Programme could not be seen through to conclusion."

"Ten seconds, Mother Three."

"Noted, Mother Two. Check?"

"Checked and confirmed, Mother Three."

Phyllida Wynters and Travis Groyleston rushed forward as the two strangers crashed through the pub and lay, unconscious, in front of them. She grabbed at the hand of the older man, desperately willing him to still be alive. She was glad to feel his cool skin, feel the slow echo of (two?) pulses, feel some connection to the world after what they had been taken away from.

"Who is Mother Three...?"

The Doctor sat up with a start, the question on his lips. His vision was at first filled with a stern, frowning matronly woman of about fifty, sensibly dressed. She looked terrified out of her wits, and his smile seemed to give her some comfort. Sometimes the Doctor wished someone would smile comfortingly at him.

He looked around and found himself lying on a floor, cold and hard and black. All around him was darkness apart from Turlough, stirring now by his side, taking a little longer to come round. One of the many perks of Time Lord physiology was that revival tended to come quickly, especially when dealt with a low-level, near-proximity telepathic blow.

Beside Turlough crouched an unfortunate-looking man with heavy beard shadow and a glaze of sweat slickening his face. Beneath some possible inebriation, he had the same shell-shocked incomprehension as the woman.

Looming over them were the barman and two ladies, their features wreathed in a sparkling shower of light.

"Doctor, where are we?" asked Turlough.

"I'm not sure," admitted the Doctor.

They sat in silence as the trio shimmered into rotund, bright blue conical creatures. In place of their human features were protruding elephantine trunks. Tufts of bristly hair

surrounded their thin lips. Their conical bodies bloomed outwards to four spider-like arched legs.

Their blue skin shone slickly, as if they were sweating beneath powerful stage lights, and they smelt faintly of seaweed and cut grass. Turlough wondered what they would feel like if he touched them but thought better of his curiosity.

"What are they?" asked Turlough.

"Aliens!" gasped the sweaty man.

"I wish I could be more specific," shrugged the Doctor, annoyed at this second confession of ignorance. He stood up. Turlough marvelled at his stolid insistence on maintaining good manners no matter how hostile the circumstances. "Hello, I'm the Doctor."

"'Doctor'—a professional title," said one of the creatures. It was hard to say whether it had been the barman or one of the two ladies. "No designation? Only the title?"

"That's right, *just* the Doctor." He had to be firm on that point; he wasn't about to share his name with the first jumped-up invaders he met.

"Noted," said another. "And what title does occupant the second use?"

"Turlough. He's my friend."

"Is 'friend' profession of the second occupant?"

Turlough shook his head. "Friendship isn't an occupation, it's a hobby. Something that enriches life. My occupation is ..." He felt a shiver when he contemplated his life before he was exiled to Earth. Now was certainly not the time to go into all that business. Instead, he retained his simple Earth identity. "Student."

"Confirmed," said the third creature. "Doctor is primary visitor, Student Turlough secondary, Mother Three. Note that."

"So noted, Mother Two."

"Mother, Mother Two, Mother Three," counted the Doctor, pointing his rolled-up hat at each in turn.

"Accurate," intoned Mother tonelessly.

"Where are we?" asked Turlough, stepping forward. The three creatures retreated, not showing fear so much as healthy respect for personal space.

"Location stationary relative to previous conscious experience," rattled off Mother Two.

"Confirmed, Mother Two," said Mother. "Local Scan registered."

Turlough felt dizzy, but at least no longer felt that torpid drowsiness. "What's all this about local scans?"

"We're still in the pub?" inquired the Doctor.

"Correct, Doctor," said Mother Three.

The Doctor looked around the featureless space, his eyes scanning its nooks and crannies to identify any sign of the innocent pub. "The pub then: a hologram?" They stared at him with silent condescension. The Doctor made a face and continued, to Turlough, "No, not a hologram. A psychic environment for us to enjoy. Taken from these two poor souls here. A projection!"

"Correct again, Doctor," agreed Mother Two.

The Doctor turned to the two bewildered humans. "I'm so sorry, I never introduced myself. I'm—"

"The Doctor, yes, I heard. I'm Phyllida Wynters."

"Travis," the ruffian piped up.

"The pub wasn't real?" Turlough blinked. It had felt so solid and true. He could still taste the smoked meat and cider. He tapped at the cold, hard synthetic surface. It could not have been more different than the comfortable old English alehouse. "These creatures must have a lot of power."

"These creatures, yes." The Doctor turned to them. "You have us at a disadvantage."

"Mother, Mother Two, Mother Three," said Mother Three.

"Yes, but what of your race? Your species? How are you collectively known?"

"Collective we are Gar. Individually, we are designated Mother One, Mother—"

"Two and Mother Three, yes," finished the Doctor impatiently. "The Gar, eh? Judging by your appearance and technology level, perhaps some distant relation to the Uggrakks?" The trio left the Doctor's question unanswered, and he cleared his throat and pressed on. "I have not encountered your race before, but your psychic abilities are most impressive. Now take us back home."

"Are you all not already home?" said Mother. "Take time now to recollect no change in status of static local presence."

"That's not what we mean, and you know it," growled the Doctor.

Phyllida's blood ran cold, and she gripped at the Doctor's sleeve. "They want to keep us here, don't they?"

"Don't worry," he assured her, his youthful voice clearly not inspiring all her confidence.

"This isn't where we were," insisted Turlough. Seeing the three Mothers quiver to correct him, he quickly continued, "Well all right, maybe it is, but it isn't the hills or the woods. It isn't the—" He stopped himself. If they didn't know about the TARDIS already, he certainly wasn't going to give it away. "This is not our usual place of residence."

"Noted," said Mother Three.

"Confirmed," said Mother. "Temporal vessel ascertained on initial scan."

"You traced my ship?" asked the Doctor.

"Indeed," said Mother.

"Temporal displacement registered on initial scan at inception of Gar simulation," added Mother Two.

"I see," said the Doctor. "Well, my admiration for you continues to grow. My ship is usually impervious to scans. If you knew we came from elsewhere, why were you so coy about our home?"

Mother explained, "We heard you talk about your love of the place 'Ing-lund'."

"I might have known your inexplicable affection for this planet would get us into trouble," Turlough sniped.

Ignoring him and the Mothers, the Doctor carried on. "Why do you want to keep us here? Why do you want to keep Miss Wynters and young Travis here? What do you want from us?"

"All three mothers are Earthbound."

"So, you're stuck here?" asked Turlough, laughing coldly. "I know how that feels."

"Do you want passage off this planet, is that it?" asked the Doctor. "I am sure that something can be arranged."

"Noted," said Mother Three, "but not required."

"Confirmed," said Mother Two.

"Then what?" asked the Doctor, punching one hand into the other in frustration. "It's been a while since I've had such difficulty being understood."

The Gar all looked at one another, then Mother spoke slowly. "We are observers. Observation and influence are the purpose of the Gar."

"They were watching us?" Phyllida demanded.

"That's how they created that simulation," explained Travis.

The Doctor nodded. "I am sorry. Unlikely though it may seem, your planet arouses a great deal of curiosity from others around the galaxy. They seemed particularly taken with your littering."

Travis looked at the polished black floor, embarrassed.

The Doctor whirled back to the Gar to continue his interrogation. "What was the purpose of your observation and influence?"

"We desire perfection in any microcosm fit for Gar, and you run contrary to this ideal."

"Me?" asked the Doctor, his indignation a source of fleeting amusement for Phyllida and Travis.

Mother jabbed a trunk toward Turlough. "This occupant. Affixed designation Turlough," confirmed Mother.

"Me?" Now it was Turlough's turn to be indignant. "Why?"

"Because you asked about the rubbish," guessed the Doctor.

"Confirmed," said Mother Two. "These specimens—" Mother Two flailed a trunk at Phyllida and Travis "—harmonious."

"I beg your pardon?" Phyllida asked.

"You create, are productive and positive. The other specimen is destructive, negative, unhygienic. You wish for others to maintain this balance. These visitors initially fulfil this. Then Student Turlough disputes this balance. Result: antithesis of intended purpose of projection."

"Noted," said Mother Three. "Why?"

Turlough shrugged, straining to remember this offhand comment. "If memory serves of Earth employment, people can't always find another job."

Travis nodded in sympathy. "They're usually too stupid to work elsewhere."

The Doctor flashed the poor man an apologetic glance. "Turlough, don't be such a snob! You should clearly have enrolled in a grammar school." He turned back to the Gar trio, and brusquely declared, "My friend here is being crude, but his point stands. For various reasons, not every human can do every job."

"Individual merit," said Mother Three. "Acknowledged. Individual merit is a positive factor, allows for people to make steps forward. Work from lowest level servitor to monarch."

"Disputed," interrupted Mother. "Local data incompatible with statement."

"Statement idealistic in intent, clearly," said Mother Two.

"Confirmed," said Mother.

"Noted," said Mother Three.

"Seems they can barely understand each other a lot of the time," Turlough observed acidly.

The Doctor nodded, turning back to them to continue his point. "And it's not just kings or queens. What about age? Size? Physical fitness? Personality type?"

"Merit is only relevant factor," said Mother Three.

"Merit *should* be," said the Doctor, "but sadly rarely is. Earth society is more ... parochial than you might be used to."

"Ideal suggests—" said Mother.

"Idealism is all very well," the Doctor interrupted, "but here, right now, it will not work. You have to take steps towards ideals. It takes time, and sometimes they are found to be unattainable and you just have to settle on a good compromise."

"Com ... pro ..." The Mothers all took turns sounding the word out.

Phyllida said under her breath to the Doctor, "They were having a hard enough time with simple concepts. How on earth do you expect them to understand 'compromise'?"

"Good point, Miss Wynters." The Doctor tapped his finger in thought, and rephrased, "You cannot just expect your predictions, your expectations, to be fulfilled."

"If expectation is planted and catches on, ideal will be attained in time," suggested Mother.

The Doctor massaged his temples. "Oh dear. This isn't going to be easy."

"It isn't going to be easy because the Gar may have a point," opined Travis. Seeing the Doctor's sharply raised eyebrows, he continued, "Maybe society should work the way they're saying! What chance did I have after I messed up, got left behind, got dumped on my own?"

Phyllida patted his shoulder, regretting her former judgement. "I didn't realize ..."

The Doctor nodded. "Your interaction—with the beer cans and so forth—was the first step in the Gar experiment. A compartmentalized society, roping people like Turlough and myself in to clean up after you."

"And be rewarded with ploughman's lunches?"

The Doctor laughed. "Some humans I know would find such that a wonderful living. However, in practice—"

"In practice," continued Turlough, "it doesn't work that way, but you can't fault their principle, surely? They're not the first aliens to be confused by the nuances of human culture."

"Fair point," said the Doctor. "And if everyone did buy into it, it *might* be achievable. But it won't happen because too many will not."

Turlough looked at the Gar. It was still clear they barely understood the Doctor's point. It was also clear the Doctor, from his lofty perch above the affairs of mere mortals, was perhaps not the best person to explain or find an analogy for their confusion. Turlough looked between the Time Lord and the Gar, staring obliviously ahead, and the bewildered humans Phyllida and Travis, and struggled to think of a parallel. He took a chance. "Gar. Who is the leader here?" A pause. "Who is designated in charge? In your group here, that is?"

"No leader," declared Mother Three primly. "All tasks shared, all decisions agreed on before executed."

"Tasks should be shared and performed by all equally? That certain positions should not be set in stone, but you also have positions forbidden to others?"

"Not forbidden," said Mother Two.

"It sounds right up your street, Doctor," said Turlough. "Meritocracy in all aspects. Everyone equally involved in decision-making. No profiling or discrimination, just people getting on."

The Doctor chewed his lip. "Well, yes, but it's a theory in both cases. In the present social structure, it wouldn't work for Earth or, from what I'm hearing, the Gar home world."

"So everyone should get behind it and push ahead," said Turlough.

Beginning to understand Turlough's point, Phyllida chimed in, "Ignore if you're a man or a woman, black or white—er, forgive me, blue or purple in your case."

Turlough nodded appreciatively, but the Mothers ignored the comment, typically.

"But that's a privileged expectation," countered the Doctor. "Easy when you've got by with ease. Would that it were otherwise, but that's not here, not now, not this planet or life. There will always be people who disagree with a viewpoint, so what do you do then? Shout louder? Ignore the reality of things? Or impose your will?"

"Force? Force. That is why ideal to be executed here," said Mother Two. "Proof of concept."

"Confirmed," said Mother Three. "The Gar Thesis shall be played out."

"So," summarized the Doctor, "you have an ideal that you wanted to impose upon this small part of the Earth, using these two humans as test subjects, but reflective of the disparity, not the equality, from your own world?"

"Confirmed," said Mother Two.

"Incidentally, it is wholly immoral to use them, and us, in your experiment without our permission," the Doctor declared.

"Experiment was to improve quality of life for non-Gar. Holisitic benefit. Permission irrelevant."

"And ... what?" asked Turlough. "You just don't care?"

The Gar thought about this as one. "Confirmed."

"Oh." The Doctor looked taken aback.

"Argument circular. Uninteresting to Gar," said Mother. "Experiment still viable, but input of subjects unwanted, unnecessary, irrelevant. Therefore, recommend immediate expulsion of Homeowner Phyllida, Litterer Travis, Student Turlough, and the Doctor. Humans victims of Doctor's paternalistic attitude. Doctor, meanwhile, blinded by prejudice—"

"Prejudice?" the Doctor looked aghast. "Now wait a minute!"

"Arguments unnecessarily pessimistic and deleterious to experiment. All subjects will be returned and Gar will reconceive parameters of study on homeworld. As for Doctor and Turlough—you will be blocked."

"Blocked?"

"Blocked," Mother Three concluded tersely.

There was a flash, and the darkness vanished to be replaced by grass and mud and nothing else. They were all home.

Turlough sighed as he felt the seat of his cords, caked in mud.

A few yards away, the Doctor was hauling Phyllida and Travis to their feet with one arm each.

"I suppose the whole thing was a projection then?" Turlough grumbled.

"To match and reflect the hopes and desires of people unwittingly subjected to it."

"Like us?" Phyllida asked.

"Like you, yes." The Doctor spun on the spot. "A countryside free of litter. For us, a bit of peace and quiet, lovely weather, the perfect drinks in the quiet pub with the complementing food."

"Our lives are ordinarily a bit hectic," Turlough explained.

"So we pick up your litter, show spirit, adhere to their rules..."

"Or be stubborn, argue, and get blocked from paradise?"

"Get *us* blocked from paradise," laughed Phyllida.

"Wouldn't that make him the devil?" joined in Travis.

The Doctor joined in their laughter at the absurd symbolism of it all. "Somehow, that feels oddly fitting, doesn't it?"

The travellers had said their goodbyes to Phyllida and Travis. Perhaps by way of apology for her snap judgement being the basis of the poor lad's imprisonment by aliens, and perhaps to put their traumatic experience behind them, Phyllida suggested her brother-in-law might be able to give Travis Groyleston a place to sleep and a chance for some gainful employment, and the pair drove off to Whitstable.

Glad that this social problem had been solved, the Doctor led Turlough back to the TARDIS so they could find a proper pub and billiard table, ideally one not being studied by aliens. They trudged along the wood in silence for a while.

"The Gar had the right idea though, didn't they?" asked Turlough.

"Perhaps." The Doctor was still reluctant to be drawn into the debate. "The older I get, the more I doubt there is any one 'right idea'. There's nothing wrong with striving towards idealism. It's naivety that causes problems. In their own way, by attempting to impose a solution on humanity with their limited understanding of Earth's social structure, the Gar had the potential to be as autocratic as the worst alien invader. You can talk all you want, until you're shouting louder than anyone else... but then you're just another being shouting into the void and not paying attention to the worlds around you."

"Worlds?"

"Plural, yes. I haven't found Utopia yet. The name is well chosen—not just 'perfect place' but 'no place'. Still, I hope such a place might be out there. I suppose I'm political enough to keep looking."

"Or lazy enough to dissuade the Gar from putting their thoughts into action," offered Turlough.

"I've been called many names, but never lazy," said the Doctor.

"I know. Sorry. I suppose I like the idea of Utopia, too."

"It's a nice belief," smiled the Doctor gently, "and time will tell."

"And a Lord of Time would be the one to judge?"

The Doctor smiled more warmly. "I have ideas, but I'd never want to judge."

"Look!" Turlough pointed ahead, where the trees finished, and both he and the Doctor let out a smile of relief. The sun was out and there, ahead of them, was the TARDIS, now donned with bunting, by the windmill and surrounded still by Phyllida Wynters's arrows and eggs. The village children, who had no doubt successfully completed the Easter egg hunt, dashed away at the sight of the adults approaching.

"Home," said the Doctor.

“Yes...” said Turlough, then he hesitated. “But isn’t the sunshine and Easter egg hunt a bit ... ideal?”

There was a rumble of thunder and the sun vanished, replaced with bitter howls of wind and rain. They dashed to the shelter of the TARDIS, Turlough’s new ensemble soaked to the skin.

“Looks like you spoke too soon,” he admonished Turlough.

“Now this is the British weather I remember,” giggled Turlough. “And you said my knowledge of Earth seasons was awry.”

“Yes.” The Doctor let out a deep breath as he unlocked the police box door. “If you’re going to say ‘I told you so’, be a good chap and get on with it.”

“Confirmed,” said Turlough. “Noted.”

"Unlikely though it may seem, your planet arouses a great deal of curiosity from others around the galaxy.
They seemed particularly taken with your littering."

The TARDIS is too quiet these days. Try though he might, the Doctor is still racked with gloomy introspection over Tegan's departure. Turlough, too, is lost in feelings of imprisonment, penance, and conformity. As if to take them off their shared malaise, the TARDIS lands in a typical—almost archetypal—idyllic English scene.

Meanwhile, Phyllida Winters and Travis Grouleston find their own afternoon brooding interrupted by two dowdy but decidedly dangerous pensioners.

Following a trail of Easter eggs and discarded beer bottles, the Doctor and Turlough find themselves inside a pub enjoying a ploughman's lunch. But it is clear that this environment is too good to be true—that their presence here is a kind of test.

The Gar thesis is being proved. All of Earth society could be reshaped based on its results, and the Doctor's ideals may for once cast him as the enemy.

This story features the Fifth Doctor as played by Peter Davison

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