

THE DOCTOR WHO PROJECT

i.i.b

Hamish Crawford



Copyright © 2020 Hamish Crawford
Published by Jigsaw Publications

Doctor Who, TARDIS © 1963, 2020 by BBC Worldwide
The Doctor Who Project © 2020 by Jigsaw Publications

First Printing November 2020

Cover design by Robert Carpenter
Interior design and layout by Bob Furnell

Jigsaw Publications
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

All stories published by permission. The moral right of the authors have been asserted.

A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications Book

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication reproduced, transmitted in any form of by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval system, without prior written consent of the publisher is an infringement of the copyright law.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to any real persons, living or dead is purely co-incidental.

Typeset in Calibri & Times Roman New

***D**o the people we become shape the stories we like? Or do the stories we like shape the people we become?*

Picture a young child, living in a land beyond the farthest star. Perhaps the youngster was a boy, perhaps a girl; I confess I am not quite sure, so forgive me if the pronouns slip from time to time. How old this child was does not matter, because in many ways this child never grew up. If you know such a child, or if you were such a child, then you can appreciate how active imaginations can be. If they are lucky, children's imaginations grow and flourish, encouraged by dotting parents, a brother or sister, or enthusiastic friends of the same age. Perhaps they find an outlet in sports, perhaps in dressing up, flying kites, telling jokes. Or perhaps they turn to stories—written or spoken, simple or elaborate. For children who are creative, there is nothing more engrossing than being swept, and sweeping others in turn, into those private universes of make-believe. Life holds so much pain and misfortune, so who isn't happy to surrender for a little while to fun for its own sake?

The people in this land beyond the farthest star, that's who.

This child's imagination was allowed no outlets. Where this child lived, there were no stories. Children were barely tolerated, hidden under a cosmic gooseberry bush until they were whisked off to the Academy, from which they were expected to emerge as responsible, mature lords and ladies, far too proper to have any personality. None of the child's friends had imaginations, and none of the adults did either. Imagination was a pitiful and decadent trait, a sign of a mind wasting its potential, which could be better applied to something—anything—else.

So, this child, whom you or I might have liked to know, was very lonely. Not that the child was too bothered by loneliness. Oh, to be sure, there were times when the lives of the others, occupied with their careers and their duties from a young age, seemed enviable. But what our child knew, with clarity and wisdom that we could all learn from at any age, was that you didn't have to fit in to be happy. And you certainly didn't need to be ambitious or popular either. In fact, life might be even more fun as the outcast.

* * * * *

He had stayed in his flat all week. He made his usual list of goals, but somehow Sunday rolled around and he hadn't gotten any of them done. As usual.

He did pop down to the post office on Wednesday. As he did, he passed his neighbour. He didn't really enjoy talking to this neighbour and had hoped the snobbish fellow had already left for work. But there he was, walking from Flat 007. The Doctor found something untrustworthy in the man's *savoir faire*. His single-breasted, navy-blue suit was immaculate, and he adjusted his black, knitted tie as he climbed into his battleship grey 1933 Bentley Continental. The man looked down on his increasingly hairy hacking jacket, camp shirt, and corduroy slacks, frayed at the knees, and his old suede shoes, suddenly sheepish about his careworn outfit. Lately, it seemed like he was conscious of what others thought of him—conscious to a fault.

His neighbour adjusted the comma of black hair that had fallen forward and nodded a greeting. The grey eyes blazed coldly and underlined the insincerity of his narrow, perfunctory smile. To be sure, he was a cordial enough neighbour, but there was something rather cruel about his manner. As if to underline the point, he started the Bentley and raced away, the machine's engine blaring out contempt for polite society.

The man had hoped to stay out longer as it was unusually sunny this morning, but this silent encounter had flared up his recurring indigestion, so he returned home. It wasn't worth staying out long anyway. As he approached home, the sky greyed, and he had no umbrella. He detested setting out unprepared.

Once he was inside again, a moment of dread overcame him. Now that he was back inside, his flat seemed not welcoming but dark and imprisoning. There was some nameless dread lurking beyond that trip to the post office, a feeling of suffocation, a feeling that he had to get as far away from this place as he could. He found himself short of breath, his stomach churning. He staggered to the toilet but found himself feeling better once he stared in the mirror. He ran a hand through his long hair and stared at that long, Gallic face he had gotten used to.

He gazed deeply into his eyes. Then he shook his head and splashed some water on his face and went back to the kitchen in search of a pot of coffee.

“Cheer up, Doctor,” he said to himself. “Two weeks until the visit.”

* * * * *

The next day was Monday. At least the Doctor would get out that day, if only for his therapy session. He felt a cold coming on and rubbed at his throat as he waited for the bus to take him into town. It was a drizzly, miserable morning; the kind that made him regret moving to this town. He never had time to pay attention to the weather before, but now that he did, he realized he didn't like the same thing every day. It didn't have to be sun-kissed beaches; he didn't even mind a bit of snow. But it was nice to look out the window and never be sure what one might see. He missed that sensation. But here, it seemed you could count on the scenery to be permanently, unendingly dreary. It wasn't just his mood that was suffering from the gloom. He was sure his skin was feeling the side effects—all raw and irritated.

Raw and irritated, he chuckled. *Just like me*.

As more despondent commuters trudged to the stop, shaking off their tired-looking macs, transparent plastic anoraks, and other sad and ineffective rain combatants, the Doctor looked ever more despondently to the horizon. It was a paradoxical concept, to anticipate something without any eagerness. He just wanted to get to town, get his appointment over and done with, and get back home. Standing here was an interminable limbo.

He tried not to think of his discomfort—actively willed himself not to scratch his neck—and thought of the red bus. How lovely it would be when, any minute now, that reassuring 1221 would appear to drive him to the city centre.

1221... he remembered the number because it was his age... but that couldn't be right, could it? It must have been someone else's age. The Doctor frowned; it couldn't be anyone he knew.

This morning, his knees did feel over a thousand years old, he considered as he stroked the protesting bones.

"Morning, Doctor!" A familiar husky voice filled the air, banishing the Doctor's dismal train of thought.

"Oh, it's you, Emma." The Doctor turned to see a familiar dove-grey Lotus Elan pull up at the bus stop, its engine coquettishly humming. At its wheel, Emma flicked her auburn hair away from her puckishly beautiful face and smiled wryly at him. It was bright enough to make him briefly forget the rain.

"Where are you off to?"

"Oh, just..." the Doctor abruptly halted, silent with embarrassment. Emma was so unflappable, so carefree that he was certain she would not understand him and his neuroses. "Just an appointment in town," he ultimately said.

"Why don't I run you down that way? My usual partner is visiting a cybernetics firm, so until he needs to be rescued, I'm at a loose end. Go on. I could use the company." She gave the passenger seat an intimate pat.

"It's quite all right."

"No trouble, Doctor. After all, you know what they say about waiting for buses."

The lady beside the Doctor shot them a filthy look.

"I could give you a lift too, if you want," Emma told her. The lady retorted with another, even filthier look.

Suddenly tired of the manners of people on this street, the Doctor impulsively agreed.

The row houses faded to a blur as Emma sped past to the motorway. "They don't look quite so grim when they're whizzing past, do they?" she said with a laugh.

The Doctor chuckled as well. "It's a gloomy street, I agree, but it's nice to have a few interesting people living on it."

"Spare my blushes, Doctor. Unless you were talking about your friend at the bus stop?" Emma gave him a sweet smile. Did that sound flirtatious? The Doctor couldn't remember what flirting sounded like anyway. Suddenly embarrassed, he tried to find something to distract himself.

A copy of the *Daily Telegraph* had sunk into the seat. To occupy himself amid Emma's rather rapid driving and his over-analysis of their small talk—with his way of putting every encounter under the microscope, he seemed to be conducting his own therapy—the Doctor leafed through the paper.

"Keeping busy, Doctor?" Emma asked.

"Oh, you know ..." He thought guiltily of last week's unfinished list. This week hardly seemed any more promising. Even from the vantage point of Monday, it looked to be one of those weeks where one's ambitions gradually ebbed away. He was having a lot of those weeks lately.

He would have liked to share his listlessness with Emma, but she seemed so vibrant and energetic that he feared she would not understand his lethargy.

As if she had read his mind, Emma said, "Not to worry. We all have slow weeks sometimes. And I'd say in our line, a bit of a rest doesn't come around often enough."

The Doctor chuckled understandingly. “Quite. How about you?”

“Oh, another assignment, I think. I’m hoping to get back to the Amazon before the end of the month. The rain there is quite refreshing.”

The Doctor nodded. “Yes, I remember an intriguing summer I spent there with a chap called Fawcett.”

Emma’s eyebrow arched. “You’re always dropping those intriguing snippets, Doctor. I always forget you’re so well-travelled.”

“That’s nothing. The rains of Kar-Charrat—” The Doctor broke off, clearing his sore throat in embarrassment. He felt as though she had caught him in a lie. He felt he was lying himself, but the memories were genuine. However, the way he remembered them made him feel uneasy. He had increasingly come to wonder if they had ever happened at all.

“Well, Peter had a rather sticky experience with one of the cannibal tribes.” Emma arched her eyebrow. “Very prone to misunderstandings, as you can imagine. And the cannibals aren’t terribly forgiving either.”

They both laughed.

“You should consider yourself lucky to just be divorced, Doctor. Having a missing husband is far more inconvenient.”

Emma smirked, as though the “inconvenience” was no greater than eating a bad oyster.

“Don’t lose heart, Emma. I’m sure he’ll turn up eventually.”

“Yes, that’s what I’m worried about.”

The Doctor chuckled along with her.

“Do you miss her?” Emma asked gingerly.

“Emma, I’ve been divorced long enough not to feel awkward about it. I suppose I’m not the easiest person to live with.”

“Surely not.”

The Doctor fell silent, struck by an unsettling thought. He was having difficulty remembering how long he’d been married, or why they had divorced. Indeed, even his wife’s face was just a blank haze in his head.

“In any case, one must move on, not brood over the past. I’m trying to focus on the present. And at least I have my grandchildren.”

Emma smiled indulgently. “Oh yes. I always forget you’re a family man, Doctor. You seem so young and dashing. But of course, you’re older than you look.”

“Or is it younger? I’m having a bit of trouble remembering these days.”

“Due to visit in a couple of weeks, aren’t they? You must be so proud of them.”

The Doctor was filled with happy thoughts, but they were sharply curbed by the headline in the *Telegraph*. “Good grief. Another murder.”

Emma’s face clouded as she glanced at the paper. She tutted. “Dear me. Looks like it was only a young chap.”

Skimming through the unhappy tale, the Doctor found little in the way of useful information. “Of all the yellow journalism,” he grumbled. “No facts, just hysteria.” He made a note of the article’s writer: John Smith. No doubt they were too embarrassed to use their real name.

“I should make a note of the scores from the last Test. John’s been muttering darkly about the Ashes all week.”

“Ah, good thinking, Emma. Better than this drivel. I mean, what possible help is it to say that the police found a recorder at the scene?”

* * * * *

The Doctor sank into his therapist's couch. It was a stiff, unforgiving leather. He preferred the rounded edges of his couch at home, in which he would often doze off, usually watching *Antiques Roadshow*.

Today he told her about the *Telegraph* story, which had aroused his anxiety.

"Why do you think that was?" she asked, as if no one had ever been anxious about murders in their life.

"I suppose it was that ... business with the recorder. I don't seem to remember much else about the article. No description, no pertinent details, just that useless piece of evidence. What on earth does that tell us about this fiend?"

"He's musical," the therapist mused. "Are you musical, Doctor?"

"No," he said emphatically. "And certainly not a recorder. Childish instrument, really."

The Doctor wondered what instrument he might take up. Perhaps the spoons? Or perhaps he and a few similar fans might get together and form a band, playing gigs in pubs around the country. "Doesn't seem like me either," he said. "Perhaps when I was older... or younger, I mean..." His earlier joke with Emma was turning into another in his long litany of confusions. For her part, the therapist seemed disappointed by the answer. Not sure how to interpret that, the Doctor mumbled, "Well, whenever it was, I think we can agree it's too late for me now."

"Oh, Doctor, it's never too late, surely?"

"Please," he sighed. "I'm an old man." He ran his hands through his long, shaggy hair, quizzically. "At least I think I ought to be. According to my knees, I am."

She looked at her watch. "What a shame. It looks like our time is up."

The Doctor smiled thinly. He was relieved he got out before he really started to talk nonsense.

Try as he might to rationalize it as another manifestation of his discomfort or neuroses, the Doctor had to be honest. He had to face the fact that he was uncomfortable by the attention of his therapist. Of course, it was a common delusion of the middle-aged divorcé to imagine any and every person around him harboured a secret crush. Perhaps Emma was flirting with him, too, he thought with a self-loathing chuckle!

But there was something more about this therapist. She asked him such questions, as if she were looking for a certain response from him. Whatever it was, the Doctor consistently failed to provide it. There was a lingering air of frustration and disappointment that hung over their time together which irritated the Doctor as he felt she was allowing her own feelings, ambitions, whatever, to cloud his mental health. This session ended as each one before it, with her shaking her head and thanking him for coming with a touch of insincerity. Whatever she hoped to find was as elusive as his 1221 bus.

He sighed and shook his head at the unproductive train of thought.

"More delusions, Doctor," he said to himself. "Why would Hannah Redfoot possibly be interested in you?"

* * * * *

The child had known there would be trouble early on.

You may have heard tales of this child's home, although they tend not to like too many stories getting out in case people got ideas about them. It was deemed to be most improper, the

way some of their earlier luminaries had drawn attention to themselves, even going so far as to pass into the realm of myth. This was widely frowned upon as the height of gauche attention seeking.

Even so, it is unlikely you'll have heard how this child grew up, as the handful of tales that do get out tend to focus on the movers and shakers and give no particular feel for what it is like to live there.

It probably won't surprise you that this childhood home was a place where history, duty, and obligation weighed heavily on even the youngest set of shoulders. From an early age, children were encouraged—ordered, really—to plan their futures. And it was during one of these interviews that our particular child prompted a great deal of concern.

“What do you want to do when you grow up?” the Counsellor had asked.

A simple enough question which the Counsellor had asked countless times to countless other children. The Counsellor had long since lost interest in the answers. There was no shortage of ambition in this cohort of tots. Some had aspired to advisory roles; some to head the many bureaucracies and ministries that kept this utopian society so happy and well run. A surprising number had simply said they would like to be in charge. The Counsellor and the Prefects nodded to each other and chuckled sagely at the conceit. Amazing how many pint-sized Lord Presidents-in-waiting this class had produced. Or maybe even that was too small a title; no doubt some wanted to run the whole universe.

Not this child, though.

“I want to drive a train.”

“A what?”

“A train. It's an Earth transport device.”

“Earth?!”

“It's a planet on the other side of—”

“Yes, yes.” The Counsellor didn't actually know where this “Earth” place was and didn't care to find out. Worse, this child seemed to sense the Counsellor's ignorance and was all too keen to share some more information about the silly planet. “Never mind about Earth. Why don't you tell me about this ‘train’ thing you want to drive?”

“Compartments carry passengers and cargo along tracks from one part of the country to another.” The child leaned forward and added, conspiratorially: “Rarely on time.”

The Counsellor looked from the child's incredulous mentor back to those oblivious eyes, blinking innocently at the statement.

The child was getting quite garrulous now. “It's piloted from a front compartment by rows of levers and dials, and if you pull down on a cord, the train makes the most fantastic whistle!”

“That's quite enough!” the Counsellor demanded, shuddering.

The child was not mollified, instead silently drifting from the here and now to some daydream—happy on some distant world, terribly happy at the controls of one of these “trains.”

“Where in the name of Pazithi Gallifreya did you learn of such a thing?” The Counsellor murmured an apology for the oath to the Prefects.

“Nowhere around here,” the child answered with a cynicism that struck all the adults in the room as deeply subversive.

Reader, I don't know about you, but when I heard this account, I was filled with admiration for this child. In such a situation, what might you or I have done? Do you not think that we would keep quiet about our difference, realize that the world around us would not accept our dreams, and guard our words accordingly? Even we, who live in societies infinitely more expressive and

positive than this poor young stripling, would bow to the pressure to say what others want to hear, to fit in and keep our heads down. I hope we would not feel that we had to, but I worry that we would anyway.

Not this child, though. For he had concluded long ago, and this encounter, so mortifying for his family and the mentors, was in fact a happy and triumphant moment.

It was well known that there were worlds beyond theirs, teeming with life familiar and strange. However, everyone had the good taste to accept this knowledge with boredom and resignation. Such worlds could not match theirs for advancement, so their existence was more or less academic. They saw no point in exploring these worlds unless they had to and, beyond being aware of their existence, tried their best to ignore them. It was quite logical to suppose that they already lived in the best of all possible times and places, so why would they ever visit anywhere else unless out of obligation?

Not our child, though. From this moment on, his growing nose was buried more and more in books that had nothing to do with study, and that troublesome imagination flourished further. And something happened that might have seemed worse. The child's dreams moved on from the fantastic other worlds he might visit. The child began to ponder how, and how soon, he might get away to visit them.

* * * * *

It was after dark when he returned to the street, thanks to missing the returning 1221 bus. He was certain the bus driver saw him approach, and indeed made eye contact with him before putting his foot down and speeding the wretched vehicle into the distance. The Doctor saw the evil gleam in the bus driver's eye, stroking his neat goatee with one gloved hand while the other cranked the steering wheel. The Doctor wondered why he would wear an all-black outfit to drive a bus, but the driver seemed to have an overdeveloped sense of melodrama anyway. It only took a running commuter to make him laugh like he was about to destroy the world.

He had half-wished for Emma's Lotus to reappear, but she was probably off somewhere terribly glamorous by now. Their earlier conversation left him eager for more. It was nice to have a friend to talk with, a... "companion" if the word didn't sound too risqué. He never thought of himself as a social animal, but when he was alone, the Doctor tended to brood.

Night's cloak had replaced the dreariness of the suburban corner with a sinister air. The Doctor cursed aloud at the bad luck and tried to reassure himself that he was only worried about missing *Antiques Roadshow*—or was *Countryfile* on tonight?

But there was something else.

No people, of course. It was funny how the street could be so busy one moment and deserted the next. It was almost as if it had its own perverse consciousness and knew just when and how to annoy the Doctor. When he felt embarrassed and insecure, there were rows of judgemental eyes to stare at him. When he felt lonely and in need of reaching out, there wasn't a soul.

In the distance, he saw Flat 007 empty, its windows dark. Where was that chap at this hour of the night? No doubt terrorizing commuters on the motorway with that obnoxious Bentley. A funny sort of travelling salesman.

The Doctor wouldn't even have minded running into him. Any light conversation, even if it was about an unusually fine Solera his neighbour had tasted the other day, could have broken

these morbid thoughts. They had only grown grimmer since he left Dr. Redfoot's office, and now he was right down in the slough of despond.

The fresh air carried a chill, something that shook the Doctor to his bones. The flimsy cagoule he had put on was quite inappropriate for the day. It wasn't even his style. Why didn't he wear a coat? A night like this called for a proper, full-skirted Victorian frock coat of flecked tweed or, better yet, one with strips of yellow and red and tartan.

This wasn't working. His gloomy thoughts were still with him, and then, suddenly, a sight roused him to make his blood run still colder.

At the corner of the street, a few yards from that bus stop, stood a figure illuminated by the sodium flicker of a streetlight. It was a man of about the Doctor's height, wearing a coat—the exact parti-coloured frock coat he had just imagined—along with garishly striped trousers and a blue spotted necktie.

He didn't see the man's face as he retreated, just the back of his head with vivid, curled hair almost as yellow as the trousers and coat sleeves. The street was empty once again. The man had vanished into thin air. He had not been furtive in his movements, and he would hardly be able to blend into the darkness. So where had he gone?

However, the Doctor soon stopped looking around. A corpse lay on the street where the man had just stood.

This was a young woman, her scarf torn away at the neck, two ugly bite-marks trailing blood.

The Doctor leaned over the lifeless body, horrified. There was something discarded beside her. He picked it up and looked at it, confused.

The man had left an enamel cat badge.

* * * * *

As the child grew older, he realized that it was rather fun to get into trouble. He had a particular knack for getting into it, rivalled only by the adroit way he could get out of it. And it was rather ludicrous that so many people were afraid of it. The other children were most afraid of it, which made them avoid him. But he had long since come to enjoy his solitude.

When he wasn't daydreaming, he was playing pranks you'd never believe. He hid in the cloisters, blending into the darkness like a chameleon, just to see the stern faces of the guards when they saw the graffiti he had sprayed on one old monument, written in the old language. They had even summoned a cardinal, just to translate it—the looks on their faces as the old scholar read it aloud was priceless. They were so happy to know everything that these people tended to be philistines, and things like the old language, along with the history of their founders and the secrets of their great power, had all been forgotten or suppressed outright over time.

As a result, there had never been any graffiti on anything, and here they were finding some. No one had read the old language for millennia, and here they were seeing it in a most incongruous way. For all its vulgarity, the fact that it betrayed some learning made that cardinal even angrier.

Misbehaviour usually carried a heavy punishment, but they let it go unmentioned, perhaps reasoning correctly that as they knew who it was, identifying this particular child as the culprit would only encourage him and increase his notoriety.

The child was deemed notoriously vulgar indeed. "You will never amount to anything in the universe," one of his tutors said. "So long as you retain your propensity for vulgar facetiousness."

He chose to take that as a compliment.

That was shortly before the first time the child failed nearly every important examination in his young career. That put paid to any lingering hopes that he might make something of himself. And the failure, as well as his tutor's rejection, was the most liberating moment of that child's life. He ended up with 51% on his third attempt, but nobody's perfect.

* * * * *

“Doctor, I thought you might like to take a look at these.”

The Doctor shifted uncomfortably in the interrogation room's straight metal chair. He looked up at the doughy face of the police officer, who returned his gaze with a distinct lack of warmth.

“Well,” he corrected himself with a mirthless chuckle. “*I'd* certainly like it if you did.”

The detective spoke with a serrated cockney accent. He shifted back and forth on the balls of his feet, impatiently. The shifting grew less metronomic the longer the Doctor stayed silent. There awakened within him a perverse desire to stay put and see how frustrated the man would get. Yes, he possessed some long-dormant instinct for needling authority figures. It was rather childish looked at in this harsh setting, but the Doctor smiled grimly at the thought. He could have stayed there all day, but finally, he decided to give the copper's arches a rest.

“Why did you bring me here?” the Doctor asked.

“Well, you were on the spot when the last one happened. You found that little memento at the scene. Very observant, that. Made us think you might be able to help us with our inquiries.” The officer held up a hand to silence the Doctor's protests.

“I know, I know. You didn't see nothing, right? You'd be surprised, Doc, how often we have people in here saying they don't know anything, didn't see anything. Funny how a bit of time is all it takes for them to remember.”

The Doctor merely gave a defeated shrug.

That was good enough for the detective. With the grace of a punch, one of his podgy fists dived into the cardboard box on the table.

“Four murders... so far. Four... trinkets, I guess you'd call 'em.”

Dropped onto the table, without ceremony, was the recorder. Hot on its heels tumbled down a tweed hunting cape and a pair of ostentatious sunglasses. Lastly, and with apparent disregard for the internal dimensions of the cardboard box, the detective produced an umbrella. Its handle was red, carved into the shape of a question mark.

“Five now, I suppose,” the Doctor observed, indicating the cat badge on top. The detective nodded with surprising deference.

“Certainly likes his fancy dress, this murderer,” the detective mused. “Don't think you'd miss someone in all this clobber running down the street in the dead of night. A tailor's nightmare, that's what my sergeant said. Especially the description you gave. And yet you lost sight of him.”

“Yes, that was peculiar, wasn't it?”

The detective scowled so deeply that his face seemed to implode, but the Doctor meant no sarcasm. The murderer's disappearance was genuinely perturbing. It convinced him that there was something more than met the eye about this culprit.

“And then there are all these knickknacks. Our chap must be quite the collector, wouldn't you agree, Doctor?”

The Doctor ran his hands along the objects, nodding.

The detective inferred something from the contact, as his eyes suddenly carried an unsavoury gleam.

“Recognize anything?”

“Why would I?”

“You saw the murderer. The descriptions we get seem incompatible—tall distinguished gent with silver hair and a big hooter, little bloke with a straw hat.”

“I didn’t see his face, but all I did see was curly blond hair.”

“I don’t really like that inconsistency, myself.”

“Hardly inconsistent.”

“Why?”

“Maybe more than one. There might even be a gang of them. Now there is a ghoulis thought.”

“Everything we know suggests this suspect is acting alone. So, I ask you again, Doctor. Did you recognize him, perhaps?”

Now it was the Doctor’s turn to chuckle without humour. Should he mention that he imagined the murderer right down to his improbable coat before he saw him on the street? What would the detective make of him suggesting that he might have willed the murderer into reality, conjured him out of thin air? He chuckled again.

The detective did not take kindly to that.

“Now, Doc, why’s that so funny?”

“I wouldn’t know even if I did recognize him. I hardly recognize myself these days.”

* * * * *

The Doctor swallowed a cup of reviving tea. Why had he been drinking so much coffee lately? Tea—that was the quintessential hot beverage. Accept no substitutes.

The inspector’s blunt idiocy had troubled him, and it was nice to discuss matters in more civilized company.

“Surely, though, the police are taking entirely the wrong tack. Surely the method of murder is as important as the identity of the murderer? The draining of blood? Start with *that* and you’ll find the answers.”

“So, what do you think, Doctor? Some kind of vampire? Of course, I have notes of such things.”

The Doctor took another sip of his tea as Sherlock Holmes whirled over to his trusty index. He was rather obsessed with cataloguing things. The Doctor wondered if it helped Holmes keep details straight. If so, perhaps he should try it.

“But are we to give attention to such things? This Agency stands flat-footed on the ground, and there it must remain. No—”

“No ghosts need apply,” finished the Doctor. “Haven’t you said that before?”

“You don’t know that’s what I was *going* to say,” Holmes replied testily.

“And are you quite sure about that?” The Doctor twitched the curtains on the bay window, looking down to the street below, awash with the patter of more rain. Nice though it was to be away from the police station, another dreary day hardly put him at ease. “Perhaps you’ve never had the fortune, or the misfortune, to encounter vampires. Perhaps they’ve just not visited these parts.” As rain plashed insistently against the window, the Doctor added ruefully, “Which shows

good taste on their part. But what about a naval base in Northumberland during the Second World War? What about E-Space?"

"What space?"

"The Exo-space-time continuum?" The Doctor looked over at him, hopeful that the reference might trigger something, but the detective's hawk-like features remained unmoving. He sighed.

Holmes rose to the Turkish slipper and refilled his pipe. In deference to the Doctor, he selected the less odoriferous clay pipe. "So, you are assisting the police in their inquiries?"

The Doctor nodded sadly. "Why do they think I can help them? Why didn't they ask you? You're the great detective, after all."

Holmes nodded vainly. "I hardly need their licence to conduct my own investigations of course. Perhaps I shall. The case does have its points of interest."

"Perhaps they might even reach out to that modern fellow?" He gestured to the black Belstaff coat and scarf thrown loosely on the couch.

Holmes snorted. "That interloper? He leaves nicotine patches all over the place. Say what you like about me, at least I'm tidy."

The Doctor shook his head. "I seem to remember Watson writing: 'He was the most untidy man that ever drove a fellow lodger to distraction.'"

A thin smile cracked the stony face. "That need not contradict my earlier statement. I'm disappointed, Doctor. 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.'"

"Ralph Waldo Emerson," both men cried out in unison.

"Forgive me, Doctor. You seem to bring out my competitive nature." As Holmes resumed his seat, he flinched in discomfort, producing another nicotine patch from the cushion. "Do you see what I must put up with?"

"What Mrs. Hudson puts up with, surely?"

Holmes frowned. "She's away visiting her relatives, I think."

"And Watson away fishing as well? Most inconvenient."

Holmes glowered; no doubt disappointed in the mundane human obligations that deprived him of his helpers. "Give me Watson any day. That modern fellow... why, he's just a pale shadow of me."

"Yes, he's certainly pale," the Doctor nodded.

He rose from the chair and gave another twitch to Holmes's heavy velvet curtains. His flat was undeniably nicer than the Doctor's. It had so much more personality. He looked from the furnishings to the ornate china of his teacup and blurted: "I've just realized something!"

To his momentary amusement, Holmes jumped at the exclamation. Regaining his composure, he asked irritably, "What's that?"

"My house. Well, it's not a house at all. No mementoes, no books, or records. Just a television set and a few bland, anonymous sticks of furniture. Where's that lovely ormolu chair of mine, eh? But this place, well, it's like I've never lived in it."

Holmes stepped nearer to him. "But you have."

The Doctor frowned. He certainly couldn't deny the reality of the last little while he'd spent living here. "Yes, you're right."

"Could your wife have removed all your sentimental items when your divorce was granted?"

“Yes, yes, it’s probably something to do with her. Perhaps I just haven’t had time to unpack my things, really make it a home.” And yet, the Doctor thought wistfully, he had wasted all those evenings watching repeats of *Antiques Roadshow*? That didn’t seem to add up either.

Holmes was clearly thinking as much also. “How long have you been here?”

“Ever since I stopped travelling.”

“When was that, Doctor?”

“You’re starting to sound like Hannah Redfoot.” Whatever thought this was leading to had left the Doctor’s head. Like that reference to E-Space, he felt more fragments of memories shaking loose from his subconscious, yet they stayed frustratingly out of reach. “There were pressing reasons, I remember. I enjoyed travelling so much, but then I... well, I just had to retire.”

“Perhaps to get married.”

“Yes!”

“To get married to someone you can’t even remember now. Yet she was bewitching enough to make you change your entire life?”

“Touché, Holmes.” The pipe smoke had filled the room, turning the air close and cloying, as the Doctor strained through the deep grasses of his memories. Yet there was nothing specific there, just that vague feeling. “By the time I got to my last adventure, I knew it was time to call it a day.”

“Such a momentous decision, Doctor, would surely not be taken lightly. Even you aren’t so capricious.”

The Doctor felt almost dizzy from the revelatory swell. “You’re right, Holmes. There’s something in this, I think. Do you remember your last case?”

“‘Shoscombe Old Place’ was the last story published in *The Strand*, in January 1927, I believe.”

“An unusually balmy January, if I remember. I got it from a surly newsagent in Sloane Square. Miss Rossi couldn’t understand why I needed a complete set.” The Doctor smiled. “It was for sentimental reasons, of course.”

Holmes gave a disinterested nod and continued his precis.

“Chronologically I believe I permanently retired after ‘His Last Bow,’ at the outbreak of the Great War.”

The stories raced through the Doctor’s head. Along with a great many works of Earth literature, he had read them as a child, and now he saw something amiss about talking to the man in person. However, it was nothing compared to the brainstorm in his own head.

New suppressed memories burst through, unwillingly. The Doctor’s temple suddenly seared at the visions.

“The TARDIS had landed somewhere... not where I’d expected. There was something significant in that.”

“Make sure to spare no detail,” Holmes said sarcastically.

The Doctor scowled and continued. “I can see myself walking ahead, sharing some information about the time period—late Earth Empire I believe. One of humanity’s most brutal and inhumane chapters. Although we were far off the beaten track of the Empire. *But* we had picked up the warp wake of an Earth cruiser...”

Holmes nodded imperiously.

“Actually, I don’t know why I share my vast knowledge, as sometimes I feel nobody actually listens to it. And certainly not—Vicki? Jo? No, more recent than that, an American... not Peri either.”

Her name escaped him. The Doctor could see her standing next to him: she was, to use an Earth expression, the “tomboyish” type, with a bracing irreverence and prone to particular impatience at being lectured. It was a useful check on his pomposity, and he actually saw something of his young self in her, as she preferred learning for herself without being told.

He could picture her clearly. Her name, though, lay entirely beyond his reach. Especially frustrating as he felt he’d seen her quite recently. “How disconcerting. We’ve been travelling together for ages.”

“Had been.” Holmes inhaled deeply into his pipe. “But I broke your train of thought, Doctor. How thoughtless of me. Pray, continue.”

The Doctor paced the rooms in Baker Street to jog his memories. Instead of those clubbable environs, he pictured dimly lit metal corridors, lined with glass booths. No, they weren’t dimly lit; the corridors were open to the stars. Yes, they had landed at a station hovering in space, seemingly without protection; yes, there was an atmospheric membrane, he remembered. But the Doctor was not focussed on their surroundings. His mind’s eye was filled with the rows of booths, and two in particular. “Yes, there was something inside the booth...” He held his hand in front of the fireplace, seeing the twin blue-lit glass chambers. He felt his hand run along their surfaces—smooth and cold. “Something or someone...”

There was a face in front of him. He could just about remember what it looked like, and something about the face gave him a start...

Just like that, the recollection vanished. The Doctor punched the mantelpiece, shaking loose some correspondence pinned in place by a jackknife.

He felt on the verge of a wonderful breakthrough only to have it snatched away at the last second. He was touched to see Holmes look just as concerned and frustrated.

“It’s not even the first time I’ve lost my memory,” the Doctor admitted. “Sad thing is, I can’t remember any of the other times. Or how I got it back.”

Holmes patted the Doctor’s shoulder. “There, there, old chap. We’ll get there—after all, I hate an unsolved mystery as much as you.”

The Doctor paced back to the window. He stopped at the curtain again, as if retracing his steps might jog his memory. Instead, his eye darted across to the door. It was a narrow, light-panelled door built right into the recess of the bay window. The Doctor was no interior decorator, but it looked so silly and unsightly, so much so that he didn’t quite see how it could be real. He tried its handle, opened and closed it gingerly. “Has that always been there?”

Holmes looked at the door quizzically. “Why yes.”

“Why do you have a door in a bay window anyway?”

“It does come in handy, you know. If you recall the case of ‘The Mazarin Stone,’ I was able to catch Count Negretto Silvius unawares through that very door.”

The Doctor smiled. “One of the later efforts... widely believed to be non-canonical.”

“Canonical,” sneered Holmes. “Remember Emerson.”

“The game is on!” a voice called from downstairs.

Holmes rolled his eyes. “Afoot, man! The game’s afoot! It’s a quotation! You sound like an idiot when you say that!”

“When is a door not a door?” the Doctor said to himself, ignored by the bickering Holmeses.

* * * * *

Two men, but the same man. They were both Sherlock Holmes, and yet they were different from each other. There was some kind of clue in that as well. But what? What did those two incarnations of the same personality suggest to the Doctor?

A door where there should not be one. A magic door, the Doctor considered. That too held some secret, but what?

The Doctor emerged from 221B to find the street empty. This time, he was sure, it was because his neighbours were avoiding him. 007's curtains parted then shut rapidly again. He knew everyone thought he was an oddball and being a bystander during one of these night attacks seemed to prove them right. If they knew how often he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, they'd never have talked to him to begin with.

That regrettable human impulse, he lamented, to somehow think that people who get into trouble must be trouble themselves. Better to stay inside and judge someone than act and risk looking like a fool.

"No sense of adventure, the lot of you!" he cried out, seized by a sudden extravagant impulse.

Of course, he didn't always have a sense of adventure himself. That was another piece of the puzzle, he realized. The beginning of his adventures might reveal why they ended. Somehow recalling that long-ago childhood—what he could even remember of it—seemed to hold some clue to why he retired, why he ended up here...

On the brow of the hill, he saw an old man running away. His unruly mane of white hair was blowing in the breeze, and he held a cane sword-like by his side, even though he seemed not to need it.

"Help! Police!" A voice called. The Doctor's blood ran cold, as someone stood, shocked, over another corpse on the street. Another young innocent, this time felled in broad daylight. The Doctor was furious.

This man held some answers, and the Doctor would not let them pass him by again. Spying an advantage, the Doctor leapt from his higher ground and collided with the man. The two tumbled down the incline into an empty football field.

The Doctor strained to focus on the face. They were tossed around like bowling pins, and he got equal visions of grass, sky, and people scattering from the path to avoid them. He caught dark eyes narrowed in suspicion and alarm. He caught bony cheeks and an aquiline profile. It was a face he recognized.

The thin lips parted, revealing a row of fangs. A feral snarl erupted from the old man, and he seemed to snap at the Doctor.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Hands roughly pulled the Doctor away. He was face to face with the glowering lady, whose face he recognized from the bus stop two days ago.

"Wait a second—" He tried to pull away from her, but she held him firmly.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Doctor? Someone could get hurt with you playing a bloody fool like that!"

He wrenched himself away, to find the old man had sprinted into the distance at surprising speed. He was now a speck at the other end of the pitch.

He turned back to the woman, fuming at her oblivious self-righteousness. There was always someone like her, he thought, getting in the way, not seeing the danger on their doorstep... her limitations were most human, he thought, though he felt guilty for being so judgemental. Right now, he had every reason to be angry with her and told her so.

“You silly fool! You let him get away!” he protested.

“Too bloody right I did! Attacking an old man! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!”

“Attacking...? But my good woman, that wasn't an old man. It was one of them. I saw his fangs. I'm sure it was...”

“One of what?”

“Well, he had fangs, and the victims have been drained of blood. The poor innocent was right over there!” the Doctor explained impatiently.

“Fangs?” A small crowd had gathered, as incredulous as she was.

The Doctor looked from her to the others. Where was the body? Where was the person who had cried for help? Why did he have to spend so much time explaining things to people who didn't believe him? “Do I have to spell it out to you?”

The Doctor didn't think she could look any sourer. He was wrong.

* * * * *

The Doctor called Hannah's office and booked an emergency appointment the next day. This encounter and seeing that old man's face had not left his mind. Indeed, it had triggered some new troubles.

“I'm having... having that mirror problem again.” The Doctor coughed uncomfortably.

“What mirror problem?”

He cleared his throat. “Really, Hannah, do I have to explain it to you again?”

“Talking about it helps us talk through it.”

The Doctor rolled his eyes and pulled his shirt forward in the manner of that retired French captain who lived in Flat 1701D. He then explained, grumpily: “Do you ever look in the mirror and get, well, surprised by the face you see?”

“Surprised how?”

“I expect to see a different face. I'm not sure what the face looks like, but there's certainly more than one of them.”

“How many are there?”

The Doctor shrugged. “Nine? Ten? Probably just a very normal problem, though, wouldn't you say?”

Hannah frowned. “Doctor, there's no such thing as a normal problem, you should know that. And even if there were... would you really want to be normal?”

* * * * *

The Doctor awoke that night with a start. He had a vivid sense of dislocation, as if he had been pulled violently away from some other place.

Details sat on the topsoil of his mind, so as per Hannah's suggestion, he grabbed for a tape recorder and clicked it on, saying everything he could recall from the dream, not wanting to lose anything.

The words tripped out of his mouth automatically. When he stopped recording, he was startled to consider that he hadn't remembered anything he said. And the strange visions that were in his mind had also vanished. He rewound the tape and played it, somewhat desperate.

“We had received the guided tour, but there was one wing of the Questin Orb they wouldn't let me see. Of course, as it does so often my nature got the better of me, and I had to know what

they were hiding. So, I went into the wing. Inside there were rows of booths, with people—humans—in a kind of suspension, living out fantasy lives in virtual comfort.

“I looked at the humans, realizing that they must have escaped here from the reaches of the Earth Empire. And then, there was one particular face in the glass. I recognized the face. And I recognized the one in the glass next to it as well. It had been so long since I saw them that I was confused and angry. I began to suspect the Architect knew more than he was saying. So, I broke into the Projection Suites and tried to end their simulations, bring them back to the real world. I just had to see them, had to talk to them again. But the 'Scape software was more sophisticated than I thought, and it sucked me into its workings. Perhaps it was trying to protect itself; perhaps there really was a danger to the occupants of the Experiential Grid... My last sight before I slipped away was Hannah finding me, struggling to get me free.

“Just now, I woke to see Hannah and the Architect as well as a couple of medics. Medical apparatus was hooked up to me, and they appeared to be watching my dreams on the monitor.

“‘It isn’t making any difference!’ Hannah declared impatiently. ‘How much longer can he take it?’

“‘That’s the problem,’ the Architect replied, frustration masked in professional understatement. ‘The Doctor is experienced at withstanding mental attack. A Time Lord’s defences are impregnable, far more so than any other race. He could remain in that world forever with only minor physical degradation.’

“Hannah looked at me sadly. ‘That’s the problem. The degradation is so much worse than getting old. He’s just... giving up.’

“‘He can’t, Hannah. You have to help him.’”

The Doctor clicked the tape. ‘Time Lord’—he hadn’t remembered that. Those strange adventures were the norm, which explained why he found this normality so strange.

And Hannah! Yes, it was definitely her. And he had more dreamlike memories of her as his companion; she was the tomboyish American who gave as good as she got, who was always up for a fight.

How embarrassing. All that remained in his mind was the feeling of letting her down. No, it wasn’t a romantic connection, she was... somehow his friend and confidante. She had trusted him, and somehow, everything he was doing—even though he looked around and didn’t seem to be doing anything—was contributing to his betrayal.

He picked up the phone and dialled the number. “Detective Inspector?”

“Ah, Doc, it’s you. Evening.”

How had he known it was the Doctor? Had the detective expected his call? The Doctor thought no more about it. “I’d like to help you catch these... murderers any way I can.”

“Thrilled to hear it, Doc. Knew we could count on you. Now, get some sleep.”

* * * * *

“Me and my big mouth,” the Doctor grumbled the following evening.

“Where’s your sense of civic responsibility, Doc?” the detective retorted with an unsavoury grin.

Never mind civic responsibility; the Doctor was coming to wonder why he had been seized by that impetuous rush after waking from his dream. The feeling was certainly long gone now. He sat in the back of a police van with the detective and his partner, a severe woman with a chunky

braided ponytail. She kept her eyes locked on the street, darting between the officers she knew lurked in wait behind strategic bushes.

“Are you sure,” she asked, “that the Doctor should be the—”

“Bait?” he finished, her worries echoing his own.

The detective waved their concerns away. “Don’t you start,” he reprimanded her. “And anyway, the plain-clothes bobbies are around every corner, aren’t they? You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Nodding uncertainly, the Doctor opened the door of the van and began his stroll through the street. Once again, night had given it a sinister mien. In a way, it was merely being out here, alone, that was the Doctor’s greatest fear. Whoever was waiting for him—whether it was the old man, his curly-haired friend, or any of the other odd-looking gents the police had recorded—could only relieve the haunting feeling he had of being alone in the dark.

It did not take long for the Doctor to notice the sound of footsteps. A small rush of fear enveloped him, and he looked around in vain for any of those plain-clothes officers that had been rashly promised.

There was nothing. The bushes remained stationary. The Doctor kept his tread light, trying to betray no sense of worry.

The Doctor could feel the man stalk closer. As he walked, their closeness grew; it was rather like being stalked by one’s own shadow. And like his shadow, there was something in the pace and the posture of his follower that was familiar to the Doctor.

Finally, he could take no more. “I know you’re there. Why don’t you come out?”

He stared impatiently at the alley. There was no one there, but the Doctor knew that it was because his follower was standing just out of sight. And the follower knew that the Doctor knew it, and so on. The impudence of the man maddened him.

“Fine, I’ve nowhere special to be. If I remember rightly, Wednesday’s always a pretty mediocre night of telly. Don’t you agree?”

With that, the figure detached himself from the surrounding shadows and crept towards the Doctor. There was that familiar, yet unfamiliar walk again—shoulders in a permanent semi-shrug, hands pocketed.

All the Doctor could see was the approach of this tall shadow, his body surrounded by two tentacle-like growths. After a moment, the Doctor recognized them—not tentacles, but the ends of an unfeasibly long scarf.

As he emerged from the darkness into the arc of the streetlight, he glowered upwards, and the Doctor saw him fully. There was that scarf, multicoloured and twenty feet long, looped several times over a garnet-coloured velvet greatcoat. The unruly bouncing curled hair was backlit, giving him the appearance of a lightbulb come to life.

The Doctor smiled in recognition but flinched as his follower smiled back revealing the same mouth of narrow fangs the elderly man in the frock coat had.

“I assume you’re somehow connected to that other chap.”

“Mmm.”

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“You might as well ask who *you* are, and what *you* want.” The man spoke with a honeyed growl, deep and warm but with a spike of sarcasm. “Aren’t you supposed to be the Doctor?” Somehow, he spat the last word, as if he resented someone else being the Doctor.

“As a matter of fact, I am.”

“And when you see something wrong, don’t you feel an urge to figure out why?”

“What is, is.”

“What *is*, is wrong!” the curly-haired man thundered. “You know you don’t belong here, Doctor.”

“I made a decision.”

“You made a mistake. You saw it yourself. We’re trying to get you out.”

The Doctor examined the man’s face closely. Suddenly he saw it. This was his face and he saw his own familiar features—the unruly hair, the long face with its Gallic handsomeness—through that man’s eyes. He saw eight other faces as well. Ten of them, ten of *him*—all seeing with the familiarity of looking in the mirror.

They saw him running around the six sides of a console, its screens and control panels flickering chaotically. He was wearing his familiar garb of a loud casual print shirt and a smartly cut Chesterfield coat. Across from him stood Hannah Redfoot. They stepped outside, finding themselves in a floating crystalline palace, contained in an artificial planetoid. The view was incredible—the entire system of multiple suns and planets, a dizzying asteroid belt spun around them, seeming at any moment like they might spin into the crystalline barrier. Yet the orbits continued, perpetually, with balletic grace. And this structure floated right at the centre of it. Hannah was quite taken with it. Hannah wasn’t always the easiest companion to please, so the Doctor was additionally happy to impress her. But his happiness did not last long.

Forgetting for a moment that he was supposed to be catching the man for the police, the Doctor related his memory. “We had arrived on the Questin Orb, and I was out of sorts mere minutes after we stepped outside.”

“Why’s that? Let me guess—guards rushing about pointing guns at you?”

“No. Hospitality staff offering us a guided tour.”

They both shuddered.

“Before long,” the Doctor continued, “they were showing us all round the orb. It was interesting, because it was far beyond the reaches of the Earth Empire, and yet there was the energy trace of Earth space-warp engines.”

“And then you saw them...”

“That’s right!” the Doctor exclaimed, the memory smacking him in the face. “They were there, and that familiar face. And they were so far away that I thought they must have been lured there.”

“So naturally you wanted to know more.” The man smiled again, this time more conspiratorially. No one knew the Doctor’s irrepressible nature better than he did.

He opened his eyes, and saw this bohemian vampire with his face nodding, his cold eyes suddenly warming at the shared recognition.

“That’s the spirit, Doctor. Keep remembering.”

Yet the night scene vanished into the same dreamy abyss as the TARDIS. The Doctor’s next sight was three damp patches on his bedroom ceiling. A miserable grey daylight soaked the cheerless room.

Yet the Doctor remembered his own words, said in that deep authoritative voice.

“It’s not too late to escape, Doctor. Remember who you really are. It’s the only way out.”

* * * * *

With effort, the Doctor was able to hold the fragments of that last adventure in his head. The last few days he had been waylaid by some distraction or another, but now he was determined to find

the details. He noted, to his chagrin, that most of the time he would get distracted by the anticipation of John and Gillian's visit.

Surely, they didn't know anything about this? They were his family, after all. Was he really to trust Hannah Redfoot? Or these vampire men? Over his own family?

He had shared his concern with another of his neighbours, a count. He now lived in a modest house at the end of the street. The Doctor didn't usually see him out much during the day, but here he was taking a stroll down the street while the Doctor tended to his garden. This weak, grey sunlight clearly suited him.

He was now quibbling with the Doctor's use of the word "vampire." "You don't know it was an authentic *nosferatu*, do you?"

"Oh really, Dracula. You're as bad as Sherlock Holmes."

Dracula smiled wryly. The Doctor knew the men did not get along.

"You know, it's all connected to that last adventure. I suppose I must have sorted it out before my wedding and decided to settle down here. But why are the memories so fracture?"

The Count stroked his iron-grey moustache thoughtfully.

"You know, you look younger today."

"Why, thank you, Doctor," he replied with an affable chuckle. "Though how could a man get younger?"

"Oh, it's not so hard when you have a little help."

This, too, jarred some of the Doctor's memories. Like the two Holmeses, he recognized something in himself of this paradox.

"On the contrary Doctor, I find it exceedingly hard to keep my youth. And the lengths to which I am prepared to go... sometimes they startle even me." He licked his scarlet lips sensually; the Count seemed not so startled as he said. "And you said that the charming Hannah Redfoot, your therapist, was there with you during this adventure?"

"Yes! No..." The Doctor flinched at the memory. With the sudden overflow of a brainstorm, he saw dozens of trips through space and time, in the company of Hannah Redfoot! "Why did she never mention it? How did I not remember that, eh?"

"You could always ask her."

"I intend to."

"Perhaps, Doctor," the Count purred, "it might be said that you don't seem exactly settled here."

"Huh! That's just it. Perhaps I'm not." He looked down at the delphiniums. They drooped forlornly against the lawn. "Oh dear. I just watered those."

"I envy your green fingers, Doctor." As surreptitiously as he could manage, the Count crept from the verge back to his own house. To the Doctor's amazement, the drooping flowers seemed to revive at his retreat. "Well, anyway, I should be getting on. I have some real estate matters to sort out."

"But what about all this? How will I recover these memories, if I can't even concentrate?"

"Doctor!" the Count hissed in frustration. "What happened to that mind of yours? Distracted by some domestic nonsense?" The Count softened and adjusted the braided collar of his Szekele tunic. Some of the fur on his palm caught on its eyelet. There was another detail of himself the Doctor saw in that—an ordinary man on the surface but beneath most inhuman...

The Count snapped him back to reality. "You don't even need to exercise your mind, my friend. Why don't you call on that magazine that's always writing about you?"

The Doctor chuckled. “Ha! How come I didn’t think of that? You’ve been a great help, Dracula.”

The Count waved away his thanks. “Yes, thank you, Doctor. If Jonathan Harker calls, tell him I’ve needed to lie down for a bit.” Another vulpine smile crossed the Count’s scarlet lips. “We’re neither of us as old as we used to be, eh Doctor?”

* * * * *

The child had first heard of vampires from an old hermit who lived on the side of the Southern Mountains. In search of something to do rather than go to school, the child went exploring. No one would look for him outside, as fresh air and the nature of their planet was another in the long list of things they didn’t like on this planet. During one of his expeditions he stumbled upon the hermit’s cave.

It was close to the family home, indeed right in its shadow. The child felt momentarily guilty to live in such grandeur while the hermit spent his days living in such squalid simplicity.

Yet the hermit wasn’t living alone in his cave for want of a better life. The more time the child spent with the hermit, the more it became apparent that the hermit had everything—wisdom beyond infinity—right at his fingertips. And so, the child found that playing truant was the best way to learn.

The hermit told the child many tales, familiar as he was with the myths and folklore of hundreds of worlds. These tales were not the dry, self-aggrandizing accounts of their homeworld and its glorious supremacy. They were alive with horrors and fantasy, with romance and danger.

The hermit told the child of vampires and of the wars their people had fought in the dawn of their civilization. And there were many other monsters—those who had bargained away their souls to live forever in steel boxes, those who dwelled in the shadows of time to feast on unwary voyagers, those who fought for aeons to rule their worlds watched by primitive, terrified people who mistook them for gods. All of these terrors lay waiting in the darkness of that universe, eager to snare the unsuspecting. Perhaps the child—still nursing those dreams of escape—might meet them one day.

Some of the hermit’s tales scared the child in other ways. One afternoon stuck vividly in the child’s mind. It probably occurred after that vandalism incident because the hermit had been the one to share some of the secrets of the old language. The child, trying to repay the hermit for the many hours of wisdom he had imparted, had brought an artefact. It was something that had given him much joy, and that he hoped the hermit might enjoy in turn.

The hermit regarded the dusty pile of leather and paper gingerly. “A book,” he said carefully as his bony fingers turned its pages in fascination. “You know, there are worlds where these are the most advanced technology. And we may be on one of those worlds. Think of them in the Capitol, patting themselves on the back to have a Panatropic Computer and those absurd data-slices. If they only realized how much more sophisticated a good book could be.”

Chuckling to himself at his protégé’s confusion, the hermit read the title. “The Adventures of Sheer...” He stumbled on the alien name. It struck the child that it must have been a long time since he had talked to anyone, local or alien.

“Sherlock,” the child finished. “Sherlock Holmes. It’s an Earth publication.”

“Well, I look forward to reading it.” The hermit tucked it in a bundle with various other trinkets and mementoes. “I have a long evening’s meditation ahead, and a bit of light reading might be just the thing to break up the intensity.”

The child suddenly felt embarrassed. All the hermit's tales had been told from memory, and perhaps he found a mere book to be too new-fangled for his taste. It was a good thing Arthur Conan Doyle wasn't available on data-slice.

"Well, young fellow, your generosity certainly deserves repayment." The hermit turned to his bindle, his bony fingers rooting among the ramshackle collection.

"I was hoping," the child suggested, "you might tell me another story? That would be more than enough repayment."

"Another one? Oh dear, you have quite an appetite for my escapist hokum, don't you?" He glanced at the sky outside, beginning to glow orange with the coming evening. "Anyway, shouldn't you be studying? Exams coming up, I'll wager."

"Oh, well... I suppose so..."

The hermit stroked his beard. "Still, I suppose you can't spend every waking minute learning about thermodynamics and dimensional theory. Especially not the way those pompous cardinals teach it. Well, I'll give you a quick story."

And so, the hermit told the tale of the Arcellian Fugitives. They stood against a mighty and tyrannical empire, a symbol of a world that had lost its way. In losing their way, the Empire had decimated and conquered helpless worlds, with the cruel disregard its own people had been shown by the conquerors of the past. It was a sad pattern of all civilizations—they would take power and use it not to help but to dominate, seeking only territory to claim and resources to abuse.

This part of the story that terrified the child in a different way to the hermit's usual scares. To learn that even the most principled could be corrupted, even the most progressive could succumb to barbarism, taught him a sad but immutable truth that the self-satisfaction of the Academy could never hope to reveal.

Indeed, when the Arcellian Fugitives came into the story, it almost made the child sadder. After all, they couldn't hope to prevail against such an almighty monolith. The Arcellian Fugitives were not better armed than the Empire, nor did they have a fighting force. Indeed, they were hopelessly outnumbered. Their homeworld of Arcellis Minimus was a farming colony that had been razed by the Empire for its opposition to their colonization. The remnants were a handful of aged farmers who took to piracy in the stars to replace the home that was taken from them.

Yet two of the Fugitives were not who they seemed. On the surface, they were the weakest of all the Fugitives—a boy and a girl. They were initially regarded with distrust by the Fugitives and had to prove themselves. The other Fugitives, shaken by their incalculable loss, were wary of off-worlders. And these two children were, on the face of it, very suspicious. In the years they spent together, the children never seemed to age a day. They did not come from Arcellis Minimus or Earth but never said where they did hail from. This boy and girl helped the Fugitives strike a blow against the Empire, not with weapons, but with their knowledge. A stolen MacGuffin here, a bit of intelligence whispered into a Draconian's ear there, and the house of cards that kept the Empire's vice-like grip was apt to topple over. They knew exactly how to affect events in their favour, not enough to drastically change things but enough to benefit this small group of refugees.

"How did they know the future? Surely they didn't... surely they weren't... one of us?"

"Why couldn't they be?" the hermit asked rhetorically. "Just because your stuffed-shirt mentors never saw a fight they didn't want to run away from doesn't mean everyone would be so spineless."

It was a perverse paradox of this hermit, that he believed very strongly in his principles of peace and universal harmony, yet still argued for the courage to fight force when needed. Perhaps one day the child would be wise enough to resolve that paradox.

Right now, though, he was still questioning the hermit's tale. "But children? Fighting against an entire galactic empire?"

"Don't underestimate children when they have a mind to something, they can do it. The only thing you need to make it out there is an open mind. And an optimistic nature."

However, the hermit had to confess that even he didn't know exactly where the children came from. Wherever it was, they never told the Arcellian Fugitives. Instead, they let their actions speak for them. Their foreknowledge gave the Fugitives the edge they needed to score their greatest victory against the cruel Emperor. It was said they deposed the Emperor personally but did not kill him as the Fugitives hoped. Instead, they let the Emperor live the life of one of his subjects on an outlying colony, the better to learn the full error of his ways, and the ways of their centuries of cruelty.

And the hermit told the story so clearly that our child who loved stories saw these two children, the boy at the helm of an Imperial Planetary Ballista and the girl sweeping in with a set of mechanical wings she had constructed by herself from old junk. They flew through the shields of the Imperial flagship and onto its bridge. They grabbed the Emperor from his very seat as his disbelieving subordinates looked on.

After their victory, an Empress, worse than the Emperor, succeeded to the throne and had made it her top priority to bring the Arcellian Fugitives to justice. A justice, of course, resolved from the point of a sword. By this time, the Fugitives had well and truly grown old and wanted to end their days in peace. They knew that the Empire would never allow this and would one day track them down unless they escaped to safety. They begged the children to use their powers to find them somewhere to live out their lives away from danger. The children had learnt of a place where these ephemeral beings could escape the burdens of their aging bodies, of the cruelty and violence of the universe around them.

They constructed a mighty engine, and such was their sense of showmanship that, at the very moment the Empress and her fleet closed in on them, they vanished to the farthest star and were never seen again.

The entire tale had left the child disturbed, and the ending was particularly inconclusive. Only the words of the hermit offered the closure he was looking for.

"One hopes," concluded the hermit, "that they found what they were looking for. A good enough hope for any of us."

* * * * *

The office reminded the Doctor of one in Kentish Town he had visited in 1979, although like everything, he now saw the familiarity was a mere façade. The reality of these backdrops, or their lack thereof, changed depending on his memories.

The front door swung open as he neared, and behind it, looking as if he'd been hunched over transparencies, was the familiar face of Ken Book: young and cheeky, with his brightly dyed hair tied back in a ponytail.

Ken warmly greeted the Doctor and led him through the offices. This awakened a thrill he had not felt the whole time he had been in this town: the hectic atmosphere of publishing, imaginations unfettered and running riot beyond the humble walls of a converted Victorian townhouse.

Comic artists nodded hurried hellos before burying themselves back in their creative coalfaces. At present, the illustrator was adding dramatic daubs of India ink to his splash page: a

furry, large-eyed creature, its brows furrowed maliciously, a hazardous laser weapon in its paw. The Doctor smiled with recognition.

“Beep the Meep,” he remembered.

Ken paused in his relentless path to the office to nod curtly. “Just bringing him back for the back-up comic strip.”

“It has been a while since Beep’s path crossed with mine. I wonder if he’s still languishing in that Wrarth prison?”

“Well, you’ll have to buy the next issue to find out, won’t you?” Ken quipped.

The Doctor shook away another reverie and turned towards Ken’s office. Inside, he pushed aside a pile of transparencies and allowed Ken to take the worn, moulded-plastic chair opposite.

“Not often we see you down this way, Doc,” Ken trilled. “How are those memoirs coming?”

“Memoirs?”

“Surely you haven’t forgotten. Since you’re retired, we thought you might want to publish some of your incarnation’s experiences in the mag.”

“Oh... yes, well, I’ll think about it.” Shadowy recollections of such a conversation briefly floated before the Doctor, but now he was beginning to doubt such memories. Like that wife of his and the divorce that preceded his move to this town, they had the unmistakable ring of falsity to them.

Ken shrugged, not particularly disappointed. “Shame. It would have filled out the back pages of Issue 879. Still, we’ll probably just run a *Fact of Fiction* on *The Killer Cats of Geng Sing*.”

The Doctor gave his own bewildered nod and remembered his business. Somehow feeling a little self-conscious saying he’d been chatting with Dracula the other day, he abandoned any preamble and launched into his request: “Actually, speaking of my past adventures, I’m having trouble remembering some of them. And also one of my friends.” He glowered sadly. “Actually, most of my friends. I can barely even remember myself these days.”

Ken nodded, the prospect of research suddenly animating him. “Ah, now that is more like it, Doctor!” His chair squeaked in protest as he wheeled it clockwise to the chunky metal drawers and began rifling through them. “Who were you looking for? Tamara Scott? Leela? Vislor Turlough, perhaps? Mind you, my favourite was always Frobisher the Whifferdill.”

“How about Hannah Redfoot?”

The Doctor was not surprised that the name seemed to dampen Ken’s enthusiasm. This knowledge was getting the Doctor closer to some fundamental truth about this place, and the one thing everyone had in common—with the exception of Holmes, Dracula, and Emma—was a shared desire to conceal that truth from him.

He looked from Ken down to the drawer and back, silently commenting on the reporter frozen above his archives. “Oh, yes, of course,” he mumbled, finally diving in and pulling out a thick pile of magazines. He flipped through them and with an expert archivist’s skill, mere seconds later read out: “Hannah Redfoot. Born 6 December 1989. A Sioux American. Graduated a Bachelor of Science in Geology from the University of Wyoming. She was working in the Devils Tower Monument gift shop when you met her, and she joined up with you that time you, Liz Shaw, and Syrok battled the Oracle and the three Masters...”

The Doctor leaned back in the uncomfortable seat, his mind suddenly racing miles away. He remembered the Silurians, the Arcadia, that desperate battle against three iterations of his

mortal enemy. The recollections crackled through his brain. He could remember all the details but somehow not hold them in his mind. What was holding them back, he wondered?

“And then Hannah and I travelled together.”

Ken nodded, flipping through the pages. “For quite a while, I believe. Although it’s rather hard to measure in years, what with you travelling in time.”

The Doctor nodded, rather surprised at Ken’s introspection. But it was true—that was one of the saddest facts of all his fellow travellers, oblivious to how fast those fleeting years went by, wondering how quickly it would be before they decided to leave him alone again.

“When did we, er, part ways?”

Ken stopped flipping and looked up, as if the answer had run off the page. “Well, when you decided to retire, I suppose.”

Unlike the memories of their adventures, this was opaque. And that opacity seemed to get to the heart of the Doctor’s predicament. The Doctor reached for the magazine, but to his irritation, Ken snapped it back. “Hang on—these are collector’s items. Some of them are very fragile.”

“That hardly seems fair. It is *my* magazine, isn’t it?”

Ken hid his face behind the magazine. His mind clearly wouldn’t be changed.

“Have it your own way,” the Doctor snapped. “Could you look up my last adventure with Hannah? What would have been the last trip I took before my retirement?” Merely saying it seemed to emphasize its absurdity. He thought back to what Holmes said: the momentous decision, as momentous as going travelling in space and time in the first place... and he couldn’t remember making it?

Ken thumbed through the magazine listlessly. “Ah! There’s only a synopsis, I’m afraid. Any more than that you’ll just have to remember yourself.”

The Doctor nodded impatiently. “Yes, yes. What does it say?”

“‘The Doctor and Hannah discover the Arcellian Fugitives in hiding on the Questin Orb.’ Who are the Arcellian Fugitives when they’re at home?”

A shiver ran down the Doctor’s spine. “Some legendary space raiders who disappeared in the early thirty-first century, one of the defining defeats of the Earth Empire. I first heard about them a long while ago, as a... well, a bedtime story. I never quite thought they were real, you know.” No wonder he had been so affected by the sight of the face in the glass—if he was face to face with figures from his childhood stories, come to life... well, it could have prompted him to react quite irrationally.

Ken continued the account. “‘They meet a retiring race who have avoided the reaches of the Earth Empire and dedicated themselves to finding refuge for the dispossessed of the universe, homes for those in need of escape. The Doctor distrusts the Head Architect of the Experiential Grid and suspects the Fugitives are being held there against their will.’ So far, so good. ‘Hannah is interested in the experiential grid—a fully developed alternate virtual reality able to alter itself to the user’s subconscious—but the Doctor becomes increasingly suspicious despite the Architect’s assurance that the Arcellian Fugitives entered voluntarily.’ Oh, that’s it I’m afraid.” Ken flipped the page, only to see an advert for some nasty-looking liquorice. “Doesn’t sound terribly exciting. Are you sure that was your last ever adventure, Doctor? I’d have hoped for a rematch with the Daleks, or at least the Cybermen.”

The Doctor found it extremely exciting indeed. As the sentences chimed with his own memories and with that twice-told tale, he felt himself catching up. “I think I’m beginning to understand what’s going on. The only thing to figure out is the connection to me...”

Ken nodded, more absorbed in the magazine than the Doctor, to his chagrin. Shouldn't he have a little more respect for his subject?

"One more request, Ken. Two other fellow travellers, from quite a while ago... John and Gillian?"

"Ah yes." Ken fished an older, scrappier magazine from the depths of the filing cabinet. He was happy to hand this one to the Doctor—no collector's item, he supposed—and smiled affectionately at one of the grainy comic strip panels, almost resembling woodcuts. On the left was a sprightly young girl with black hair in a fashionable 1960s bob. Next to her on the right was a pale boy with curly brown hair wearing a blue shirt. They were simple likenesses, but instantly recognizable to the Doctor.

"How young they look," the Doctor said. He looked up at Ken, still smiling. "Almost as young as you."

Predictably, Ken scowled. "They're all grown up now, though, eh, Doc? I suppose also unlike me. As a matter of fact, I hear they're due to visit you soon. Today, isn't it? They'll probably be coming in on the afternoon train."

"Yes," the Doctor said. "At least there's that to look forward to." Except, with what he now suspected, it was nothing to look forward to at all. "Well, thank you so much for your time. I have a good feeling about Issue 879."

* * * * *

Suddenly, the people around him seemed less individuals and more pieces of a puzzle. And the puzzle, he further realized, was about him. For each conversation he had with Emma and the Holmeses and Dracula was somehow revealing his nature and revealing something other than what was around him.

There was one exception. His therapy sessions with Hannah. And remembering her part in his travels unlocked more memories. He saw himself descending on a gift shop in Wyoming, and through him, she changed her life and the universe opened before her. In his retirement, the Doctor could scarcely imagine having such an impact on a young person's life, yet he saw the evidence in these strange memories that filled his head.

That almost compensated for the bitterness of those inevitable goodbyes, the Doctor remembered. The thought that they would go out and try to change the worlds in which they settled down to live. He thought of how far and how wide his brave companions had settled themselves, from ancient Troy to Terminus. As much as they drew inspiration from him, the prospect of them all, sleeves rolled up, determined to make a difference—it inspired him.

And that, as well as those unfortunates who never made it out of their travels with him (Miss Rossi and Mr. Brooker flashed painfully in his mind) made the Doctor determined to go beyond what was humanly possible to keep those in his care safe.

And here was Hannah Redfoot, apparently living a different life, her past connection to him hidden from his thoughts. Why had she not jogged his memory? Perhaps she was trapped in this world, and perhaps that explained the gaps in his memory and knowledge. Knowing there must be some reason and that the reason may hold the solution to all this, the Doctor decided to go on the offensive. The Doctor was combative at his next therapy session, and Hannah seemed to notice.

"Another rainy day, I see."

She nodded complaisantly.

“It’s so grey in this country, isn’t it? One thing I’ll never get used to, no matter how long I spend in England. It makes me long for the wide-open spaces of Wyoming.” He narrowed his eyes. “Laramie, now there’s some breathtaking scenery. Have you ever been?”

Somehow, she managed to grab a hook on another line of questioning. “I’m more interested in your comment, Doctor. What makes you think this is England?”

The Doctor froze at the question. Once again, Hannah seemed to know more than she let on. “Well, it has to be, doesn’t it? The people around me are English. The buses are never on time. I live in a poky, semi-detached flat. It’s not exactly the most glamorous side of England, but it is still a country I recognize.” His eyes narrowed. “But you’re right, Doctor Redfoot. How did I miss that?” He batted his head. “I definitely have gone soft!”

“You’ve lived in England before, though.”

“Yes, several times. It’s come to seem quite familiar to me, actually.”

“So, it stands to reason that if you woke up somewhere so familiar, it would be England.” She leaned forward in her chair, an excitement suddenly quivering underneath her, the mask of professionalism dropped. “But it isn’t where you come from, is it, Doctor?”

“Certainly not. Not like Laramie, Wyoming—”

“Where do you call home? Or should I say, where *did* you call home before you retired?”

“The TARDIS, I suppose.” He sharply exhaled. “My dear, I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed the old girl. I always trust that she’ll take care of herself more than any of us, but maybe I should be more careful with her. What did I do with her? Let her quietly settle into a patch of the Time Vortex? Surely, I didn’t abandon her on some miserable street to decompose? She deserved a better fate than that.”

“Before the TARDIS, though, Doctor.”

He realized that Hannah wasn’t hindering but helping him to remember. As if remembering would help her as well.

“Oh, Gallifrey? Is Gallifrey a key to all this?”

Hannah bit her lip as if frustrated that she could do no more than sit by and prompt him. The Doctor was reminded of a parlour game. The brainstorm was getting bogged down, and he felt mired in the fog of his old memories.

“I wouldn’t call that a home, of course... I’ve never regretted leaving.”

“Are you sure about that?” Hannah looked down at her notebook. “Some people would find leaving their families to be traumatic. But you never seemed to worry about them, did you?”

“There were other reasons for that, Hannah. Reasons...” He looked skyward. Even here, even with no one else about, he couldn’t quite let his guard down, couldn’t idly reveal too much. “Reasons I can’t go into. Something those who travelled with me always understood and respected.”

“I’m sure they did, Doctor. But what about that family? What do you remember about your wife?”

The Doctor bristled. “Where did that question come from?”

Hannah continued: “What did she look like? What was her name? Who *was* the Doctor’s wife? You’re supposed to be divorced from her, isn’t that right?”

Yes, he realized. And he thought he saw what Hannah was getting at. “Memories given to me... this retirement, it’s a hoax, isn’t it?” Suddenly, his mind raced. He saw clearly through the numberless weeks, the gradual haze that had enveloped him. And he realized whatever was at his heart, there was some danger. Behind the hoax lay a trap. And no doubt the trap was set for him, for Hannah—and, most worryingly, for his grandchildren, John and Gillian.

* * * * *

Hannah Redfoot removed her interface helmet and looked down at the Doctor, still connected to his nightmare. Across from the bed, standing over him with his brow furrowed, was the Grid Architect. He was a diminutive alien whose blue-domed head was augmented with various antennae, which twitched in worry.

“I think he may have made a breakthrough.”

“Yes, but you did risk it, my dear. It was dangerous to get the Doctor to remember so much all at once.”

Hannah shook her head angrily. “Your simulation might kill him, so forgive me if I’m trying to hurry him up to disconnect from it.”

“With all due respect, Miss Redfoot, the Doctor is only in danger because he put himself into it.”

“I know, of course. And you’ve no idea how often he puts himself in this danger. *I’ve* no idea either...” Hannah looked down at the Doctor’s placid face. Even in sleep, the sorrow of the universe seemed to etch into his face’s handsome lines.

“It’s easy to generate simulations with most species.” The Architect gestured towards the placid individuals hooked up to the machines. “Take humans, for example. So full of unhappiness and insecurity. No problem at all to spin them a fulfilling alternate reality to lose themselves inside. These fugitives from Arcellis Minimum, they were so weary of being on the run and of the destruction and chaos that those petty empire-builders brought in their wake. The ‘Scape was able to generate a dreamworld that satisfies them in no time. Just the thing to spend a few decades inside, wait until the heat dies down. And they can emerge not a day older, their bodies perfectly suspended.”

Hannah nodded. The screens above the sleeping occupants were filled with predictable scenes of luxury, albeit augmented by their outlandish subconscious whims. One scene was a beach with talking turtles; another was an endless motorway along which a hovering car drove onward to infinity.

“These two were a tad difficult...” the Architect reflected, indicating the boy and girl whose faces the Doctor seemed to recognize. How Hannah wondered what he knew of them, what they could say about him? It almost made her want to disconnect them from the machinery. “But even they were happy to live out some uncomplicated adventuring. Most unlike...”

Hannah nodded, beginning to see the problem with the Doctor. “How do you create a fantasy world for someone whose entire life is fantasy?”

“Exactly!” The Architect stabbed the air. “You take my point precisely, Miss Redfoot. The Doctor got himself tied up in the works, and the program had no choice but to try to incorporate him. Unfortunately, the program is not used to a mind so complex, so unstable, as a Time Lord brings to the proceedings. Not merely one mind, but, how many? Nine, ten? And the result...”

“The result is a prison for the Doctor. A world without challenges to overcome, enemies to fight. So... he responds to it by giving up and moving into a street with Dracula and Sherlock Holmes. And his only ideas of normality are a divorce, an ugly house, and a visit from his grandchildren.” She looked down at her friend. Even in this comatose state, his body seemed tense, as if it would spring out of the machine any second. She might have guessed he wouldn’t be able to unwind, and bluntly said what was on her mind: “You know, you really are a first-class weirdo, Doctor.”

* * * * *

The Doctor staggered through the streets of the dingy city centre, its buildings buffeting under the howling winds and the lashings of rain. The rain seemed more savage, its endless pelting stripping away the surroundings and leaving only a hazy grey wash.

Yet as the outside grew vaguer, his mind was sharpening. More memories bombarded him as he ran. Perhaps it was appropriate that the memories were overshadowing reality: himself with all those other faces, the companions who helped him, the foes he fought, and the friends he met along the way...

He strained through the memories—ten lifetimes of them, so much life kept in his head. No wonder he forgot! There were two he needed to hold onto in particular.

John and Gillian. Yes, he was certain that they had travelled with him—long before Hannah. He hadn't said goodbye to Hannah, but they...

It was too hard to hold onto in his mind, so the Doctor had to start speaking out loud. "John and Gillian... they left me shortly before Jamie and I had all those encounters with the Quarks. I believe they were enrolled in Zebedee University—John and Gillian, that is, not the Quarks."

The raincoated old gentleman with whom he shared this shook his head and staggered away, his clipped moustache bristling in annoyance, his umbrella blowing inside-out with the lashing rain.

"Think, Doctor, think! Where will they be?" He remembered Hannah's prompts: he was somehow here because of something from his childhood.

"How do you expect a thousand-year-old Time Lord to remember their childhood!" he screamed, half in frustration, half in joy. For remembering that childhood, that strange upbringing now so detached from his life as to belong to a different person entirely, crystallized all that was wrong with this world. Its reality—that home, those faces that lived in his mind as something apart from who he considered himself now—exposed the fraud in which he was presently enmeshed. How could he live one second of this dismal imitation of life, knowing now that such adventures lay out there for him?

"I hate *Antiques Roadshow!*" the Doctor yelled at the top of his lungs. His words seemed to echo around the rain-lashed square in the city centre.

And then, he thought of the connections. They were not memories after all, but fictions. And he knew the fiction from his childhood that told him where to go now.

And of course, as he realized, he bumped into the sour-faced lady. "How fitting that you should be here," he said with a smile.

Yet her face was clouded with some dark revelation of its own. "I have a bone to pick with you," she snarled.

"Yes, yes, I'm certain you do."

"Me with my narrow-minded parochial world—that's how you think of those humans you *don't* see all the time, isn't it Doctor? The ones who aren't ambitious, glamorous young women, or brigadiers in the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce, or what have you?"

"I think that's a little harsh."

"But I wonder, Doctor, if you don't think worse of us, or yourself?"

He nodded. "You'd know better than I. But I'm afraid I don't have time to get into a discussion with you. Could you please tell me, my dear lady, where is the nearest train station?"

"Train station?"

“Yes! It’s the key to getting out of here.”

“Well, it’ll be a relief to see the back of you, Doctor. Even if it does mean I’ll vanish into non-existence. Anyway, what are you going to do? Get on a train?”

“No, but the train will be where it all ends. It’s all to do with my childhood, I see. And I remember it so clearly, that was the first thing I ever wanted to be! I can still see in my mind’s eye, that first image of Earth—all that lovely countryside racing past, the wind in my hair, the steam and the whistling...”

She shook her head, singularly un-charmed by the prospect of a pint-sized Doctor at the engine of a train. “Well, the nearest station is just across from the cathedral. Stockbridge Halt.”

“Stockbridge! Of course it is!” The Doctor remembered the real Stockbridge, its beautiful cricket grounds and the Cathedral of St. Justin, and that happy summer five lifetimes ago he spent bowling for the village Eleven. Where else?

* * * * *

The Doctor looked down at his sodden lobster-print shirt. It somehow looked brighter; the lobsters danced with possibility across his chest.

He was amused to find himself out of breath, his lungs burning from the exertion of his run from town. “Oh please!” he shouted up to the sky. “Now I know this isn’t real. If there’s one thing I know how to do, it’s run!” And he sprinted even faster, fighting the pain in his chest and his knees, coming to enjoy it.

Stockbridge Halt loomed ahead in his view. And sure enough, standing in a line at the train platform, a phalanx of scarf and tweed cape and star-patterned waistcoat barring his way from the train, were the nine creatures. They even had the pedantic taste to stand in order.

“Creatures,” he chuckled to himself as he looked at each in turn. “Not a terribly friendly thing to say about oneself, is it?”

His last self said breezily: “Only ten of us, and still enough to crowd a station platform.”

The Doctor nodded. “I can’t imagine how it will be when I get any older. Sometimes it’s bad enough having you all in here.” He tapped his bulging forehead in sympathy.

The Doctor looked above them to the “Arrivals” screen. “Ah, the next train is due from Zebedee Central in about three minutes, is it? Nothing at all preposterous about that!”

His earlier selves were far from amused, although their amusement was difficult to gauge with them slavering through their mouths of sharpened fangs. “A most undignified look,” his third self noted with dismay.

“Yes,” the sixth nodded. “And notice that he gave *us* the fangs, not himself.”

“Though I think he might suit them,” the fifth chimed in.

“Seeing us as his enemy,” the second grumpily agreed.

The Doctor saw that his earlier selves were circling him, preventing him from getting to the train. “I don’t understand,” he implored them. “What was the purpose of those grisly attacks? Why *are* you made up as bargain-basement vampires?”

The incarnation with the starry waistcoat and the goatee rolled his eyes. “Really, Doctor. This experience has rather addled you, hasn’t it?” He turned to his preceding self. “Why don’t you explain, pipsqueak?”

His seventh self scowled at both of his successors. “It isn’t you,” he trilled. “It’s your mind rebelling against the nauseating machinery of this grid!” The “r” in “grid” rolled contemptuously in the short man’s mouth.

Two Doctors stepped closer into the circle, spreading the other selves out. They were his most recent incarnation, the suave older gentleman with slicked black hair and long distinguished face that resembled two profiles pasted together, and the man who had more right to consider himself the Doctor than any of them—the original, he might say. Both faces were, disconcertingly, not as the Doctor remembered them, their jaws distorted by the slavering fangs. Instinctively, he backed away from them, before realizing there was no danger. So, he neared them, the various Doctors entering into a kind of schizophrenic huddle.

He looked to the original Doctor pleadingly. He knew what they would say now, as their minds converged with his. The obscured details of his life, all that had been suppressed to make him fit in here, was bombarding his psyche.

“You know, of course, that you can’t meet John and Gillian.”

He did, of course, but hearing it simply made it dull, inescapable certainty more painful. “Why not? Surely it wouldn’t do any harm, just seeing them again?”

The other Doctors shook their heads emphatically. “It was all we could do to delay them getting into town.”

“If you see them, you may never get out of here. You can’t stay here, Doctor. Hannah’s waiting for you. The TARDIS is waiting, and all those times and places...”

The Doctor knew, as did they all, whose faces he had seen in those glass booths, who had provoked him to tear at the machinery and try to extract them from the Experiential Grid. “You don’t suppose... I’ll be able to get them out?”

His former self shook his head again. “As far as Hannah has discovered, all the Arcellian Fugitives wanted their escape. And it looks as though we’ll have to let them be here, until the Earth Empire forgets them, until that dark chapter of human history is over, and the Arcellian Fugitives can return to reality. They will get out, Doctor. We just... came at the wrong time. As for us, all we can do is trust to luck that we might meet them another, happier time.”

The Doctor looked from the platform, the display above his head taunting him with the flashing text “TRAIN ARRIVING.” Yet he knew they were right. “It does get rather tiresome being right all the time,” the old fellow said with a sad chuckle. “But it does have its, er, compensations, hmm?”

Turning away, the Doctor smiled to see a friend more welcome than his distorted earlier selves. Tucked away in the corner of the platform by the newsstand stood that brilliant blue police box, its phone ringing. The Doctor proudly marched towards it, opened the hatch, and picked up the receiver.

With one last torrent of rain, the train station, and the town, all faded into whiteness. A moment later, he saw the ceiling of the Projection Suite, the breathtaking vista of the Questin Orb, and best of all, the relieved face of Hannah Redfoot, her significance now fully apparent to him.

“Miss Redfoot!” he cried joyously. Feeling the energy and the vitality of being back in the real world, he sprang from the uncomfortable bed and flung his arms around her. Surprised by the extravagant emotion, she hugged him back.

“Nice to have you back in the real world, Doctor.”

* * * * *

The Doctor now remembered all his actions on the Questin Orb, and with the recollection he felt rather guilty. He had been concerned that the human visitors to the Experiential Grid were not there by choice, despite the assurances of the various engineers and the Architect. So, when no one

was around, he had tried to dismantle one of the entry ports, in the process getting tangled up in it himself.

It was all very embarrassing. Though it was not in his nature to apologize, the Doctor was compelled to try. However, the Head Architect of the Experiential Grid spared him the indignity, refusing to hear his apologies, instead blaming himself for the Doctor's situation and trying to allay his own confusion. Hannah looked at the poor creature sadly as he struggled to comprehend the ordeal the Doctor had undergone in their simulation. Indeed, he seemed downright afraid as he tried to understand how the Doctor could so distort their fantasy generation into that existential nightmare.

"I must say, Doctor, I don't understand the first thing about you. Do you mind if I *try* before you go?"

"Be my guest. But be warned that my answers may not make much sense."

"When you entered the 'Scape, naturally it was necessary to scan your entire life. All those centuries of adventure... all time and space at your fingertips. Such a life was unimaginable to us, craving as we always do a home. Yet does such a life really satisfy you?"

The Doctor did not even have to think. "Certainly."

The Architect wagged a finger cautiously. "Please Doctor, don't think us unadventurous. When we examined your mind, we saw that even after all those countless places you had visited, there was never anywhere you felt at home."

"True."

"And perhaps you have been travelling so long you've forgotten it. But didn't you once think at the end of your travels, you would find a better home? Somewhere you felt peace and happiness, and could spend the rest of your days with everything you ever wanted?"

"I did think that, yes..." The Doctor shifted uncomfortably. "And I still do think that." It had, he realized, been years, perhaps entire incarnations, since he thought of those humble ambitions in his head the day he had left home. "Well, you've seen my life! There's always so much else going on. I never really have time to think about what I want."

"Exactly, Doctor! Exactly. All this... the purpose of the 'Scape is to create a place without the challenges you face in your real life. The Arcellian Fugitives welcomed the escape it offered. And one day, we have assured them, they will emerge from it to reality when the universe is a more peaceful place."

"I hope I'll be able to meet them when that happens."

"I wish you had believed me when I told you they entered quite willingly. It's most distressing being thought of as the sort of fellow who might hold people against their will."

"I wish I'd believed you as well."

The Architect sighed. "And yet, you could not help but see such the absence of challenge *as* a challenge, an impediment to your freedom. You could not help but search the unreality and try to dismantle it. So, the fantasy began to tear itself apart from its inception. You did not give yourself love, but separation from love. You did not give yourself a tranquil home, but a sterile suburban prison. You did not populate your world with sympathetic friends, but fictitious characters with whom you seem to identify. And those other selves of yours had to rampage through it, had to give you a conflict and a mystery."

"They were trying to get me out."

The Architect's brow furrowed, and his antennae twitched in sympathy. "Well, you've solved the mystery. But it saddens me that you can't take solace on its own terms Doctor."

The Doctor glanced into the distance, saw those two booths so tantalizingly close, and despite himself and the assurances of the Architect, was compelled to consider one last attempt to get them out... but then, he looked back at the Architect and realized that they wanted to be there. He would have to have faith that times would change, they would get out, and he would meet them again. Improbable, yes, but a hope worth having.

“This search for trouble...” the Architect said sadly. “It seems a morbid fascination.”

The Doctor laughed and clapped the Architect on the back. “I’m very touched, Architect. Thank you for being so concerned about my life. Perhaps you make a good point, and one I will think about. Although you are wrong about one thing.”

“Oh?”

“I do have a home. And I have someone who needs me and cares for me, and whom I need in return.” That familiar police box stood in the distance, and Hannah led him to the door, already anticipating their next voyage.

The Architect smiled at the pair of them as they climbed inside. “Glad I was wrong about that, Doctor.”

* * * * *

Still feeling out of sorts, the Doctor spent a few happy hours underneath the TARDIS console. Tolerably satisfied with his recalibration of the linear calculator, he crawled over to his favourite gilt-edged armchair. He looked from the armchair to the warm glow of the wall roundels, heard the soothing hum of the ship’s ancient engines and felt an overwhelming calm to be back in his natural habitat.

He was sure he would meet them again. After all, the universe was such a web of coincidence that such strange things—stranger, even—were happening all the time. Satisfied to have faith, he considered the deeper meaning of their near encounter. The story the hermit had told, all those ages ago, had sparked his wanderlust. And that wanderlust had led him, by accident, to find the end of the story. Yet there was no end, merely the prospect of another chapter he would have to encounter another time. And round and round it went. He considered the hermit’s philosophical conundrum: *Do the people we become shape the stories we like? Or do the stories we like shape the people we become?*

“Maybe I don’t quite know *everything*,” he said, feeling his other selves within him, laughing at the conceit right alongside him.

When Hannah re-entered the control room, the console was blinking away with what struck her as its own version of contentment. Neither the TARDIS nor the Doctor seemed to notice she was there. He was flipping through a dusty book, a smile of surprising sentiment playing across his face.

She knew it was nosy, but she couldn’t resist getting a little nearer, to get a peek at what was softening him.

It was an image, faded and black and white. Its texture, though, was more like an oil painting, and as Hannah got nearer, she saw it stretched out beyond the frame and seemed to move with her perspective, in three—or knowing the Doctor, more likely five—dimensions.

Yet even the strange, Harry Potter-daguerreotype quality of the photograph was not as intriguing as the faces in it. It was a picture of two children—a girl with bobbed black hair and a red-cheeked boy with curly hair. From where she stood, Hannah could see high, black and white collars that seemed of Time Lord design.

Much to her frustration, the Doctor noticed her before she could look further. He snapped the book shut and brusquely rose from the chair back to the console, his face red with embarrassment.

“Sorry, Doctor.”

“No, no, Miss Redfoot. That experience inside the ’Scape... just made me a little nostalgic. Which is generally a bit of a vice, in my view.”

He laughed sadly.

“You know,” Hannah said, “the whole thing only lasted a few hours. How long did it feel like you were in there?”

“An eternity.” Suddenly the Doctor’s face clouded over.

“What’s the matter?”

“I wonder... if I seem to be enjoying this too much.” He prodded the gilt frame of his armchair, punched the buttons of the linear calculator, but was still uneasy. “Could I still be in the Experiential Grid?”

“Doctor, come on...”

“No, no! Think about it, Hannah, how would I know?”

“Are we going to start singing ‘Row, Row, Row Your Boat’ soon?”

“Life is but a dream, exactly! Maybe the simulation has merely adjusted to something more in line with my desires, by more closely resembling my ‘real’ life.” Hannah couldn’t believe it; this was no mere joke, nor was it the opening to some extended metaphysical pondering. The Doctor snapped his fingers desperately. “Quick, quick, Hannah, tell me something that will prove this is reality. Something outside my frame of reference, or that of the ’Scape simulation!”

Hannah scrambled for a second. She again saw in the Doctor’s face that deep fear of confinement that had so suffocated him in his fantasy life. Now he was hyperventilating, frantically wondering if escape was possible. She needed to think of something, anything, that he would never think of...

“Oh! I’ve got something! One of *my* memories.” She stepped nearer to the Doctor, her voice dropping. “I had a boyfriend, before David—and we went out to a show, and after we went back to his place. And he took his shirt off...” She indicated with her finger, “and he had this tattoo that went right down...”

“Thank you!” the Doctor blurted; hand raised to halt the anecdote. “All right, it’s reality.” He ran his hand through his hair and laughed, with a rueful shake of his head.

Hannah looked over at the scanner, currently showing a breathtaking view of the time vortex. “Now that we’ve settled that, perhaps it’s time for a real holiday?”

“I quite agree, Miss Redfoot.” The Doctor pushed past her and began dexterously tapping away at the TARDIS control panels. Seeing that they were currently on-course for March 11, 2020, the Doctor grimaced and hastily reset the coordinates for the Amazon. “There’s an explorer down that way I should really check up on. And, err... I’ll try my best not to cause too much trouble.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” Hannah replied archly.

* * * * *

It was much, much later when the child finally left home. He was no longer a child, but such was the paradox of these people and their time-twisting lives that one could be old and young, a grandparent and yet still barely out of the Academy. There was nothing paradoxical about the

child's status, though. He would never make the first rank. He was regarded as a bit of a lost cause by this point.

His family had been and gone, under circumstances that are not entirely clear. And without them, he began to feel his age. Or rather, he began to realize it was time to stop acting his age.

He knew what he wanted, and there were those ranking above him who could have given it to him. It would have been better for everyone: he could have seen the wonders of the universe, they wouldn't have to put up with all his pranks and delinquency, and everyone would be better off. But they did not, because of the universal blight that is bloody-mindedness. To the bloody-minded, the mere fact he wanted to go meant that he should not. And passage from their home was strictly monitored and circumscribed. So naturally, in order to leave, you had to first prove you didn't want to. That reminded him of another Earth story.

He had acquired an aura that went beyond shabby respectability and into fearful awe. Not that anyone would ever give him respect or awe: he was an oddball and an eccentric, hindered by his lack of achievement and no doubt a disappointment to that family of his, about whom he didn't speak. Not to mention the great and storied legacy of their people. They set great store in such things, and perhaps having him around, never letting him do what he wanted, reminded them how important they were. If one threw one's standards away, they said to each other, any of us might end up... like... him.

Knowing that he would never leave this drab world by the conventional route and, knowing more and more about the moral failure embodied in his society, escape became not just a daydream but a necessity. The daydreaming begun to taunt him; he was starting to choke on the dust of his world. Life was not worth living in this vacuum, he knew that much. So, he concocted a plan.

And there finally came a day. What happened that day is a story for another time, indeed perhaps it is a story that should stay with our child and his conscience. But after what happened that day, he knew he could never stay here. And so, he left. He did have some help. And he had a member of his family to remind him of his home. And when he realized how easy it had been, and how much he had gained by leaving, he was inexpressibly happy.

His life ended that day. But the adventures begun.



Do the people we become shape the stories we like?
Or do the stories we like shape the people we become?

The Doctor is happily retired. He always knew he would retire, and he is fairly sure that he's happy, living in a semi-detached in suburban England. However, the only problem is that the Doctor feels miserable. He is plagued with doubts, depression and ennui. He spends too much time watching TV. He feels the neighbours are judging him. He only has his therapy sessions and a visit from his grandchildren to look forward to.

Then, a series of grisly murders rock the neighbourhood. The eccentric tokens left at the scene—a recorder, a question-mark umbrella, a stick of celery, and a pair of sunglasses—jog the Doctor's memory.

Something happened on the Doctor's last adventure. Something that reaches right back to his childhood.

Something that makes him think the adventure isn't over at all.

ISBN 0-918894-28-X



This is another story in a series of original fan authored
Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project
featuring the Tenth Doctor as played by Laurent Meyer

