

Lost and Found

Rejected Short Story for BBC Books

By Robert M.J. Morris

The darkness had fallen without her noticing; one minute the garden was vibrant and full of colour and the next it was grey and subdued, overcast with a blackness which tentatively fingered the pool of light spilling through the conservatory door. She cast her eyes over the lawn for a few brief seconds before she reached out and pulled the door closed, cutting out the penetratingly cool evening air. For a moment she was transfixed by the reflection which had been pulled into her view, a strangely lifeless rendering of her face against the gloom beyond.

With a shudder she broke away from the spectre before her giving the door a final heave before turning the key in the lock. It gave a satisfying click. Then, out of habit more than anything else, she gave the handle an experimental tug. The door remained shut, as always, but tonight it seemed so inadequate that she tried it again. After all, this was her first night without her trusted first line of defence.

In fact, maybe she'd try it just one more time.

Finally the door managed to satisfy her that it had no intention of being opened, and Sarah turned back to the figure sitting quietly in one of her garden chairs. He was hunched forward, holding a mug of hot chocolate, and apparently staring in rapt attention at the movement of the froth on its surface. She shook her head sadly; she'd seen him do this a hundred times before and it had always seemed as though the infinite possibilities of the universe were being played out for him between his hands. Now, however, he seemed to see nothing before him. His sudden lack of vitality made her feel more than a little scared.

She had to break the silence, though, or she'd probably explode. The stillness was becoming oppressive. 'It'll get cold,' she ventured, wondering if she'd sounded too sharp, perhaps even a little patronising. 'The chocolate, I mean.' She watched as he raised his head and looked at her, a weak smile breaking through ice of his dour expression, and lifted the mug to his lips. 'Sorry,' he muttered and took a sip. She must have looked vaguely expectant because he hurriedly added that it was very nice, thank you.

Sarah sighed, a feeling of dreadful inevitability hitting her for the second time that day. The first had been when he'd turned up again on her doorstep, carrying K-9's body, with its faint after smell of burning, in his arms. There had still been water from the valley dripping out of the dog's casing. With a shudder she tried to put the thought to the back of her mind. 'It already is cold isn't it?' she said, reaching out to take the mug from his grasp, surprised to find that it was offered up without any denials

or justification. Just the meek, compliant expression of a child who'd broken his favourite toy. Well it wasn't, a part of her complained, surprising her with its belligerence, it – he – was mine.

'Come on,' she found herself saying, almost embarrassed at the traitor within her, 'we'll pop it in the microwave for a couple of minutes. It'll be as good as new.'

Unlike some things, of course.

Oh, shut up.

After a few moments the Doctor followed her into the kitchen and leaned against the doorway, his folded arms crumpling the velvet of his frock coat. 'It's a nice place,' he said, desperately grasping at some form of conversation opener. 'Is work going well?' He stopped as a frown suddenly creased his face. 'Or have I asked that already?' Sarah cast a raised eyebrow in his direction and opened a battered old tin. 'Oh,' he mumbled. 'I'm sorry, I'm just a bit—mmmph.'

The microwave pinged and Sarah turned back towards it, leaving the Doctor looking askance at the sizeable rock cake she'd inserted into his mouth. Her timing was perfect, even if she did say so herself. She glanced back at him: the poor man looked as if he was trying to examine a spot on his nose.

Did he ever get spots? She couldn't remember him ever having any. Oh, for Gallifreyan skin.

Shaking the thought from her head, Sarah gave the chocolate a quick stir and put it back in for another minute. When she looked back, he was picking the raisins out one at a time and brushing a cascade of crumbs on to the floor. 'Nice?'

'Mmm. Vemy goom.' She stifled a laugh, but still she felt the weight lift slightly from around them. He should have seen it coming, really. It wasn't a jelly baby but it was definitely one of his own tricks. He smiled at her, a genuine one this time that made her tension almost vanish completely. With perfect timing the microwave pinged again.

She presented him with another mug of steaming chocolate and he took it gratefully. 'Incidentally,' she leaned towards his ear, conspiracy ringing in her voice, 'you've asked four times. Once when you arrived, once when I was making this the first time, once in the conservatory and just now. For the last time: I've been doing fine. Hence the nice place.' She caught his eye. 'And if you apologise one more time, I will tip that drink down you. Living room, or the conservatory again?'

A look of panic flashed across his face for a second, as though he took her threat completely at face value. Then it was gone, and he simply shrugged. 'Not the conservatory. I always feel a bit

hemmed in.'

'Really?' It seemed an odd enough phobia in itself, let alone as an admission. 'Why?'

Sarah couldn't tell if it was a snort of bitter laughter or a sigh that escaped his lips. 'I can see all the stars,' he said, glancing through the doorway, 'but I can't reach them.' He shuddered. 'Besides, well, he's still in there.'

'Fair enough.' She quite understood. She didn't even feel like going in there tomorrow, let alone tonight. 'Come on then.'

They sat together in the living room, sipping at their drinks quietly. Sarah had grabbed another coffee from the kitchen whilst re-heating the Doctor's chocolate, fuel for the night ahead. After the last hour or so she didn't really feel like working, but a deadline was a deadline after all, and it'd help keep her mind off things. The Doctor just sat there taking in his surroundings. He was definitely sexier in this body, she thought. Curls, again, it was like his body preferred them, but they weren't as maddeningly eccentric and uncontrolled as before. He looked quite sweet, really; vulnerable and excitable, the chestnut locks softening his already delicate looks. Not for the first time Sarah found herself wishing that she could be twenty years younger again – or perhaps several hundred years older.

Slipping out of her reverie, she found herself looking at the picture on her mantelpiece: she and K-9 with the Doctor's previous incarnation, a shorter and more elfin version wearing a tired smile that suggested he was taking a break from arranging the universe. This new one always looked as if he'd be happier arranging flowers. Or doing a makeover on the living room.

She looked back over to him and realised he had followed her gaze, staring at his former self, trapped within the edges of the frame. 'What was I like?' he asked quietly.

For a moment she didn't know how to answer him. She put the coffee on the table and thought hard. She'd only met him a couple of times in that body. Afternoons spent gardening, once trawling round the local market and one particularly mad afternoon being abducted by a race of warrior ants. But there was something about him...

'Intense' she decided. 'And quite piercing.' It was the eyes more than anything. Every Doctor she'd met had special eyes, absorbing everything about them with keen interest. But when she'd first encountered his last body, the seventh apparently, there was something else. Occasionally they'd seemed more calculating, almost the look of a hawk.

Across the table, the Doctor nodded as if he were satisfied and stood up, approaching the

fireplace and picking the picture up with tangible hesitation. 'I can't say I remember that much about me.' He looked wistfully at the photo. 'These days I can't even tell what's real, and what's someone else's fabrication. I suppose I was hoping K-9 would.'

Sarah sighed and grabbed her drink from the table again, hoisting her legs up on to the chair. 'What's the matter?'

'Hmm?' He looked puzzled for a moment, looking up from the picture and staring through the wall. 'I don't really know.' He shrugged and wandered over to his chair again. 'I just feel a bit lost at the moment. I don't know if I'm handling everything as well as I should be.' He looked up at her, his past self's enquiring eyes shining at her. 'Was I ... when you first, no... when I'd regenerated that first time. Was I..?'

She smiled, amused at seeing him lost for words. 'Was you what?'

'Well. My fourth self.' He was stumbling over his own thoughts. 'I get the feeling I was more popular then.'

'Oh, Doctor.' She couldn't help but laugh. 'You're not telling me you're worried about what people think?'

'Sometimes. Doesn't everyone?'

'I suppose. Your previous self wouldn't have, though.'

'Oh, he did. I know that much. But he just hoped that it'd work out right in the end.'

That seemed about right. She remembered one sunny afternoon, just a few months ago in fact. He'd been companionless for the first time since she'd known him and had turned up in much the same state he was in now. He'd wanted to whisk her off somewhere for dinner, but she bullied him into doing some weeding instead. At one point she turned back from her patch and found him on his knees in the rose bed, burying his nose in various Lagerfeld and Broadway blooms. He'd caught her eye and looked at her with a vaguely embarrassed expression before saying something that surprised her. 'I'd forgotten how important it is to smell the roses,' he said. She'd stuck a Lagerfeld in his buttonhole as he left, the white and lavender leaves looking maddeningly out of place against the tweed jacket he'd taken to wearing. She sighed. He'd seemed so tired and fearful that day, and now here he was: just as lost himself, and bearing the responsibility for hers as well.

'I think you're doing fine,' she said, partly to herself as well as him.

'Thank you.' He smiled gratefully at her, but it quickly faded. 'But I think under the

circumstances...'

'It was going to happen sooner or later, you know.' There'd been no recriminations spoken, and she couldn't blame him anyway. The worst feeling had been seeing him kneeling by the shell, frantically trying to strip out the damage, only then discovering how much of it there was. She'd made up her mind at that point, kneeling down beside him, putting her hand on his shoulder and telling him to stop. The look of helplessness in his eyes had been terrible to see. 'Besides,' she added as an afterthought, 'Have you any idea how difficult it is to get hold of ZX81s these days?'

He looked puzzled. 'Really?'

'Oh, they're collectible now. You go round searching for Ri-Sec bus drivers and the minute they find out you're cannibalising the damn things they don't want to sell.' She found herself gazing towards the door, even though she couldn't see the conservatory from here. 'People get quite attached to their computers,' she murmured, as much for her benefit as his.

'I could go back and get some. It wouldn't be any trouble. His memory will be intact.' Unexpectedly he echoed her earlier traitor thought. 'He'd be as good as new.'

It was tempting she had to admit. It seemed odd how fond she'd become of the dog, despite his aggravating prissiness. But she'd made her decision. 'No, Doctor,' she said firmly. 'I'm not having him getting younger on me. Besides, all that trouble Brendan went to to get him Millennium compliant is just too much to go through again.'

The Doctor frowned. 'I never really thought about him becoming obsolete.' He shrugged and furtively glanced in her direction. 'I suppose I was pleased with myself for doing so much with the technology.'

'Egoist,' she needed. 'Still, it's just as well you did. You know UNIT gave him a quick once over at one point? They were really annoyed he wasn't more alien.' She shook her head in half-amusement. 'Let's face it, you can't trust them as far as you can throw them these days.'

'Yes,' he muttered, a trace of disappointment reverberating in his gentle voice. 'So I've found.'

'Mind you,' she'd smiled and leaned towards him conspiratorially, 'I wish you'd used some better shielding. You have no idea how much trouble he was when there were more than a couple of mobiles in the room.' His eyebrow raised and she ploughed on. 'TV cameras too for that matter. He just went round in circles until he managed to adjust himself.'

He drained the last of his chocolate. 'Don't we all?'

'True.' There had been a definite closing tone in his voice, but she hadn't finished yet. 'I'm glad he was with you when it happened. It's kind of appropriate.'

His brow had furrowed again. 'No it isn't. He wasn't my dog.'

'Oh, don't be silly, of course he was.'

'No he wasn't.' The Doctor slumped backwards into the chair and stared up at the ceiling. 'And I should have known before I even tried. He wasn't my K-9. He hadn't been with me, he hadn't travelled with me, he even had a completely different personality. And there was nothing we could talk about because he didn't have any real memory of me.' He turned to her and gave a weak smile. 'All in all, it's been a bit of a disaster really.'

Something cold punched its way into Sarah's stomach. 'Couldn't you have reminisced with me?' It felt as though her time with him had been relegated to second class status.

His denial was swift. 'Of course I could. And I will. But K-9 was with me for longer. I had a K-9 with me when I travelled with Leela and Romana as well, you see. But yours was the only one I could reach.' He looked across at her. 'As it turns out, taking him for a walk wasn't such a good idea.' For a while there was silence between them, broken only by the Doctor's eventual cough. 'I suppose I'd better go.'

'Yes,' Sarah unfolded from the chair and rose to her feet. 'Time's moving on.'

'As always.' They stopped at the door, the Doctor turning and smiling encouragingly at her. 'You will be all right?'

'Of course. I always am. I'm a survivor, remember?'

'Yes,' he grinned. 'Now that I do remember.' He reached out and touched her arm, his face suddenly sombre, his eyes burning into hers. 'I am sorry, believe me.'

'I know. I do.' She found herself intensely aware of how strong she always felt whenever he was around, even at a time like this. It was as if his belief in good changed everything around him. 'I'm sorry as well. He was a good friend.' He nodded, but there was something vaguely quizzical about his expression. 'Are you sure I can't do anything about it?'

She shook her head. 'No, Doctor. But thank you for caring.'

He shrugged, perhaps resigned. 'I have to, don't I?'

She found herself shaking her head and smiling at his new-found innocence. 'No, Doctor, you don't. But you do anyway.' He looked stunned, as if this had never occurred to him before. 'That's what

makes you so special.' For a few seconds he seemed lost for words, but then, to her surprise, he grabbed her in a hug that seemed to last forever. At length, he spoke. 'Goodbye, Sarah Jane,' he said.

He was holding her as if she was the one thing he could be sure of in the world, which was both disturbing and reassuring in equal measure. It was exactly how she felt about him right now. 'Goodbye, Doctor,' she replied. 'And you take care.' She felt as if her voice was about to crack with emotion.

'I will'

'Of everyone.'

She could feel his chin digging into her shoulder as he nodded his agreement. 'Yes. I will.' Thank God he seemed certain again.

They stepped back from each other and smiled before she opened the door and watched him walk into the night. Then, with a heavy sigh she closed the door, set the bolt and chain and walked back down the hall, realising that she was now alone again. And this time it was complete; K-9 was gone for good.

She was reaching to switch off the light when the doorbell rang, heralding the descent of a tight, cold feeling on her stomach. He wouldn't have, surely. He couldn't be that insensitive. Her journey towards the door was filled with trepidation, her heart pounding in her ears as she fumbled with the lock again.

As she had expected, the Doctor was nowhere to be seen and she steeled herself to look down, expecting a huge crate to be sitting on the front doorstep. She looked, and almost cried with relief. Before her lay a bundle of lilies, wrapped in simple white paper. There was no note, no message and no sign of the Doctor.

Tentatively she bent and picked them up before turning and walking into the house once more. She closed the door behind her and leant heavily against it, an electrically unreal sensation flooding over her skin. She could feel the tears welling up in her eyes even before she brought the flowers to her nose and after only one breath of their morbid perfume a lonely drop had started to roll down her cheek.

A tear, Sarah Jane? Where there's life there's...

Suddenly it all seemed too much, her free hand rushing to cover her nose and eyes as if it could hold back the aching sobs that wanted to tear her apart. She felt stupid: her lip was wobbling uncontrollably and her nose was starting to stream, causing her to sniff in an incredibly undignified manner. She found herself sliding down the door, feeling her jumper snag on the way, telling herself she

couldn't do this, it's just not her and there was bound to be pollen on her clothes and she'd never get it out. And somewhere deep inside she knew that there was no holding it back. It was the third inevitability of the day.

Begrudgingly, she gave herself over to her grief.