

Doctor Who

## LIVE AND LEARN

A First Doctor short story  
by  
Deborah Latham

---



Had anyone been observing the boy making his way along the dimly lit and rather shabby street, they might have been struck by the caution with which he was moving, occasionally throwing a nervous look over his shoulder as if he were expecting to see a pursuer behind him emerging from the patchy swirls of fog. Such an observer might have speculated on who would be in pursuit of a mere eleven year old, even in this part of London; it might also have crossed their mind to wonder what he was doing here at this time of day.

But, as it was, none of these lines of thought were being pursued, because there was no-one to observe; even now, in the middle of the afternoon, the leaden November sky above was darkening prematurely – the street lights were already on – and the temperature was dropping, so there was no-one about. The ageing terraces on each side of the narrow street showed no signs of life; even those inhabitants who were prone to curtain-twitching were staying close to their living-room fires or in their stove-warmed kitchens.

So the boy was able to reach his destination, where the street turned sharply to the right, without anyone seeing him.

He didn't stop to look at the familiar legend painted in ageing white lettering on the battered wooden gates. If he'd been concentrating, he might have noticed the bicycle propped against the dustbins lined up along the brick wall on the right, or the empty bottles someone had dumped on the top of the wall, illuminated by the light from the lamp-post there, but he had other things on his mind.

Stealthily he approached the gates and laid a cautious hand on one of them. As he did so he half-glanced behind him, to his right, and saw movement where the street was being swallowed by another of the swirls of fog. He turned so as to see more clearly – and froze.

A policeman! Slowly sweeping the street with a torch as he walked...

The boy, knowing full well he was somewhere he ought not to be, shrank back against the gate, as if by doing so he could make himself invisible. For the first time he noticed the bicycle. Was it the policeman's? Had officialdom already been alerted? Was he himself the object of that probing beam of light?

But the policeman was walking away, patrolling at an unhurried pace, and didn't turn round as he disappeared into the obscuring eddies of moisture. The boy let out a silent sigh of relief and

leaned forward slightly to apply a gentle pressure to the gate. It opened just wide enough to admit him, then swung quietly back into place.

Now, even if anyone had been watching, below the darkening sky they would have seen only an empty street and closed gates that announced to the world:

*I. M. FOREMAN  
Scrap Merchant  
76, TOTTER'S LANE*

Inside the yard, the boy surveyed his surroundings with a swift, almost perfunctory motion of his eyes to make sure he was alone, before focusing all his attention on what he'd come to see.

He'd caught a quick glimpse of it for the first time yesterday, as he'd been walking past the gates; one of them had been partly open, with someone he hadn't been able to see properly just in the act of closing it. But whoever they were, they hadn't done it in time to prevent him catching a momentary sight of the object that had excited his curiosity ever since. He spent a lot of time playing alone, and not so very long ago much of it had been spent in that yard (unbeknownst to anyone else), so he was generally familiar with its contents and their potential for entertainment. However, it was quite a number of weeks since he had last been there, so he was both fascinated and intrigued by the novelty of what he'd seen – an object that he knew hadn't been present on his previous visit, and wouldn't have expected to find there at all. Ever since that brief sighting, he'd been almost obsessed with the need to come back and investigate.

Now he had, and could.

Standing there surrounded by the jumbled and discarded detritus of life – the familiar disfigured mannequins, dusty vases, unwanted gardening implements, car tyres, and so on – was a tall box. A tall blue box. A police box.

The boy stared at it, wondering how it had got there, when, and who had put it there. It didn't look damaged, so what was it doing in a scrap yard?

As he gazed, something began to seep into his consciousness, and he realized what it was. A sound... Was that a faint hum he could hear, coming from the box – ?

Puzzled, he took a step forward, halted, then took another. Now he was near enough to touch the door...

He had just raised a tentative hand toward it when a sudden movement to his right made him jump back, startled. The gate had swung open, so suddenly that there was no time to flee, nor even to hide. He stood frozen, staring at the man who had stepped in and now stood regarding him with an equally fixed gaze.

An elderly man – somewhere near sixty, perhaps? – wearing rather old-fashioned clothes, given that this was 1963; a dark cloak or cape, a long scarf looped around his neck, and an astrakhan hat perched at a rakish angle on his long, silver hair. At first glance he didn't seem particularly threatening. But his eyes, and their hawk-like regard, somehow made the boy feel intensely uncomfortable.

"Who are you?" the old man demanded sharply. "What are you doing here?"

"Nothing, sir!" the boy blurted nervously.

“Nothing, hm?” The old man sounded sceptical. “Not what I’d expect someone your age to be doing, I must say! Well, even so, you’re presumably here for a reason – what is it?”

“Er – I live here...”

“I beg to differ, young man! I don’t think you live *here*. In fact, I *know* you don’t. And how do I know that, hm? Because I *do*. For the moment, at least. So come along, explain yourself. What business do you have in a scrap merchant’s yard?”

The boy swallowed nervously. “I do live in Totter’s Lane, sir. I come in here to – play, sometimes...”

“Do you, now?” The tone of voice seemed fractionally less sharp, hinting at a growing interest. “I don’t recall having seen you before. I’m sure I’d remember if I had.” Looking at those bright, piercing eyes, the boy believed him – utterly.

“I used to come here all the time, but I haven’t been for a while,” he explained. “And I’ve never seen that police box before. That didn’t use to be here.”

The old man’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Perhaps not, but scrap yards can be dangerous places, very dangerous places. All those things you can get tangled up in or injure yourself with. I’m surprised at your parents for letting you. Yes, most surprised.”

“I haven’t got a dad,” the boy muttered. “He’s dead. And Mum doesn’t know... She doesn’t know I come here. She found me in here once and told me not to...” He sounded half defiant, half ashamed.

“So you’re not very good at doing what you’re told, eh? Well, neither am I, young man, neither am I!” Unexpectedly the old man smiled, and suddenly the atmosphere felt completely different. It was as if they had formed a connection; as if the two of them had become co-conspirators instead of adversaries.

“I haven’t done anything wrong, I promise,” said the boy urgently.

“Hmm,” said the old man sceptically. “Are you quite certain about that? Shouldn’t you be in school at this time of day?”

The boy bit his lip and dropped his eyes. He didn’t reply.

“Oh, I see.” The old man nodded sagely. “Playing truant, are you? Is that why you’re here?”

The boy looked up again, and there was a touch of desperation in his voice. “There isn’t usually anyone in here, and I have to go *somewhere*, when I’m –”

He broke off, as if he’d said too much. The old man looked at him keenly.

“When you’re what?” Then, when there was no immediate reply, “What’s your name?”

“Smith, sir,” said the boy unenthusiastically. “John Smith. It’s a boring name. All the kids say so...”

“Boring? Only if *you* are, young man! And whether you are boring or not is *your* decision to make, no-one else’s!” The old man eyed him keenly. “Well, John Smith, *I* am the Doctor, and I know as well as you do you shouldn’t be in this yard!” Abruptly he paused, as if trying to pinpoint an elusive memory. “John Smith, John Smith... Now, where have I heard that name recently...?” Recollection dawned. “Ah, yes, I remember. Some music or other my granddaughter was listening

to the other day. She was getting quite excited about it. Utter rubbish, if you ask me," he added dismissively. "But according to her it was a John Smith who was responsible for it."

"Yes, sir," John agreed, carefully concealing his opinion that this Doctor, like all old people, was obviously completely out of touch with the modern world. "John Smith and the Common Men. It's going to the top of the charts."

"Is it, indeed! Whatever that may mean!" the Doctor retorted. He clasped the lapels of his jacket with both hands and studied the boy's face thoughtfully. "Well, what I want to know is what your problem is, young man. You've implied you come here because it's some form of refuge for you. What is it that's worrying you?"

John hesitated. "School," he said at last, somewhat sullenly.

"School?" the Doctor barked. "What about it? What school?"

"Coal Hill. I've just started there."

"Ah, yes, Coal Hill School," the Doctor nodded, still clasping his lapels. "My granddaughter goes there." He raised an interrogative eyebrow. "She seems to like it well enough. Why don't you?"

John scowled at the ground. "Dunno," he muttered, still sullen. "The other kids call me stupid. And I keep getting in trouble with the teachers. It makes Mum cross. She had to go and see the Headmaster last week. Miss Wright reported me for arguing in class..."

"Oh, Miss Wright, is it?" The Doctor tapped his chin with his forefinger, thoughtfully. "Yes, my granddaughter's told me about her. She also has had occasion to argue with Miss Wright, I gather. That may prove to be unwise of her..." He seemed to have forgotten John's presence for a moment and to be talking to himself. "I suspect it may be making Miss Wright too curious about certain things... I think we're going to have trouble there, before long. Yes, trouble..." Abruptly he focused on John again. "Well, never mind about that. What have *you* been arguing with Miss Wright about?"

"It's not just her, it's all of them." John stuck his hands deep into his pockets and kicked at an inoffensive piece of broken stone near his foot. It skidded over the ground and disappeared under the nearest pile of junk. "It's – I don't know – it's – well, such a lot of what they expect you to learn doesn't seem to be any *use*," he blurted. "I can't see the *point* of it, so I can't be bothered! That's why Miss Wright gets angry with me, I suppose," he admitted, in a moment of perception. Then he scowled again, and his voice began to rise. "But I can't help what I think! If she doesn't want to hear what I think, she shouldn't ask me, should she? I can't see why she thinks it's so important to learn all those kings and queens and the Crusades and the Romans and all that. That's already happened! It's in the past! Why do I need to know about that? And algebra, and poetry, and all the other things they want you to learn. What's it *for*? It's *pointless!*"

The Doctor shook his head. "Not as pointless as you seem to think, young man. If you don't learn history, how can you learn *from* history? Suppose you were able to travel not only in space but also in time, hm? If you did *that* without studying your planet's history, think how much trouble you could end up in!"

"But you *can't* travel in time," John protested. "That's impossible."

The Doctor looked at him sharply. "Oh, is it? Well, well! And how old are you, exactly?"

"I'm eleven."

"My goodness me! Eleven, are you? And at only eleven years of age you already know everything about everything, do you? You're already absolutely certain about what's possible and what's impossible in a universe you haven't yet explored? I congratulate you, sir! There are many older and wiser heads on this planet of yours who make no such claim! That makes you an extremely remarkable young man, doesn't it, hm?"

Under the Doctor's penetrating gaze John suddenly felt much less sure of himself, and it wasn't a comfortable feeling.

"Look, maybe I don't know everything," he said angrily, "but I do know it's not possible to time travel!"

"You know nothing of the sort, young man!" the Doctor contradicted him briskly. "You only know what's possible based on the knowledge currently available to you on this planet, at this point in its development. People are making discoveries all the time that make the impossible possible! Radio, now – do you listen to the radio? I suppose you must, since you seem to be so familiar with the racket that passes for popular music in this period of Earth's history."

"Of course I listen to the radio!" John snapped, still annoyed. "Everyone does."

"But what if you'd lived in the Middle Ages, eh?" the Doctor challenged. "Would you have been able to listen to the radio then? Of course you wouldn't! If you'd even suggested that people could speak words or play music and be heard hundreds or even thousands of miles away, not only would you have been told that such a thing was impossible, you'd probably have been accused of witchcraft for even thinking such a thing! And that would not have been good for your health – no, not good at all! And yet it *wasn't* impossible – now, was it?"

John felt his annoyance subside as he thought about it. "No-o-o..."

"No, indeed!" agreed the Doctor. "Because on this planet it was James Clerk Maxwell who theorized the existence of radio waves, and Heinrich Hertz who then proved they existed. And how do you think they were able to do that, eh? Not by implementing a deliberate policy of inattention at school and refusing to learn things like history, or algebra – or, indeed, anything else! Certainly not!"

John thought about it. Perhaps, he found himself unwillingly conceding, the Doctor had a point... But then something in his mental playback of the Doctor's words made him cock his head to one side, frowning slightly.

"You keep saying that," he said slowly.

The Doctor's chin dipped and he regarded his interlocutor from under lowered eyebrows, almost as if he sensed some form of danger. "Keep saying what? What do you mean?"

"*'This planet'...* You keep saying *'this planet'*," John repeated. "It sounds – odd. Strange. As if" – he struggled to formulate his thought – "as if you'd been on other planets as well as this one."

“Oh! Ah! Well, now, don’t get too excited about *that*,” said the Doctor, sounding slightly flustered. “I expressed myself poorly, yes. It’s just a figure of speech, young man, a figure of speech! After all, we’re all on this planet, aren’t we? You, me, everyone.”

“Yes, but –” John began, not entirely convinced by the hasty disclaimer.

“Though perhaps it won’t be long before mankind goes to other planets,” the Doctor suggested quickly, as if keen to change the subject.

“The moon, do you mean?” John exclaimed, diverted. “Oh, we’re bound to go to the moon – I know we are!”

“Oh, no doubt of that,” the Doctor agreed. “No doubt at all! Perhaps you’ll even be a part of that one day, who knows? Though not if you persist in thinking that learning is pointless!” Then, with another sudden change of tack, he went on, “Tell me, do you enjoy jigsaw puzzles?”

An enthusiastic gleam appeared in John’s eye. “Yes, I do! I’m good at puzzles,” he declared.

“Excellent, excellent! Then you must think of it like this,” said the Doctor. “Every piece of knowledge is like a piece of a jigsaw. It’s obvious where some pieces go. Others – well, it’s not obvious at all, is it? You have to keep looking and looking, don’t you? And sometimes it seems as if you’re never going to find the right place for that piece. But you don’t discard it, just because it doesn’t seem to go anywhere at the moment, do you? Of course not! Because you know if you do, you’ll never complete the jigsaw. There’ll always be something missing. So you keep hold of it, and you keep on looking to see where it’ll fit. And then, all of a sudden, it does! All the pieces fit together, and you can see the whole picture. And how does that make you feel?”

John analyzed it, then looked up with the air of someone who had just successfully pieced together something of his own. “Good. It feels – good...”

“Quite so, quite so!” said the Doctor with satisfaction. “Well, everything they teach you in school is just like a piece of that jigsaw, the jigsaw of your whole life. Perhaps you can’t see where it all fits in at the moment, but sooner or later, you will. So it’s all worth learning, and keeping hold of, and then you’ll have it when the time comes to fit it into the pattern of your life. Live and learn, John Smith, live and learn! You need to do the learning to be able to do the living, you know.”

John was silent for a moment. Then his shoulders went back in a gesture of resolve. “All right... I’ll try, Doctor.” Then, less enthusiastically, “But a lot of it *is* boring...”

“Yes, well, at this point in time the people running your education system don’t tell you what all the pieces of the puzzle are *for*, do they? They just concentrate on cramming facts into you, drumming information into your head, not on explaining what you might need it for, what you might do with it! No, indeed! No wonder you don’t engage with it.” The old man looked at him with that penetrating regard of his. “You said the other children called you stupid, didn’t you? Well, I don’t think you’re bored because you’re stupid. Not at all! I suggest to you that it’s because you are, in fact, extremely intelligent! But it’s not a question of intelligence, it’s a question of motivation. If you can identify what certain branches of knowledge might enable you to do, I suspect you would find yourself very motivated, very motivated indeed. Algebra, now... What if

you wanted to become a scientist, hm? Any scientist worth his salt has to know algebra. He can't do his job without it!"

John looked surprised. "Really? Mr Chesterton's never told us that."

"Chesterton? Chesterton? Who's he?" The Doctor looked as if he ought to know the name, but couldn't place it.

"He's our science teacher," John explained.

The Doctor's face cleared. "Ah, yes! Quite so, quite so – of course he is. Now you mention it, I seem to recall my granddaughter telling me she's tangled with *him* over several things, as well as with Miss Wright." He seemed to be talking to himself again for a moment or two. "I really must have a word with her. We don't want Miss Wright and Mr Chesterton comparing notes and both starting to – well, never mind that!" He fixed a beady eye on John again. "The important thing is for you to remember that *everything* you learn may be of use to you one day. And that it may help you solve all sorts of puzzles. Some of the secrets of the universe, perhaps, hm?" His expression was now a little mischievous. "Such as travelling in time, for example!"

"But time travel's just science fiction," John declared, unsure if the Doctor was making fun of him or not. Then, seeing the look on the old man's face, he added, rather less certainly, "Isn't it...?"

The Doctor drew in his chin somewhat forbiddingly. "Don't be so parochial, young man! There are other worlds out there, you know. On any one of them, your science fiction may be someone else's science fact! Had you thought of *that*? No? I thought as much! Well, perhaps in future you'll remember to keep an open mind. With an open mind you can open a great many other things. Perhaps you may become someone who proves that the impossible is possible after all!"

John stared at the Doctor, realizing he wasn't being teased after all. The Doctor was in complete earnest. Other worlds... Space travel... *Time* travel...? Could it all *really* be true?

The old man looked at the expression on the face of the boy, and nodded to himself. The seed had been planted; time now to let it germinate and grow. And time to end the conversation before any more questions were asked that it would not be wise to answer.

"Well, this has all been very interesting," he said briskly, "but now it's time you ran along home. You live in Totter's Lane, you say? I shall walk home with you, and make sure you're safely delivered to your mother. No doubt she'll be wondering where you are by now. As your school will have been, of course!"

John looked uncomfortable.

"Yes, well, you can't play truant and not expect there to be consequences, can you?" the Doctor said, but not unkindly. "I know that from personal experience."

"Have you played truant then, sir?" John asked, allowing himself to be ushered out of the yard and back into the street.

"Oh, yes," said the Doctor, pulling the gate shut behind them. He turned to regard John with an impish twinkle in his eye. "In fact, I'm still doing it!"

"Don't you get into trouble for doing it?" John enquired, as they began to walk.

“Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. All sorts of trouble, that I never envisioned when I set out. Though I have to admit it hasn’t been without its rewards, as well as its problems. Still, as I’ve already observed, I never was very good at doing what I was told. Like you, young man!”

And the two of them, the old man and the young one, smiled at each other.

A few yards more, and John halted, pointing across the street.

“That’s where I live,” he said. The Doctor briefly inspected the exterior of the cramped little terraced house, then nodded.

“Time you returned home, then,” he said. “Well, goodbye, young man. And remember what I told you – live and learn, eh? Live and learn!”

“Live and learn,” John repeated. “I’ll remember, Doctor!”

“And I’ll remember you, John Smith!” The Doctor regarded him with an unfathomable expression, hands once again clasping his lapels. “Do you know what I think? I think that one day the name of John Smith will have become very memorable. Very memorable indeed! I, for one, will always remember it, I can assure you! Now, be off with you – run along!” The Doctor waved his hand at the dingy front door across the street in a gesture of dismissal.

John hesitated. “Doctor – ”

“Yes? What is it, my boy?”

“Can I come and talk to you again? Tomorrow?”

The Doctor smiled benevolently. “Of course you can. You know where to find me. Unless...” He didn’t finish the sentence.

“Unless what?” John probed, suddenly anxious for no reason he could identify.

“Oh, nothing. No, I’m sure I shall still be there,” said the Doctor, with a smile and a shrug.

Reassured, the boy visibly dismissed his misgivings; his face lit up in a sudden wide and beaming smile. Then he ran across the road and disappeared into the house. The Doctor nodded with satisfaction. A good boy, that. Much potential. Perhaps now he’d be inspired to achieve that potential.

However, it was high time to get back to the TARDIS. Susan would undoubtedly have returned from school by now...

John sat at the kitchen table, bolting down his tea. His mother, her hands deep in the suds-filled sink, regarded him with a slight frown.

“Go steady, or you’ll choke yourself!” she cautioned. “What’s all the rush for?”

“I want to go out again. I’ve got to go and see someone,” John mumbled through the lump of meat he was chewing.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full – it’s bad manners,” said Jean Smith automatically, like a million other mothers of her generation. She pushed a stray lock of hair out of her eyes with the crook of her wrist and regarded her son quizzically. There was something about him this evening, something different, though she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. “Who is it you’ve got to see?”



“Someone I met today. I want to go and ask him something else. He doesn’t live far away, so I won’t be long, promise.”

Jean frowned. “How far is ‘not far away’?”

“In the scrap yard, that’s all.”

“In the scrap yard?” she repeated, with a laugh. “Don’t be silly! No-one lives *in* the scrap yard.”

John stared at her, suddenly uneasy. “But that’s what he said...”

“What who said?”

“The Doctor! He said he knew I didn’t live there, because he *did*.”

“What Doctor? Doctor who? Anyway, you must’ve misunderstood,” said Jean, shaking her head. “Nobody lives there. It’s just a yard.”

John’s lower lip suddenly trembled, and he jumped out of his chair and rushed out of the kitchen, his unfinished meal abandoned on the table.

“John? John! What’s the matter? Where are you going?” his mother called after him, startled and unsettled by the look on his face.

“I’ve got to go and make sure!” came the fretful reply, just as she heard the front door slam behind him.

John hurtled along the street, heart pounding. What if his mother was right? What if he’d got it all wrong, and the Doctor wasn’t there? Today had been a special day, a turning point in his life, and he didn’t want it to have ended yet. Today he’d heard things, learned things, been made to think about things that he knew were going to make him think completely differently from now on, see things in a completely different way. He wanted to talk to the Doctor again – he *had* to! The Doctor *had* to still be there...!

As he neared the gates, he saw there was now a car parked just a few feet in front of them, blocking most of the street. *That* hadn’t been there before... He slowed, panting, and looked at it more closely. Then he realized something. He recognized that car; he knew the registration. He’d seen it many times, parked outside Coal Hill School.

But what could Mr Chesterton’s car possibly be doing here, outside Foreman’s scrap yard?

Still trying to catch his breath, his heart thumping insistently against his ribs, John crept up to the gates. Was Mr Chesterton in there? Had he come to see the Doctor? He was sure to know John had been absent from school today, so if he caught sight of him...! John knew he couldn’t expect to avoid the consequences of his truancy, but he’d hoped they wouldn’t be visited upon him until tomorrow at the earliest. Not much chance of that, if Mr Chesterton saw him here tonight.

But his fear that the Doctor might not be here after all overrode even his fear of discovery by Mr Chesterton. He put his ear to the battered planking and listened for a moment, but could hear no voices. Tentatively, he reached out toward the gate.

As he did so, he heard the strangest possible noise coming from inside the yard – a weird wheezing, groaning mechanical noise, like nothing he’d ever experienced, swiftly rising in volume.

He threw the gate open and ran inside, then stopped, transfixed.

The police box! There was light coming through the door windows, and the light on the top was flashing wildly – but not for long...

John watched in utter astonishment as the box began to dematerialize, vanish into thin air. Where it had been solid, now he could see right through it. It was going! How, or where, he didn't know – but in some mysterious, unguessable fashion it *was* going. Fading – fading – both the box and the sound, fading... Then –

Gone.

Silence.

John remained as if mesmerized for a moment, then abruptly ran forward toward the place where the police box had stood. He reached out, into the space where it had been, and his fingers touched – nothing. The box really was gone.

And – he knew, somehow – so was the Doctor.

As he stared blankly at the empty space – the impossibly empty space, that had so recently been occupied by something solid and real and *there* – phrases began to echo in his head.

*“You’re already absolutely certain about what’s possible and what’s impossible..? This planet... There are other worlds out there, you know... Suppose you were able to travel not only in space but also in time, eh...?”*

John Smith swallowed, hard. *What’s possible...*

Then he looked upwards, up to where the stars would be shining high above his head, and began to smile.

“Live and learn, Doctor,” he whispered. “I’ll remember...”



July 2016

*'Doctor Who' and all of its elements belong to the BBC.  
No copyright infringement intended.*