



THE FOURTH WALL

by Deborah Latham

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Comings...

The Doctor didn't notice his unexpected visitor at first.

He was busy at the console of the TARDIS, and didn't see the figure silently coalescing into existence on the other side of the Time Rotor. It was only when he moved round slightly to reach one of the controls that he saw there was a man standing on the ramp in front of the doors.

The *closed* doors.

A man who hadn't been there a few seconds ago.

"Hullo! Who are you, then?" the Doctor enquired, taking it in his stride. "And not to put too fine a point on it, how did you get in here? The TARDIS is in flight. Shouldn't be possible!"

The man – he was a youngish man, somewhere just past thirty, the Doctor estimated – looked at him with blue eyes that were blank with utter bewilderment. He was slenderly built, with light brown hair parted on the left, a nose that was quite long in profile but nevertheless rather suited him, and a moustache and beard that looked as if they were a decision that had only recently been actioned. He opened his mouth, but didn't speak at first. He looked as though, just at the moment, shock had rendered him incapable of speech.

"Jeans," said the Doctor, studying his clothing. "You must be from Earth, then – twentieth, twenty-first century? Only get jeans on Earth, you know. Nowhere else in the universe does 'em."

"Right," said the young man slowly.

"So, wanna tell me what's goin' on?" the Doctor prompted.

“Uh – not very sure about that at the moment.” The stranger turned slowly, surveying the TARDIS with an expression of incredulity. When his survey brought him as far as the door behind him, he stared at it for some moments, shook his head as if in disbelief, then looked round at the Doctor. “Look, I just need to check something, all right?”

“Be my guest,” the Doctor shrugged. “What is it you wanna do, exactly?”

“I need to open the door.”

“Oh, right. Open the door. Course you do. Why?”

“Because, as far as I’m concerned, there are just two possibilities for what’s outside that door. One of them is only impossible, and the other one is utterly impossible. And it’ll kind of help if I know which impossibility I’m dealing with...”

The Doctor shrugged. “Okay. Yeah. Go ahead. This better be good, though.”

The young man regarded him with a less than enthusiastic expression for a moment or two. “Whatever’s out there, trust me, ‘good’ isn’t going to come anywhere close to covering it,” he muttered. Then he walked down the ramp, opened the door, and looked out.

He froze in the doorway. Beyond him, the Doctor could see the black background of the universe, spattered with the points of light that were stars.

“Hope you’re enjoyin’ the view,” he said, raising his voice slightly. “That’s the Athredal galaxy out there. Big on binary systems. Any good to you?”

The man leant forward slightly and looked to right and left, and then down. He stared in that direction for several seconds, then slowly drew back inside and closed the door with great care. The Doctor watched with interest as he flattened both palms against the door and pressed his forehead against it too, as if to convince himself of its actuality. He stood there motionless for several seconds.

“Okay, you’ve opened the door, like you wanted to,” said the Doctor. “And I’ll grant you, this is the first time I’ve ever had anybody in the TARDIS who was more shocked that what was *outside* was bigger. So do I get my explanation now?”

“Look, a few seconds ago I was at home. Watching a DVD. *The Doctor Dances.*” The young man was talking to himself, in the tone of someone attempting to cope with his situation by reasoning things out when it was only too clear he thought reason had left the building. “So am I dreaming? Don’t think so. This *can’t* be a dream. It’s too coherent. Too clear. In dreams and hallucinations you get concepts and fuzzy images, not explicit sensations and concise sentences and everything seen in sharp focus.” He raised his head and stared at the door, inches from the tip of his nose, as he continued to lean against it, palms and outspread fingers taking his weight. “Your nerves don’t feel defined sensations like this. And where I come from, it’s impossible to be physically in one place and then instantly in a completely different place. That *cannot* happen, where I come from. But I *was* somewhere else, and now I *am* here. And this” – he pushed against the door again – “this is solid. Real.”

“Course it’s solid. Bang your head against it, if it’ll help,” the Doctor offered. “So – sorted out your impossibilities yet? This the ‘only’ one, or the ‘utterly’ one?”

“For it to be ‘only’ impossible, there would have had to be a television studio outside that door.” The visitant was clearly still struggling to come to terms with his situation. “And I would have had to have been transported there in some way from where I was. Instantaneously. Which would be impossible, like I said. And since it’s *you*, this has to be at least 2005. But – where I’m from, it’s 2016. So this is the ‘utterly’ impossible one. Because there *isn’t* a studio out there. No cameras, no crew. Just – space. Not fake. Real, actual space.”

“Yeah,” agreed the Doctor. “Stars, planets, that sort of space.” A thought occurred to him. “Hang on – you said, ‘no cameras, no crew’. What you talkin’ about?”

“Breaking the fourth wall, big time – I think...” The young man suddenly rounded on him, almost accusingly. “Look, you *are* the Doctor, aren’t you?”

The Doctor cocked his head to one side. “Yeah, but how do *you* know? Have we met?”

“You’re not – an actor? Pretending to be him?” His visitor seemed to be offering it as a serious possibility.

“An *actor*?” The Doctor was highly indignant. “Course I’m not! Are *you*?”

“No,” said the young man slowly. Then he added, in a diffident mutter, “But I look a lot like someone who is. So everybody tells me...”

“Actor, indeed!” The Doctor was still fuming. “Whaddya take me for? Course I’m the Doctor! Real deal, me.”

“Then – is Rose with you?” was the next, rather tentative question.

“Rose?” The Doctor’s brow creased. “Who’s Rose?”

“Oh. Right. So you haven’t – not yet...”

The Doctor was beginning to feel impatient.

“Look, do I know you or not?” He paused, then added, more slowly, “Got this really strange feelin’ you look like somebody I *ought* to know...”

“Yeah – I, uh, get that a lot...” said the young man, half under his breath.

“Or somebody I’m gonna know, maybe?” The Doctor was still listing possibilities. “Somebody from my future?” His eyes widened and he pointed an accusing finger at his visitor. “You jumped! You jumped when I said that! That’s it, then, is it? You’re somebody from my future?”

“Uh, not exactly...” This was said with extreme care. “I’m not him. I just *look* like him. Somebody from your future. Well, the somebody who’s going to *be* the somebody from your future...” That was offered even more cautiously, as if it was complicated.

Which sounded about right to the Doctor, on the strength of what he’d heard so far. He considered for a moment, then decided to go along with it. “Okay. I’m good with that. So who are you, then?”

“Let’s just say – Arthur.”

“Oh, right. Arthur Dent, is it?” said the Doctor sarcastically.

“No,” said Arthur, with somewhat forced patience. “Not Arthur Dent. You can call me – Arthur Allison.”

“Not your actual name, then?”

“I don’t know...” Arthur sounded vague for a moment, and there was a lost look in his eyes, as if he was searching behind them for his identity and not finding it. Then he abandoned the attempt. “Look, my name doesn’t matter! I’m only telling you what I’m being told to tell you.” He was beginning to sound slightly exasperated. He walked up the ramp and halted at the top, about three feet away. Two pairs of blue eyes locked onto each other.

“Whaddya mean – ‘being told’? Who by?” the Doctor probed.

“I’ll – uh – get to that... What matters is why I’m here. I think I’m here to give you a message.”

The Doctor leaned back to rest his weight against the edge of the console and folded his arms, regarding his new acquaintance closely. “And why would you think that?”

Arthur looked uncomfortable. “This is where we get to the ‘utterly impossible’ bit...” He paused, and muttered to himself with a shake of his head, “I can’t believe I’m about to say this...” He looked at the Doctor again. “Because –” he began, then broke off.

“Yeah?” prompted the Doctor. “Because...?”

“Because – where I come from, you’re not real,” said Arthur, with an air of coming straight out with it.

The Doctor blinked. “Not real? Whaddya mean, not real?”

“Where I come from,” Arthur repeated, “you – the Doctor – you’re a fictional character. That’s why this can’t be happening. Why this is the ‘utterly impossible’ thing.”

“And yet here we are,” observed the Doctor, ostentatiously pointing out the obvious. “Gotta admit I’m wondering if you’re *all* here, mind,” he added.

Arthur ignored him. “So” – he was still in ‘reasoning-to-convince-himself’ mode – “because it *is* happening – apparently – I can only think of one explanation. We must be in a fiction.”



...and Goings

Arthur looked at the Doctor. “You know what a fiction is, don’t you?”

The Doctor pushed himself erect and started to wander casually around the console, arms still folded.

“Course I do,” he said over his shoulder. “A universe created by the act of imagining it. The idea that all fictional worlds are real and all real worlds are somebody else’s fiction.” He turned and regarded Arthur as if trying to gauge his sanity. “Are you having a laugh? *I’m* a work of fiction? This whole *universe* is a work of fiction?”

“Where I come from it, it is,” Arthur maintained stoutly. “Fiction that’s watched by millions of people, all over the world. I’m just one of them.”

The Doctor grinned. “So if I’m your fiction, that makes you *my* fiction, does it?”

Arthur thought about it, and shrugged. “Don’t see why not.”

The Doctor regarded him thoughtfully. “You know, for a bloke who, from where I’m standing, is way off his trolley, you’re becoming worryingly plausible.” He thought back. “You said you were only telling me what you were being told to tell me. So who’s telling *you*?”

“Er – that would be – the Writer.” Arthur said the last two words with a bit of a plunge, and looked round the control room again, as if he was still grappling with its reality. “That’s sort of where we are, I think. In the Writer’s head. In his mind.”

“Oh, well, if it’s the *Writer’s* mind –! That’d explain why this is so weird,” said the Doctor sarcastically. “Okay, so – summary of the plot so far. A, neither of us is real, and B, we’re both inside somebody’s head. I hope this starts gettin’ better soon. Supposing it’s true – what’s this message you reckon you’re here to give me?”

Arthur didn’t reply instantly; he looked as if he was searching somewhere behind his eyes for the right words.

“What’s the matter? Writer’s block?” the Doctor jibed.

Arthur shook his head absently. Then he seemed to locate what he was trying to find, and refocused on the Doctor.

“Look, you’re not in a good place right now,” he began.

The Doctor’s brows contracted briefly, and his expression bordered on bleak. “Reasons for that,” he said brusquely.

“I know,” Arthur acknowledged. “But where I come from, you’re a hero to millions. Literally millions. We’ve followed your adventures for years. Some of us, all our lives. We live in a world where things aren’t always clear, where the difference between right and wrong gets blurred a lot of the time. We *need* role models like you – someone who stands up for what’s right and good. Lots of us’ve got our values, our sense of right and wrong, from you.”

“Thanks,” said the Doctor dryly. “No pressure, then.”

“You know about multiverses,” Arthur continued. “Theoretically every multiverse produces countless fictions, all of which are their own reality to whoever and whatever lives in them. I mean, I’m here saying the words the Writer wants me to say, but even he –”

“Hey! Might be a she, for all you know!” the Doctor broke in.

“Yeah, you’re right. Could be,” Arthur agreed, before getting back on track. “But the point is – even the Writer might be someone else’s creation. Maybe Writers create Writers in other fictions. Who create Writers in *other* fictions.”

“Yeah, just making it up as they go along,” agreed the Doctor. “Like we all do.”

“You see what that means, though? It means potentially, anywhere there’s an imagination and the owner of that imagination writes down what it produces – well, *anything* could be possible. Like me, being here, talking to you.”

“Not so *utterly* impossible after all, then,” the Doctor suggested.

Arthur conceded the point with a dip of his head. “In my multiverse you’re not a real person. So there must be a Writer who’s created a fiction where I’ve been transferred out of my own reality and dumped into yours. Just like there’s a Writer who’s created the fiction that’s become your reality. Which is here.”

“Well, tell him thanks for causin’ all the misery, then,” the Doctor retorted. “Doin’ my head in, this is! In your jolly little scenario, what I’ve been put through – and might still be put through in the future – that’s all just because some Writer likes to ramp up the drama, is it?” He looked upwards for a moment. “Thanks a bunch, Mister Writer, whoever you are!” He returned his attention to Arthur. “Look, this hero thing – that’s rubbish. I’ve done terrible things. You don’t know how terrible.”

“Yes. Yes, I do,” Arthur contradicted gently.

The Doctor regarded him from under lowered brows. “Then you know I’ve killed. And how many I’ve killed. And I’ve got to go on living with all those deaths I’ve been responsible for. Millions. *Billions*. Never me that does the dyin’, is it? I get other people to do that. Too many of them. You know what?” His abhorrence of himself was clear. “I *inspire* them to their deaths. Great role model, me.”

Arthur shook his head.

“You’ve got it wrong, Doctor. People don’t die because of *you*. They die because someone else is attacking them. Daleks, Cybermen, whoever. *They’re* the killers. You’re the one who *hates* the taking of life. *Any* life. And what you do is help people protect themselves when they’re under attack. Fight against evil and injustice and tyranny. Fight *for* free will and peace and the right to live their own lives. And because you show them how to do that – look, think about *this*. Because you do that, how many live, that otherwise *would* die? How many *live*, Doctor?”

The Doctor was silent, but Arthur could see the point had been taken, albeit reluctantly. *A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still*, as his grandmother had used to say... The Doctor had been influenced by the conviction of his own culpability for too long to discard it just like that.

“Look, I know it feels to you like everybody dies,” he said, more gently. “But there’s something you need to remember, Doctor.”

“And what’s that?” The Doctor still sounded unconvinced.

“Some days, everybody lives.”

“Oh, is that right?” the Doctor retorted with a tinge of sarcasm. “Might quote you on that!”

“Yeah, I think you probably will...” Arthur agreed, without missing a beat. “But remember what I’ve told you. You always act for the greater good of the greater number. That’s what the people who associate with you pick up from you. And that includes us. All of us who follow your life, because of the Writer. Whatever you might think of the state of his – or maybe her – mind...”

“Don’t tempt me,” the Doctor retorted.

“Look, I know you’re feeling pretty lonely at the moment,” said Arthur, determined to offer hope. “But you’re not alone, and you never are, and you never will be. Because we’re all with you! Always. Just like you’re always with us. Making a difference to *us*. And I know – you don’t, yet, but *I* do – I know there are people you’ve yet to meet, and when you do, you’re going to do great things together. You’re going to be *fantastic*, Doctor. And then you’re going to be *brilliant*. And after that, you’re going to –”

Then he broke off, and a peculiar expression crossed his face.

“Oh-h-h-h, that’s a weird feeling,” he muttered, and put a hand to his chest as if trying to locate the sensation.

“What’s up?” the Doctor enquired, with some concern.

“Time, I think. My time, here...” Arthur shook his head, as if trying to clear it, then focused on the Doctor again. “I’ve told you what the Writer wants you to know. Now I think – I think I’m being written out...”

“That’s gratitude for you!” the Doctor said indignantly. “They can be pretty damn ruthless, Writers, can’t they?”

From the way he was flattening his hand against his chest with increasing pressure, whatever sensation Arthur was experiencing was clearly intensifying. He looked at the Doctor with an air of urgency.

“Just remember what I’ve told you, Doctor. You’ve got so much more ahead of you than you realize! Look, before I go – one last thing the Writer wants me to say...”

“And what might that be?”

“This is *important*,” Arthur said, stressing the word. “It matters. You’ve got to remember me, if you ever find yourself naming a galaxy.”

The Doctor was baffled. “Why would I be doin’ that? But, okay – if I *do* ever find myself doin’ that, I promise –”

But he never got to finish the sentence. Arthur, still fixing him with intent blue eyes, abruptly deliquessed into non-existence. Gone. Vanished. The Doctor was once more alone in the TARDIS.

He regarded the spot where Arthur had been, somewhat quizzically.

“Okay – bye, then, Arthur Allison. Been nice knowin’ ya...”

He shrugged, turned back to the console, and looked up at the Time Rotor.

“Naming a *galaxy*? What’s *that* all about?” he demanded.

But the TARDIS didn’t say.



REFERENCES

Most Doctor Who fans won’t need the various references in this story explained, but for the sake of newcomers to the Whoniverse, I have identified the source material where relevant (all episode references, followed by the year of the original broadcast by the BBC in the UK, refer to “Doctor Who” unless otherwise specified).

Comings...

- *After a 16-year absence, “Doctor Who” was relaunched with The Ninth Doctor in March 2005 (Series 1, 1.1, “Rose”, 26 March 2005); Christopher Eccleston’s tenure as the Doctor lasted for one series only, the last*

episode of which – “The Parting of the Ways”(1.13) – was broadcast on 18 June 2005. This is why Arthur reasons that he cannot be encountering the Doctor any later than 2005.

- For those who are unfamiliar with the term, the ‘fourth wall’ is the imaginary or invisible ‘wall’ at the front of the stage in a traditional theatre, through which the audience views the action in the ‘world’ of the play. In films, television and video games the function of the ‘fourth wall’ is served by the screen of the viewing device (eg television, computer, tablet, etc). Speaking to or otherwise acknowledging the audience through this imaginary wall is known as ‘breaking the fourth wall’. (When a character in a story tells the reader in some way that they know they are a character in a story, that is also ‘breaking the fourth wall’.)
- Is there anyone out there who *STILL* doesn’t know Arthur Dent from Douglas Adams’ “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy”...?!

...and Goings

- *Re fictions*: “A fictional universe is a cohesive imaginary world that serves as the setting or backdrop for one or (more commonly) multiple works of fiction or translatable non-fiction. It can be argued that every work of fiction generates a world of its own; Robert A. Heinlein coined the neologism **fiction** to refer to such a world. A fictional universe is then a *fiction* that has an existence extending beyond a single story, which becomes the basis either of other stories, or of games or other creations. It generally consists of a time and place that invoke a sense of a distinct world, one which is unique to the content and context of the tales that it is used to tell.” (Source: http://72.9.148.189/library/Imaginary_universe)
- The Ninth Doctor is not ‘in a good place’ because he has survived the Last Great Time War between the Time Lords and the Daleks, which culminated in the apparent mutual destruction of both races. The origins of the Time War lie in previous conflicts between himself and the Daleks; he therefore feels responsible for the annihilation of his own people.
- “Everybody lives!” is said by the Ninth Doctor in “The Doctor Dances” (Series 1, 1.10, 28 May 2005). (NB: In the Tenth Doctor episode “Forest of the Dead” (Series 4, 4.10, 7 June 2008), River Song expands on this theme, thus: “Everybody knows that everybody dies. But not every day. Not today. Some days are special. Some days are so, so blessed. Some days, nobody dies at all. Now and then, every once in a very long while, every day in a million days, when the wind stands fair and the Doctor comes to call, everybody lives.”)

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