

Doctor Who

INTROSPECTION

A Ninth Doctor short story
by
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It became clear something was wrong the moment the TARDIS started to land. An unfamiliar metallic grating ear-piercingly augmenting the usual laboured wheeze of materialization. A wild, juddering vibration so violent that for a moment the Doctor felt his eyes were being tricked into thinking they were seeing everything double. And a sensation of conflict, almost as if the TARDIS was fighting with itself – a sensation that ceased with startling abruptness. The ensuing silent stillness felt unsettling, rather than normal.

The Doctor released his grip on the console and looked accusingly at the now stationary Time Rotor.

“What was all that about?” he demanded.

The TARDIS was not forthcoming.

“All right – if you’re not gonna tell me, I’ll have a look for myself,” he announced, and marching briskly to the door, threw it open and stepped outside.

He took a couple of strides away from the TARDIS, subliminally noting the fact that he was apparently in the entrance hallway of a very old house – unmistakably an English manor house. A hallway long and wide enough to be a room in its own right, with age-darkened oak panelling on the walls and grey flagstones underfoot that were worn smooth by the passage of countless feet across the centuries.

Then he heard behind him the sound of the TARDIS door opening and closing for a second time, and spun on his heel. As he registered what he was seeing, his jaw dropped.

“When I said I was gonna have a look for myself, this isn’t what I had in mind!” he protested.

There wasn’t just one TARDIS behind him; there were two. His own, materialized into solidity, and another one, pale and transparent as a ghost, partially overlapping it at the rear right corner. And staring at him was a similarly ghost-like version of himself.

Not himself as in one of his other regenerations. That concept wasn’t exactly a novelty. No, this was himself as he was, right now. Tall, angular, close-cropped hair, black jacket and trousers – or what *would* have been black jacket and trousers, had they not assumed the same silvery sheen as everything else about this alternate manifestation of himself.

“Hullo – this is a new one,” he remarked, with slightly forced cheerfulness. “Bumping into other people’s bad enough. Bumping into myself – even worse. Bumping into my *same* self – definitely not recommended.”

His 'ghost' self was treating him to an extremely irritated glare.

"Excuse *me!*" he retorted, with heavy sarcasm. There was the faintest hint of reverberation in his voice, the vocal equivalent of the silver sheen. "Not *my* fault you came barging in and tried to elbow me into the middle of next week! I was here first, you know! Or I would've been, if you hadn't tried to grab the same parking space at the same moment."

"Didn't *try!*" the Doctor snapped defensively. "Just happened! There was some kind of energy spike in the Time Vortex. Don't think I *planned* to do this, do you?"

"Planned or no, we'd better do something about it, quicksticks!" the ghost Doctor responded acidly. "Because you know how bad this could end up being, don't you?"

As they stared at each other, blue eyes locked onto silver, the sound of a door opening broke in upon their confrontation.

Both Doctors turned. The door in question was a solid oak one at the far end of the hallway. From it emerged a woman who was evidently in the vicinity of sixty, though whether she was still approaching it or had already left it in her wake wasn't obvious. She wore silver-rimmed glasses to match her silvering hair, and a faintly challenging expression on her face; the Doctor half expected her to say "*Who are you, and what are you doing here?*"

But she didn't say that. What she said instead, with some astonishment, was, "Good heavens – it's *you!*"

Almost as if she knew him, the Doctor thought. But of course that couldn't be it, because he knew as a matter of certainty that he'd never seen this woman in his life – in any of his lives, come to that.

"Yeah, right. Me," he agreed brusquely. "Really good description of whom I am, that. But do you mind doing me a favour and mulling that over someplace else? Really busy right now."

She stared at him, then at the ghost Doctor. Then she ostentatiously held up her left hand and pinched it with her right.

"It doesn't work," she announced. "You're still there, and there are still two of you."

"Look, do you mind?" said the Doctor impatiently. "This is a private conversation!"

"About as private as it gets, by the look of it!"

She was evidently one of those people who interacted with life from behind a shield of flippancy; as someone who used the strategy himself, the Doctor recognized the mindset. He studied her as she walked slowly toward him, shaking her head as if that would help her get it around what was happening.

"Yeah, well, haven't got a lot of time for context," said the ghost Doctor crisply. "Having a bit of a crisis here, thanks."

"The sort of crisis only you *could* have, by the looks of it." She caught the duplicated frown of confusion on both faces and smiled faintly. "Believe it or not, I do know who you are."

"How?" the Doctor demanded. "Who are you? What're you doing here?"

"I work here," she said, ignoring his peremptory manner. "Beth Miller. My uncle met you in the nineteen-seventies – Laurence Miller. He was working in Sweden at the time. Remember those

things everyone thought was a collection of medieval burial mounds on the island in the middle of the lake? Except they weren't burial mounds, they were incubators? So UNIT got involved."

The Doctor frowned, then his face cleared. "Oh! Yeah! I remember! Narrow squeak, that." He cast his mind back. "Laurence Miller... Bright lad!" he recollected approvingly. "He's your uncle?"

"He was till he died. He gave it up after that," she said lightly. "But he did tell me about what happened. For some reason he was allowed to. There was a security clamp-down afterwards – UNIT were quite strict about that – but for some reason he got given a special exemption relating specifically to me. Of course, I was only in my mid-teens back then." She paused, regarding him with closer attention, and shook her head slightly, as if she was remembering something but was unable to believe it. Then she shrugged, and visibly returning to the matter in hand, she went on, "At any rate, he told me a fair bit about *you*. For instance, that" – she indicated the TARDIS – "that's a bit of a giveaway, wouldn't you say?" She paused, and took a deep breath. "But it's still somewhat – *disconcerting*, I think would be the word – to meet you in person."

"Saves on some of the explanations, I suppose," the Doctor shrugged.

"But not all of them. What sort of crisis are you having, exactly?"

"Long story," the ghost Doctor said impatiently.

"As my English teacher used to say – do a *précis*," Beth suggested sweetly.

"It's like this..." the Doctor began, but the ghost Doctor cut across him.

"Let me tell it," he said brusquely. "I'm your future self. I know the bits you don't know yet."

The Doctor frowned at him. "What bits are those, exactly?"

"The bit about the alien artefact in this house, for a start."

"What alien artefact?"

"Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin," said the ghost Doctor, dripping sarcasm.

"You know, when I was a very little girl I used to *like* sitting in front of the radio for '*Listen With Mother*'," Beth interjected, looking thoughtful, "but I'm pretty sure she never used to argue with herself. So can I put in a plea that you don't? Or is it some kind of imperative, with you?"

"It's been known," the Doctor admitted, "but not quite to this degree, I'll grant you. Okay," he said to his double, "go for it. I'm listening."

"About time," the ghost Doctor remarked tartly. "Right, this is what's happened. Back in the twelfth century, an alien craft was taking a shortcut through the Solar System."

"Anybody I know?" the Doctor enquired brightly.

"You don't, I do. So, yeah, eventually. They're called the Tellarim. The ship had a catastrophic engine failure and crashed here."

"'Here' as in 'here on Earth'?" Beth queried.

"'Here' as in 'you're standing on it'," said the ghost Doctor shortly. "This house got built over the crash site a couple of centuries later. Thing is, there was something really important on that ship, but the malfunction had been so bad the home planet not only had no idea what had happened to it, they didn't even know where to start looking. Or when. So I offered to help. They gave me a special detector. With that and a bit of Sherlocking, I traced it to this house. Got the

detector locked on to it, and was just coming to get it when Sunshine here” – he gestured irritably at the Doctor – “decides he’s gonna try to materialize in the exact same place and time as me.”

“Didn’t *decide* anything of the sort!” the Doctor denied indignantly. “Told you, there was an energy spike in the Time Vortex! Got thrown out, and this is what happened. What are the chances, though?” he added plaintively.

“Chances of what?” Beth enquired.

“Dunno how much Uncle Laurence told you, but for a start,” said the Doctor, “you shouldn’t be able to make physical contact with anything in the Time Vortex, because the ‘*nothing-exists-in-there-while-at-the-same-time-coexisting-everywhere*’ thing should be going on. Except, turns out that’s not always true, and it looks like this is one of those times. And then there’s the ‘*TARDIS-getting-hooked-up-on-ITSELF-coming-out-of-the-Time-Vortex*’ thing. It’s like there’re only two cars on the entire planet and they’ve smashed into each other in the middle of the Sahara. Like I said, what are the chances?”

“Nothing like as small as you thought, it would appear,” Beth remarked, an incipient gleam of humour causing her eyelashes to flicker momentarily. “They say nothing’s impossible. You appear to be doing your best to prove it.”

“Yeah, well, the only reason this isn’t triggering a temporal anomaly that’d blow up the universe is that, technically speaking, we aren’t in exactly the same place,” the ghost Doctor interjected. “I’m in this millisecond. You two are in the previous one. Not all here, you might say.”

“You might, but I don’t advise it,” said the Doctor tartly.

Beth looked perplexed. “Sorry – I’m not with you.”

“And that’s exactly the problem! Literally! Look,” said the ghost Doctor impatiently, “same TARDIS, coming from two different times on its own timeline, both trying to materialize in the same place at the same moment. Ordinarily that’d mean just a minor emergency – like the TARDIS materializing inside itself, and me having to do something clever so’s to stop a black hole being triggered that’d swallow up a galaxy-sized chunk of the universe. Got a different problem here. The collision got the energy field of the detector all snarled up with the TARDIS forcefield. Stopped the TARDIS materializing inside itself by bumping it one millisecond away from itself. Which, like I said, is the only thing stopping that black hole happening. ‘Cos we’re not occupying the same moment of time. Near enough to be able to see and hear each other, but not able to touch. But the real problem is, the detector energy’s all tangled up with *both* TARDISes’ forcefields. Like vehicles in a pile-up that need pulling apart. And the real sticking point is, the detector’s gone and locked itself onto the artefact in *your* millisecond. So I can’t touch it in mine. And where’s the worst place the artefact could be? *Under* your TARDIS! Which means we can’t get to it unless *your* TARDIS moves, and it *can’t* move, ‘cos it’s hooked up on *my* TARDIS *and* the detector energy field.”

The Doctor thought about that, then said, rather lamely, “Oh.”

“Yeah, right. *Oh*,” the ghost Doctor mimicked savagely. “Great example of clear thinking in a crisis, that. Leadership skills on display to great public acclaim. *Oh*.”

“Do you mind?” enquired the Doctor acidly. “You’re me, remember? There’s a saying about pots and kettles on this planet!”

“Ladies, ladies – *please!*” Beth interrupted, half impatient, half amused. She turned to the ghost Doctor. “Something I’m not clear on. If you’re only a millisecond away from yourself, how come you can talk and move independently of each other?”

“It’s the TARDISEs that are interlocked, not me. There’s just enough temporal wiggle room to keep us separate. Trouble is, it won’t last forever. That millisecond’s keeping us apart for the time being, but even so, we’re so close that eventually the tension of the temporal envelope’ll give under the strain, and that’ll be that.”

“Is that what you meant when you said ‘*you know how bad this could end up being?*’?”

“Yep,” the ghost Doctor agreed succinctly.

“Right...” Beth absorbed that explanation, then posed her next question. “And what’s this thing you’re looking for? Why’s it so important?”

“The Annals of Tellarim. The archive of their whole civilization. Entire history. So, huge disaster. Think ‘Crown Jewels lost in transit,’” the ghost Doctor suggested.

“And stuck in the one place neither of us can get to,” the Doctor frowned. “Got any bright ideas?”

There was a moment’s silence. Then Beth tilted her head slightly to one side, regarding the overlapping TARDISEs.

“How much does the TARDIS weigh?” she enquired tentatively.

“Inside or out?” the Doctor riposted. “And just at the moment, twice what it would normally!” He looked at her more closely. “Why?”

“Well...” – she hesitated – “I was just wondering...”

“Wondering what?” the ghost Doctor prompted impatiently.

Beth gestured at the TARDIS. “Whether you’d got any kind of anti-gravity gizmo in there you could use somehow...”

“Got anti-grav coming out of me ears in there,” the Doctor told her. “So, yeah. But if you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking, won’t work. If it was just the one TARDIS, you and me could move it by ourselves, just about. But not” – he jerked his thumb at it – “dragging his TARDIS as well.”

“Listen up, genius,” interjected the ghost Doctor with a touch of derision. “Today’s big news flash – I’m you. Anything you can do, I can do better! If I tweak the anti-grav system in my TARDIS and rig a temporal differentiator field to cover mine *and* yours – which’ll allow for the millisecond difference so they move at the same time – don’t have a problem, do we? Might even be able to help,” he concluded airily. “Provided we both pull in the same direction, of course.”

“Push, you mean,” the Doctor contradicted him.

“On the evidence to date, you two pulling together seems a very dodgy concept,” Beth commented, shaking her head dolefully. “Let alone pushing.”

Both Doctors scowled indignantly at her, then saw the twinkle in her eye and realized they were being teased.

“Okay, division of labour,” said the Doctor briskly. “We’ll get creative, and you can heckle from the sidelines. Okay?”

Beth grinned and gave him a thumbs-up.

“On it,” she confirmed. She looked at the TARDIS with curiosity. “What’s it like inside?”

“Wanna take a look?” The Doctor winked at his counterpart, who chuckled and turned toward his own TARDIS. “Come on, then.”

Beth had seen the wink and regarded him warily, but followed him to the door. He went in; she stopped short in the doorway. The Doctor turned to enjoy the look on her face.

“Now you know,” he said cheerfully. “This is what it’s like inside.”

“Y-yes,” she stammered faintly. Then, with a laudable effort at sounding normal in spite of being faced with an impossibly large interior fitting into an impossibly small exterior, she added, “Uncle Laurence never said anything about this...”

“Uncle Laurence didn’t know,” the Doctor told her, as he strode up the ramp to the console and started manipulating controls. “He didn’t get to come inside. But he did know what the TARDIS is. What it does. Told you that, did he?”

“Travelling in time and space? Yes, he did. Which was quite hard to integrate into my personal experience of what’s possible,” she admitted. “Though not quite as hard as the idea that you might change into somebody else. Which he said you warned him might happen if you didn’t get out of the incubator chamber alive.”

“As it happens, I did, so it didn’t,” said the Doctor, still busy around the console. “That time, anyway. But he was right. It’s called regeneration. Kicks in if I’m dying but not yet dead. Bit like a refurbishment, really. You come out of it looking different to when you went in. What you might call a literally life-changing experience. Only just done it recently, as it happens,” he added casually.

Beth blinked, and cleared her throat. “Right....” She thought about it for a few moments before adding, “Sounds as if it must be one of the universe’s more quirky survival techniques.”

“You have *no* idea,” the Doctor informed her.

Beth put her head on one side as she studied him. “Uncle Laurence said you had a girl with you at the time. Some sort of assistant. Is she still around?”

“Nope,” said the Doctor, keeping his attention on the console. “Been one or two since then. It can end up in a quick turn-round on the ‘assistant’ front, sometimes. Not that that’s what they call themselves, mind. Try saying that about some of them, they’d have your hand off your wrist quicker than you can blink! Some of ‘em get invited, some of ‘em invite themselves. But no-one at the moment. Like I said, only just regenerated. Haven’t had time to pick up any more strays yet.”

Beth was betrayed into a grin. “I do hope you don’t call them that where they can hear you!”

“Yeah, could *stray* into dangerous territory with that one,” the Doctor agreed cheerfully, one corner of his mouth quirked upward. He reset a few more controls, then raised his voice. “Oi! You next door! How’s it going?”

“Why? Need some help?” came the sardonic rejoinder from the ghost TARDIS.

“Course not!” the Doctor denied indignantly. “Waiting for *you*! Just making sure you were keeping up,” he added innocently.

“Heard that!” the ghost Doctor snapped instantly.

Beth grinned. “You said you could do anything he could, didn’t you?” she reminded him, directing her voice toward the other TARDIS from her vantage point in the doorway.

“Course I can! Told you, I’m him! Where’s your sense of logic?”

“Probably took a good look at what’s going on and went for an early lunch!” she retorted.

“Time to get it back on duty, then,” the ghost Doctor told her. He raised his voice to address the Doctor again. “Anti-grav tweaked, temporal differentiator field up and running. Thunderbirds are go, far as I’m concerned. What about you?”

“Yep,” the Doctor acknowledged, flicking one last lever into position with a flourish. “Showtime!”

Shortly after that Beth found herself taking up position alongside both Doctors as they gave the TARDISEs a final visual check. She wondered if they realized they were standing in identical stances, right down to the folded arms. Hardly surprising, really, but she had to actively suppress a smile at the sight of that particular phenomenon.

Switching her regard to the conjoined police box exteriors, she found herself experiencing a moment of doubt; despite the Doctors’ obvious confidence, they suddenly looked too heavy to be moved by just three people.

“How far have we got to shift them?” she asked.

“That should do it,” said the ghost Doctor, moving his hands apart to indicate a distance of about three feet.

“What’s that? The one that got away?” the Doctor enquired brightly. Both his double and Beth gave him the same slightly pained look. He sighed. “Everyone’s a critic...” he remarked sadly. “Okay, let’s crack on with it.”

“The only thing holding us up is you doing your music hall routine,” the ghost Doctor pointed out. “So if you’ve quite finished...?”

He strode forward and placed his hands flat on the jamb of the left-hand door of his TARDIS, then looked back at Beth and the Doctor. “Well, come on!” he exhorted. “You’re the one who said crack on with it. Give it some oomph!” He waited for them to take up their respective positions, then said, “Ready? Three... Two... One... PUSH!”

It was easier than Beth had expected. She braced her feet and threw her weight forward; the Doctors did the same. For a moment she thought nothing was going to happen, but then she realized the TARDISEs were moving; slowly, to be sure, but nevertheless moving. Spurred on by the realization, she renewed her effort.

“Okay, ease up!” the ghost Doctor said abruptly. “All clear!”

All three of them relaxed and straightened up, and the Doctor followed the direction of his counterpart's eyes.

"That it?" he demanded.

"Yep," the ghost Doctor confirmed.

Beth looked at where they were looking. Embedded among the larger flagstones was a much smaller one, of a similar smooth, pale grey but noticeably quadrangular in shape.

"What, the Square Stone?" she asked, surprised.

The ghost Doctor raised his eyebrows. "You know about it, do you?"

"I work here, remember? This is a National Trust place. Good job it's after hours now, or you'd be having more people than me asking what's going on!" she added, parenthetically. Then, reverting to the point under discussion, "As for what I know about the Square Stone – well, only that it's there. It's always been a bit of a curiosity. The tour guides always point it out, because it's the only one like it in the entire floor. Nobody knows how it got its name, but that's what it's been called ever since anyone can remember. The Square Stone."

"Got news for you," said the ghost Doctor. "When this place got built over the crash, it got scooped out of the ground and added to the building materials. Because your Square Stone, Beth Miller, isn't a stone at all." He dropped to his haunches to study it more closely. "That's the Annals of Tellarim, sitting there being trodden on by a lot of ignorant sightseers all this time. The exterior, you'll have noticed, happens to look similar enough to the stones all round it for the builders not to realize it wasn't what they thought it was." He straightened up, re-folded his arms, and awarded the Annals an irritated glare.

Beth's brow creased. She'd expected him to be more pleased at their success, and sent the Doctor a puzzled look, seeking enlightenment.

"That was the easy bit," he pointed out. "Don't forget he still can't touch it. The detector's locked on to it in our millisecond, not his."

"You could make a start on getting it out of the floor while we work on the next bit," the ghost Doctor suggested tersely. "That way at least *one* of us'll get his hands on it."

"Good thinking, Batman," the Doctor quipped. He pulled out his sonic screwdriver and waved it briefly at Beth. "See this? You're gonna like this..."

"Right – so..." The Doctor hefted the now released grey cube up and down as he summarized. "One hole in floor, one Annals of Tellarim in hand."

"Still not *my* hand, though!" said the ghost Doctor pointedly. "Gotta get it across that millisecond, somehow..."

In the silence that followed, Beth initially found herself thinking, '*How on earth am I going to explain that hole in the floor tomorrow morning?*' But then her mind switched tracks and started to follow a different, and very particular, train of thought...

She went back over everything both Doctors had said, and realized it all seemed to point to an obvious conclusion. But surely the answer couldn't be that simple! *Could* it? If it was, wouldn't the Doctor already have thought of it...?

She looked at the ghost Doctor. "You did say it's the TARDISEs that are interlocked, not you, didn't you?"

"Yeah," he confirmed.

"And yours is the same TARDIS as his, just one millisecond in the future?"

"Told you that already! Keep up!" He sounded slightly impatient, jerking his head as if telling her to get on with it.

"Am I missing something, then?"

"Whaddya mean?"

She spread her hands wide in a gesture that encompassed both TARDISEs.

"TARDIS now, TARDIS a millisecond from now?" she prompted, her eyes travelling from the grey cube in the Doctor's hands to the interlocked blue and silver boxes.

The Doctor stared at her, then – as she had – at the Annals, then at the TARDISEs.

And realization dawned. On both of him.

"Oh, that's good," he said approvingly, and his face split into an enormous smile. "Oh, that's very good! That's *so* good I might have to start grinning from ear to ear, and with ears like these, you wanna be careful about making that happen!" He looked at the ghost Doctor. "Humans! They're fantastic! Absolutely fantastic! Never stop amazing me! Why didn't we think of that?"

"Too busy looking for a complicated solution," the ghost Doctor admitted ruefully. "Completely overlooked the simplest one. Put it inside yours, it'll turn up in mine."

"*'To introspect,'*" Beth mused aloud, enunciating clearly and deliberately, as if she was quoting from a dictionary. She was signally failing to suppress a smile. "*'To analyze one's own thoughts and feelings.'* Although, I have to say, I've never seen it done quite like this before! *'An Introspector Calls,'* you could say..."

"Oh, wittier than a Terry Pratchett footnote, aren't we?" the ghost Doctor retorted sourly. Then he expelled a sigh of resignation and turned to the Doctor. "All right, Clever Clogs, where're you gonna put it?"

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. "You're me, aren't you? Where d'you think? With me, Beth," he added, striding toward his TARDIS.

She followed him as he marched up the ramp, and almost jumped as he swung round and unceremoniously thrust the grey cube at her.

"Hold that a minute," he instructed her. "Who knows? Might be the only time you ever have an entire planet's history in your hands."

It seemed altogether irrational, she thought, that that should suddenly make the cube feel so much heavier.

She watched as he levered up one of the metal grilles that formed the floor of the console platform. Underneath was some kind of storage space. He gestured to her to give him the cube,

then stowed it away and replaced the flooring. He stood up, dusted his hands, and gave her a grin. "Come on, then..."

Before either of them could move, they were suddenly aware of a slight vibration, like a shiver running through the TARDIS.

The Doctor frowned.

"Don't like the feel of that," he observed.

"Why, what was it?" Beth asked, suddenly feeling nervous.

"Don't wanna worry you, but – remember that thing about the temporal envelope giving out under the tension of us being so close together? Got a nasty feeling the flap might be coming unstuck..." The Doctor started purposefully for the door. "Come on!"

Beth on his heels, he went to the open door of the ghost TARDIS and raised his voice. "S'pose you felt that? Got the Annals all right?"

"Yeh – I did, and I have," said the ghost Doctor, emerging with the cube, now silver-sheened, in his hands. "Big part of the problem still ongoing, of course."

"Now what?" the Doctor demanded, throwing his hands in the air. "Some people're never satisfied, had you noticed that?"

"Detector's still stuck, remember? *Still* locked onto your millisecond. *Still* can't untangle us."

"Wonderful!" said the Doctor sarcastically. "Icing on the cake! What about the Number One All Time IT Solution? Tried that?"

"Course I have!" said the ghost Doctor irritably. "It won't *turn* off, let alone on again!"

"What about impact engineering?" Beth enquired. "You know..."

"Yeah, I know – giving it a thump. I do know what 'impact engineering' is, y'know!"

"Well?" Beth persisted. "*Have* you?"

The ghost Doctor opened his mouth, about to be withering, then realized something. "No," he admitted. "Worth a try, I suppose..."

He was interrupted by another vibration, stronger this time.

"No 'suppose' about it!" the Doctor said sharply. The ghost Doctor nodded and vanished into his TARDIS. A few seconds later his voice came floating out.

"Okay – one judiciously targeted thump coming up... Here goes...!"

Another shudder, even more violent, shook everything. The Doctor's face was grim. With his tension communicating itself to her, Beth found she was holding herself rigid, her fists clenched. It was all she could do not to let herself grab the Doctor's arm for reassurance...

Then there was a triumphant yell from inside the ghost TARDIS.

"JACKPOT!"

As they watched, the two TARDISES began to drift apart, no longer overlapping. The ghost TARDIS was changing from its spectral silver, regaining corporeality, returning to its normal shade of blue.

"Right, I'm off, before the Cloister Bell starts pointing out the obvious!" the erstwhile ghost Doctor called out. "I'll give your love to the Tellarim. Be seein' ya!"

“Not if I can help it,” muttered the Doctor darkly.

The door slammed. A loud mechanical wheezing, groaning sound filled the air, and as the ghost Doctor’s TARDIS faded out of existence, so did the ominous shuddering. Within moments, both were gone.

“That’s that, then,” said the Doctor with satisfaction. He caught Beth’s bemused expression. “Whassamatter? Didn’t Uncle Laurence tell you about the dematerialization thing?”

“Yes... Yes, he did. But hearing about it isn’t the same as actually *seeing* it, is it?” she said, a little plaintively. “I’m beginning to feel as if six impossible things before breakfast’ll be child’s play, after this!”

“Pinch yourself again, if it helps,” the Doctor advised her cheerfully. He saw her expression change again, and studied her more closely. “Okay, what is it now?”

“Well,” she said, somewhat absently, “I was just wondering...” Her eyes refocused. “That Doctor,” she went on, more purposefully. “If he’s your future self, how come he didn’t already know this was going to happen? It’s the past for him, isn’t it?”

“Thing is,” the Doctor began, “whenever this sort of thing happens – ”

Beth regarded him quizzically. “Oh, happens a lot, does it?”

“More than you might think,” the Doctor admitted. “Anyway – as I was saying – whenever this happens there’s this sort of built-in self-protection thing that kicks in. My memory resets. Doesn’t retain it. So although this happened to *me*, by the time I’m him, it’s been wiped.”

Beth reverted to a bemused expression. “Your life must be *so* complicated.”

“Old news,” said the Doctor dismissively.

She studied him for a few moments, then squared her shoulders.

“Well, this appears to be the moment for some new news,” she said, with the air of being about to take the plunge. “I ought to tell you – ” She broke off, and gave him that same shake of her head, that same look of someone struggling with disbelief that she’d worn about half an hour before, when she’d first set eyes on him.

“Tell me what?” the Doctor prompted.

She drew in a deep breath, and went for it. “That I was *told* to be here today.”

The Doctor raised an interrogative eyebrow. “Oh, yeah?”

“By – someone else.” Now there was a decidedly strange expression on her face, one that he found himself unable to decipher, as she continued her narrative. “But the message came via Uncle Laurence... You know I said there was a security clamp-down about that business in Sweden? UNIT were pretty forceful about the fact that he wasn’t to tell anyone else about it. Then someone else came along and – for some reason – told him the complete opposite. That he *could* tell *me*. No-one else. Just me.”

“Oh, yeah? So who gave him this permission?” The Doctor was beginning to be intrigued. Whatever it was she was working up to telling him, it clearly wasn’t going to fall under the description ‘run of the mill’...

“Some man who turned up after it was all over. Not UNIT, apparently – someone else. Flashed a leather wallet at him with some kind of secret service ID. Yes, it was under wraps to everyone else, but he was giving Uncle Laurence a special exemption that applied only to me. The man said I’d need to know, for the future. And that I’d need to be here.”

“Here?” the Doctor repeated.

“Here,” Beth confirmed. “And, what’s more, today. He said it was going to be crucial. That’s why I took a job here. Uncle Laurence said this man stressed over and over how important it was going to be that I was in *this* house, on *this* day. And he must have believed him, because he made me promise I’d do it. Be here, today, like the man told him. So I did, and – here I am.”

Light was beginning to dawn on the Doctor. “Who was this mystery secret service bloke, then?”

“He never gave a name. But Uncle Laurence did describe him to me...” Beth met his eyes, and spoke slowly and precisely. “He said he had close-cropped hair, blue eyes, a northern accent, and he wore – a black leather jacket...”

Of course! The clues had been there from the very start. What had her first words to him been? “*Good heavens – it’s you...!*”

There was a long pause, during which they looked at each other without speaking.

Then Beth said reflectively, with a slight smile, “You know, I wouldn’t mind betting it was that jacket that really sold him the goods...”

The Doctor glanced down at himself and unleashed one of his widest grins.

“Convincing dress code for an agent, yeah?” he agreed. “And without you, this might’ve turned out very different. So, need to make sure you’re here to stick your oar in and be *fan*-tastic... Looks like I’d better be off, then.” He got out the leather wallet containing the psychic paper and waggled it at her. “Sweden, nineteen-seventies. Gotta have that word with Uncle Laurence and make sure he delivers the message, haven’t I?”

“Oh! You’re – going, then...?” Beth couldn’t mask a sudden and unexpected pang of regret. For a split second she wondered how many others had felt that same pang. *Oh, well; it’s not possible for every stray to get picked up...* “I mean – right now?” she couldn’t help adding wistfully.

“Yep,” the Doctor agreed airily. Either he hadn’t noticed, or he’d chosen not to notice, the wistfulness. He headed purposefully toward the TARDIS.

Beth’s voice pulled him up as he got to the doorway. “Doctor...?”

He turned to look at her. “What?”

“The security thing. Am I allowed to tell anyone, now? Or have I still got to keep it a secret?”

“Nah, tell anyone you like.” The Doctor shrugged. “Why not? Nobody’s gonna *believe* it, are they?”

“Fair point,” she conceded.

“Anyway, I’m off,” the Doctor reiterated brightly. “Better not be late, had I? Don’t wanna risk having to give myself another good talking to!”

Beth couldn’t help smiling. “Doctor,” she said, with feeling, “after what I’ve seen today, I can assure you, you *definitely* put a different slant on it.”

“On what?”

“Talking to yourself!”

“Not the first time it’s happened,” the Doctor shrugged. “And you know what? Pretty sure it’s not gonna be the last.”



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