

Doctor Who

ØYEBLIKK

An Eighth Doctor short story

by

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Life – in case you hadn’t noticed – can be really complicated. There’s so much you have to remember, if you’re going to cope with it. And one of the most important things to remember is that anything you do has consequences. Some people like to think that isn’t true – they certainly behave as if it isn’t – but they’re wrong. Anything you do – everything you do – has consequences for someone. Maybe you, maybe someone else. But it always affects someone.

Now, most people – their lives follow a linear timeline, so those consequences always lie in the future. For the Doctor, it’s a bit more complicated. Sometimes, actions in his future have consequences in his past – which at the time is his present. They often amount to the same thing, in his case.

As I said – complicated.

“When you travel around as much as I do, it’s almost inevitable that you’ll run into yourself at some point.” He said that once, and it’s true. He already has. A number of times. And perhaps more to come in the future – with the Doctor, it’s always possible.

Not something most people have to deal with. But apparently you get used to it. Well, if you’re him, you do. And it only happens when there’s some kind of crisis brewing. That’s when he starts to live in interesting times.

But one of those times was different. The time he met himself face to face, yes. But with the same face...

Literally. The same face.

Though it didn’t start with a face. It started with a voice. In someone else’s head.

Mine...

The Doctor was getting ready to leave Earth. New Millennium, new Doctor. He’d regenerated, he’d saved the planet, he’d defeated the Master. Not necessarily in that order, but he had to admit he was feeling pretty pleased with himself. Still, the Eye of Harmony – the Heart of the TARDIS – had been opened for the first time in centuries. It might be advisable to check over the circuits, eliminate the possibility of residual side effects. And do it somewhere a little less boisterous than New York. There was this little glade in a forest in New Zealand he remembered rather fondly...

The TARDIS, it transpired, had different ideas. As he discovered when a huge sideways jerk made him grab for the console to keep his balance, and above him he saw the console screen announcing *SPATIAL DIVERSION – ALTERNATIVE DESTINATION SELECTED*. Next moment, the TARDIS had landed.

The Doctor checked the coordinates and looked up at the Time Rotor, unimpressed.

“Somerset?” he snorted. “*Taunton?* I mean, *really?* Hardly the beating heart of the Universe, is it? I was obviously right about those side effects...”

But before he could even reach for the sonic screwdriver, he heard the sound of knocking on the door. Urgent knocking.

He looked at the Time Rotor suspiciously. “Did you know that was going to happen?”

The TARDIS didn’t say.

The knock was repeated, more insistently, beginning to imply desperation. Curiosity prevailed; he opened the door.

His peripheral vision picked up the background of a field, a row of house roofs several hundred yards away hinting at the outskirts of the town, and above the bleak sky of a British winter. But he didn’t have much attention to spare – he needed it to focus on the woman confronting him.

“You’re the Doctor, aren’t you? You must be!” she exclaimed, before he could even speak.

He regarded her carefully. Things could be a little jumbled immediately after a regeneration, but – no, he was sure he’d never seen this woman before. She had short-cut greying hair, wore glasses, and was evidently within a loud shout of fifty – though which direction she was shouting at it from, he couldn’t be sure.

“You seem to have me at a disadvantage –” he began, but she cut across him.

“Doctor, I’m sorry, but we don’t have time for the social niceties.” Her voice carried the same overtones of desperation that her knock had done. “I need your help. *We* need your help. It’s urgent!”

“We?” There was no-one else in sight; the Doctor invited further explanation with an upward lift of his eyebrows.

“The Temporal Corridor is decaying. If nothing stops it, he’s going to die,” the woman said bleakly. “And if he dies – I die.”

The Doctor looked at her sharply. She was clearly in earnest.

“Then you’d better tell me who you are, who ‘he’ is, and exactly what you need me to do.”

He stepped back and held the TARDIS door open wide in a gesture of invitation, expecting the usual reaction once she got inside.

But – no. Though her eyes widened, as he’d expected, she took in the huge hall and the open doorway into the control room beyond, then simply drew in a deep breath and expelled it, as if bracing herself for something. She caught his expression, and the corner of her mouth twitched.

“You were expecting some variation on the ‘it’s-bigger-on-the-inside’ thing, weren’t you? Sorry, but I was told what to expect. Though not, I have to say, that your taste ran so much to the Gothic...”

"I inherited it. I haven't had the chance to redecorate yet." The Doctor studied her with interest. "So who is it you've been talking to? Most people's credulity gap doesn't encompass external-internal dimensional disparity."

"Doctor, I'm hearing and seeing things in my head that aren't even *from* this dimension," the woman said bluntly. "My credulity gap is definitely not what it used to be."

"I can hardly wait to hear why," said the Doctor. "So – who are you?"

"Ruth Clifford. And this is what you need to know..."

The Doctor studied Ruth carefully, analyzing what she'd told him thus far.

"So these sensations in your head started – when, exactly?" he prompted.

"About six months ago."

"And when did you work out that they were an extra-terrestrial mind trying to make contact with you?"

"Not extra-terrestrial," she contradicted. "Other-dimensional. Darreth isn't from this dimension. As far as I can make out, he's a totally non-corporeal being. It's made communication very difficult – he and I don't have the same reference points. Conceptually, with a few exceptions, we just don't speak the same language."

The Doctor nodded. How could you explain a circle or a square to an intelligence that had no concept of shapes? Trees and grass and rivers to someone that had no experience of a landscape? Eating or drinking or sitting or standing to a being that had no body?

"But eventually he managed to make me understand," Ruth went on. "There's a lot of this you'll have to take on trust, because I can't tell you how he knows what he knows. But it seems that at some point in the future something happens with the Eye of Harmony. Not an attack – some sort of accident. The Eye's the source of the power in your TARDIS, isn't it?"

"How could he possibly know about the Eye of Harmony?" the Doctor objected. "Or the TARDIS, come to that?"

"He doesn't. I'm describing what he was trying to tell me about, in what I've discovered is the right terminology."

"And who told you what that is?"

"I'll get to that," said Ruth with a touch of impatience. "The thing is, whatever happens, it'll have repercussions through the whole of time and space. Somebody – a human – is going to get access to all that power and they aren't going to know how to handle it."

The Doctor nodded. A human could certainly interact with the Eye of Harmony – as he knew all too well from his recent past.

"So there are going to be all sorts of inadvertent consequences," Ruth continued. "And one of them will be that Darreth is thrown out of his own dimension into – somewhere else."

"Here?"

"No." Ruth frowned, hunting for the right words. "As I understand it, it's a – a *place* between our dimension and his. I think of it as a Temporal Corridor, for want of a better description. And

he's trapped inside it. He can travel along it, but he can't get out of it unless he can access the exact same power source that threw him in there in the first place. He's been travelling back and forth along the Corridor, trying to locate the right signature. Apparently if he can fulfil all the necessary requirements, he can use it to transfer himself back to his own dimension."

"How?" the Doctor asked, fascinated.

"I don't know," Ruth confessed. "He's tried to explain, but I can't grasp it. When he tries to explain the details, it just doesn't turn into words or images I can understand. Some of those conceptual differences between a corporeal intelligence and a non-corporeal one, I suppose. And between a scientist and a non-scientist... The point is, he says it has to be exactly the same power source, and for some reason he can't use the same event that caused the original disruption. It has to be another opening of the Eye. And he finally located the right signature. Yesterday."

"Yesterday," the Doctor repeated pensively. Yesterday, in New York, when the Master's attempt to take the Doctor's remaining regenerations for himself had almost resulted in the Earth's destruction; the Doctor had only just succeeded in closing the Eye in time to avert it.

He returned his attention to Ruth. "So what's your involvement in this?"

"I'm the other requirement," she said. "It's something to do with the way he uses telepathy. It seems he can't communicate with just anyone. Not even you. He had to search long and hard for someone with the right kind of mind. They seem surprisingly rare, but apparently I tick all the right boxes. Plus, to duplicate the right conditions, he needs the Eye to be opened by another human, not you. But he needs to talk to you."

"So if I link telepathically to you, I can communicate with him," said the Doctor. "But –"

Ruth cut across him again. "Doctor, we're running short on time! Don't ask any questions you don't have to, please!"

"Just the two," said the Doctor. "First – how did you know the TARDIS was going to be here, now? You were right on the spot to meet me."

"I *didn't* know," said Ruth with a touch of exasperation. "But Darreth did. Once he located the signature, he was able to guide the TARDIS in some way. To me."

"So it wasn't a side-effect after all," the Doctor muttered, half to himself. "That's why there was a spatial diversion... He can communicate with the TARDIS somehow, but not with me – not unless there's a human brain in the circuit." He looked at Ruth again. "All right – second question. You said someone told you what to expect. Told you about me and the TARDIS. Who?"

"Darreth didn't know who or what you were, but he was able to give me some clues about the kind of person he was looking for. I knew I had to find you, whoever you were, so I started asking questions. It took me a long time to make any headway – you seem to be something of a state secret in some quarters, Doctor." Despite her obvious anxiety, Ruth managed to summon up faint smile. "But eventually my enquiries got me noticed by a certain journalist of your acquaintance."

"Sarah Jane Smith," the Doctor breathed, nodding in comprehension. "Of course... If she heard you were asking about me, she'd want to know why."

“She couldn’t help me find you. But she did brief me on one or two things.” The gleam in Ruth’s eye made the Doctor suspect her of gross understatement, but he let it pass. “If it’s any consolation,” Ruth went on, “being *told* the TARDIS is bigger on the inside still doesn’t entirely prepare you for actually seeing it.”

The Doctor stifled a brief snort of amusement. “I’ll give you a tour, later,” he offered. “But for now, we’d better link. I need to talk to Darreth, don’t I?”

The spark of humour in Ruth’s eyes was banished as her anxiety resurfaced. “What do you need me to do?”

“Just stand still, and do what I do.” The Doctor took up his position in front of her, then reached up to touch his fingertips to her temple. Hesitantly she mirrored the gesture. They both closed their eyes as the Doctor linked to her mind.

For the Doctor, it was as if he had reopened his eyes and found himself in another place. The first thing he saw was Ruth, standing in front of him, as they had been in the real world. He dropped his hand from her head, and she did the same. The Doctor glanced over her shoulder. Beyond her, a long, dimly illuminated corridor, completely featureless, stretching as far as he could see into the distance. No hint of another presence.

The Doctor smiled and shook his head.

“What?” Ruth demanded.

“You. The human mind. The brain’s ability to create images to interpret something of which it has no experience. You’ve no equivalent for where we are, but your mind imaged it as a corridor, and here we are. Humans – endlessly adaptable and creative. You never cease to astonish me.”

Ruth opened her mouth, but before she could reply the ground suddenly trembled violently under their feet, as if an earthquake had struck. Ruth reached out and clutched at his upper arms as they staggered together. The Doctor had thought the Corridor plain and devoid of texture, but he now realized the walls were tessellated with a web of cracks which were growing in size and extent as their environment shook around them. Tiny fragments were detaching from the ceiling and raining down onto the fracturing floor underfoot.

Almost as quickly as it had begun, the trembling subsided.

“Are you all right?” the Doctor asked.

Ruth swallowed, and let go of his arms. “I think so. But this is what I told you. The Corridor’s decaying.”

“It is becoming more and more fragile,” said a voice from behind them. A voice they both recognized.

The Doctor swung round, and at first the corridor seemed empty in that direction, too. Then he saw something coalescing out of the dimness. A figure. Once it had solidified, it walked toward them. A man, wearing the same clothes as him. The same hair.

And the same face. He was looking at his own face.

Which was interesting, in a way, since he wasn’t that used to it himself yet. The other times he had met himself, it had been with one – or more – of his previous faces; on one occasion, even one

of his future faces. To see this particular face, his current one – his *brand new* one! – staring back at him – that was a novel experience.

“Darreth?” Ruth said uncertainly. “Is that you?” She looked at the Doctor apprehensively. “He’s never appeared physically before.”

“I have no physical self,” said the apparition. “I have borrowed the Doctor’s appearance to make it easier for both of you to – interact with me.”

They were interrupted by another tremor, less violent than the first, but again the Doctor saw a shower of fragments falling from the ceiling. Some of the cracks in the walls had lengthened by the time it had died away, too.

“Ruth calls this a Temporal Corridor,” said the Doctor quickly. “Between our two dimensions. I’m a Time Lord. I know about Time. She’s right, this place is decaying. But it shouldn’t be. I can feel that. It’s reacting to something.”

“To my presence here,” said Darreth. His face – the Doctor’s face – showed no emotion. Which was understandable. A non-corporeal being would have no concept of using facial muscles – or any part of the body, come to that – to convey feelings. His borrowed voice was flat, mechanical, probably for the same reason. But what he was using it to say – that was important.

“This isn’t your native environment,” said the Doctor, following his reasoning. “You’re an alien presence. You’ve been here too long. So it’s trying to reject you.”

“Like a virus? A bacterium?” Ruth was obviously keeping up with him. “Being attacked by antibodies?”

“I – do not understand you,” said Darreth.

“She’s talking about how bodies – human bodies – react to invasion by – by things that shouldn’t be inside them,” said the Doctor, ruthlessly oversimplifying his explanation. “They have a system – their immune system – that rejects them. How long have you been in here?”

“Time flows differently here,” said Darreth. “It has different attributes. It is not possible to equate it with normal time. I have no measure for duration here to match duration outside it.”

The Doctor nodded. He could feel that Darreth was telling the truth. A totally different quality of time to that of his own dimension...

There was something about that that worried him, something nagging at the back of his mind, something he needed to identify and formulate. But he was distracted by Ruth clutching at him again as another quake struck. This was the most violent yet. The cracks were visibly widening; chunks of the wall were starting to disintegrate and fall to a floor that was webbed with fracture lines, and ever larger fragments of the ceiling were coming down. But this time, though the trembling lessened in intensity, it didn’t die away. The Corridor continued to vibrate.

“Doctor, we’re running out of time!” Ruth gasped.

“You also are not in your native environment,” said Darreth. The tremors did not seem to affect him; he stayed rooted to the spot as he spoke impassively. “The decay is accelerating. The Corridor is rejecting you also. It is imperative that you give me access to the power source I need. If you do not act quickly, I will die here.”

The Doctor stared at him with narrowed eyes. There was something else – he could feel it. Something else not right... But it was clear there was no time to lose.

“You’re right. Ruth, get ready to break the link,” he directed. “We’ll return to the TARDIS and I’ll open the Eye.”

“No, Doctor,” Darreth contradicted. “Ruth must be the one who opens the Eye. All the conditions of the original breach must be replicated. A human must do it. And I cannot break my link with her, or I cannot effect my own rescue. Yet if the Corridor destroys itself while I am still trapped in it, she will be destroyed also. You must not let this happen.”

Ruth looked at the Doctor, and the look in her eyes tore at his hearts. Most forms and causes of human death are at least known, if feared. This was worse, because Ruth didn’t know what would happen. She had no reference point, no yardstick. And fear of the unknown is so much worse than that of the known.

“I’m not going to let it happen,” he said quickly. “Ruth, you’re not going to die. Not you, not Darreth. You’re going to save –”

Abruptly he broke off and looked back at Darreth, aghast. He’d suspected something else was going on, and now he’d realized what it was. The look on his face intensified Ruth’s fear. She opened her mouth to speak, but another violent tremor sent her reeling against the shattering wall behind her. The Doctor kept his feet, but only just. Darreth did not move, but his eyes were locked on those of the Doctor.

“It’s not just you and Ruth, is it?” the Doctor shouted desperately above the roar of the quake. “I *knew* I could feel something else! If the Corridor destroys itself, it’ll breach both dimensions! If the time here is released into them it’ll start to destroy *their* time! It’s not just you and Ruth who’ll die if that happens – it’s every being, everything in both dimensions! *Everything* will be destroyed!”

“You must hurry, Doctor!” Darreth responded. His face – the Doctor’s own face – was only so composed, his voice so calm, because he did not have the requisite experience of physical existence to externally display emotions. In reality he was just as afraid as Ruth was. But not as afraid as the Doctor was. Of the wider consequences for both their worlds.

“Let’s hope this works,” he said. “Whether it does or not, we won’t meet again, so – goodbye, Darreth.”

His mirror image looked back at him. “Goodbye, Doctor.”

The Doctor glanced at Ruth, and broke the link.

Instantly he was back in the TARDIS, Ruth in front of him, her eyes still closed. But the shaking – that had followed them. The Corridor was approaching the moment when it would breach, and its alien environment would flood out into this world, and Darreth’s. Already it was leaking through into the TARDIS. Two universes in peril. And one middle-aged woman to save them both...

He grabbed Ruth’s hand. She started to open her eyes, but immediately screwed them shut again, her free hand going to her temple.

“I can’t – I’m – I’m still in the Corridor, but I’m here as well!” she gasped. “My eyes – I’m so dizzy – I can’t – !”

“Your brain’s trying to process two simultaneous streams of visual input,” said the Doctor rapidly. “The Corridor, and here. It’s trying to resolve the conflict of data. Just keep your eyes shut until I tell you. Come on – this way!”

Gripping her hand, he dragged her after him through the vibrating TARDIS to the Cloister Room, up the ramp to the enclosure of the Eye of Harmony, reflector staffs stationed at each of its four corners. Inside, the bulging dome of the Eye itself, firmly shut. As the Doctor brought them both to a halt by the nearest reflector staff, he could hear Ruth panting, feel her distress, but there was no time to reassure her.

“Take hold of this!” He guided her hands onto the ornate surface of the staff. “Now pull! Lift it out of its socket!”

With a strength born of desperation, Ruth grasped the staff and heaved it upward in a single movement. The Doctor snatched it from her.

“Now you have to look into the light,” he said. “Open your eyes, and look into the light.”

“But I – ”

“Now, Ruth! Now!”

She opened her eyes, but she couldn’t see clearly. Conflicting images swirled in her head, melting, morphing into one another, confusing her. She could make out Darreth, waiting in the Corridor, everything around him disintegrating, fragmenting, falling apart. His arms were lifted toward her in a gesture of appeal.

“Hurry, Ruth!” he was pleading.

But the images were mixed with those of the Doctor, beside her, urging her to look into the beam of blue light issuing from the socket of the staff.

“You need to look into the light to open the Eye!” he was shouting. “Ruth! Look into the light! Now!”

She couldn’t give in to the disorientation. She had to do what he said. She had to look!

Nauseous, dazed, she fought her way through the blur of images spinning across her eyes at dizzying speed, tracking the one she needed. The blue light. That was the image she had to concentrate on. The blue light. That blue light – there – follow the beam down, into that circle...

“You’ve done it!” the Doctor was yelling into her ear. “You’ve done it!”

Had she?

He was still yelling. “The Eye’s opening!”

She closed her eyes, hoping for a moment’s respite, then tried opening them again. Among all the whirling images she saw a dome splitting asunder, the two curved sides moving apart, a grey-blue mist swirling between them. The vibration, becoming louder and louder, more and more violent with every passing moment – was that something her brain was making up, or was it real – ? In the Corridor, Darreth’s Doctor was still holding out his hands, though now they were no longer hands, they were beams of blue, spraying out toward her... But Darreth himself was melting from sight, coalescing into a pulsing blue glow...

Ruth felt the Doctor gripping her shoulders, his fingers digging in with painful force. She forced herself to look toward the Eye, just as two lines of cerulean light shot from the reflector staffs to his left and right, meeting directly over the centre of the Eye in a nebulous, throbbing radiance.

“Doctor!” she shouted, over the roar of the vibrations. “That glow – that’s Darreth!”

“He’s accessing the power of the Eye!” the Doctor shouted back. The thunder of the quaking was now so loud she could hardly hear him. The TARDIS felt as if it was being shaken to pieces.

Are we in time – ? she wondered, as the pulsing glow swelled until it blocked everything else from sight. *Are we in time, or is it too late – ?*

Then she heard his voice. The Doctor’s voice. Darreth, using it for the very last time.

Ruth. You have saved me. You have saved all of us. Thank you. You have saved all of us...

As the voice faded, she had one last vision of the Temporal Corridor. Whole again, but empty. Then her view of it started to distort into a circle, that swiftly shrank to a dot, as if it was travelling away from here at tremendous speed. Then it vanished from her inner eye. The Corridor, and Darreth, were gone.

So was the sickening vibration. She opened her eyes, and the TARDIS was still and calm. The glow and the beams of light above the Eye were gone.

“He did it!” the Doctor crowed. “*You did it! Look, the Eye’s closing!*”

Slowly, inexorably, the lids of the Eye were coming together, as if sinking into sleep. An ever-narrowing gap, then a crack, then a black line – and then they locked shut.

“It’s over,” said the Doctor. He smiled wryly. “From the destruction of two universes one moment, to saving them the next. Sometimes that’s all it takes. One moment.”

Ruth muttered something that sounded like *‘paw ett er-yer-blick’*.

“Pardon?” said the Doctor, raising his eyebrows at her.

“På et øyeblikk,” Ruth repeated more loudly. “It’s a Norwegian phrase for ‘moment’. I used to have a Norwegian pen friend when I was young. Loosely translated, it means – the blink of an eye.”

“In this case, a blink of the Eye of Harmony,” the Doctor agreed, his smile broadening. “Plus one unique human being.”

“Of course! Unique, that’s me,” Ruth agreed ironically. “Just like everyone else.”

The Doctor threw back his head and laughed.

“Don’t,” Ruth pleaded, one hand going to her head. “My brain’s still fizzing from trying to process too much information.”

“You’ll be all right,” the Doctor assured her. “Anyone who can save two universes and still produce witty ripostes will always be all right.”

Ruth remembered some of the things Sarah Jane Smith had told her, and chuckled. “That’s an endorsement worth having. After all, you’d know!”

And that was when I had to go back. Physically, back outside through the TARDIS door; metaphorically, back to everyday life. Having got used to being telepathically linked to an alien mind for so many months, I had the feeling it was going to take a lot of readjusting to.

A thought struck me, and I turned back to look at the other alien I'd been telepathically linked to.

"I wonder who it's going to be?" I speculated.

"Who who's going to be?" the Doctor enquired.

"The human being in the future who's going to start all this off. Leave such a legacy of disruption throughout time and space."

"No idea. It might even happen more than once – it's perfectly possible. But there's one thing I do know."

"What's that?"

"That for every action there's a reaction. Everything that happens, everything that anyone does, there are always consequences."

"That person, whoever they're going to be – I wonder what they'd think if they realized what the consequences of what they do were going to be."

"I don't know," said the Doctor. "But no-one escapes consequences."

There was something unsettling about the way he said it.

"Not even you?" I probed.

"Especially not me," he said, those blue eyes momentarily pensive. Then he smiled. "But not this time, thanks to you... Tell me," he digressed suddenly. "What is it you do? Apart from saving universes, that is."

"Me? Nothing," I said sardonically. "Not any more. I used to be a local government officer. An admin assistant. You know, one of those time-serving jobsworths who don't give a backward flip about the people they're there to serve... But recently I became a local government cut. So it's all right, everyone's safe now."

"Yes," the Doctor agreed. "It's all right. Everyone's safe now. Thanks to you."

I shrugged that off, uncomfortably. "Well, what about you? What were you going to do, before you were so rudely interrupted?"

"I was going to New Zealand, to a little spot I know... But it doesn't matter. I'd probably only find Peter Jackson in the way, swarming all over it with a film crew."

"Peter who?" I couldn't seem to place the name.

The Doctor grinned. "Be patient. A few months from now, you'll find out..." Then his face sobered.

So, it was time. I could tell by the change in his body language that the moment of parting had come, and I couldn't suppress a pang of regret. Darreth was gone, and the Doctor was going. I felt – bereft...

"Thank you, Doctor," I said, trying to smile just as I would if there were no lump in my throat. "For everything. For helping. For being just in time."

"It's what I do," he said.

“What, everything?” I teased him. “Just in time?”

“Always,” he confirmed. One last smile, then the TARDIS door had closed, and he was gone...

In the control room, the Doctor paused by the console and considered his next move. A new regeneration, and the whole of the universe and all of history to choose from. So many places he hadn't yet seen, so many times he hadn't yet been.

He smiled up at the Time Rotor.

“Just in time,” he said aloud. “Of course! Where else would I want to be?”



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