

A story? You want me to tell you a story, just like that, right off the top of my head? What do you mean, "just make something up?" Why should I? Yes, of course I have a story. Doesn't everyone? And it's a whopper, as they used to say. What? They still say that? Well, bless me!

Did you know that between 1854 and 1929, over 200,000 orphaned, homeless, and destitute children in the United States were placed out across the country, many to farming families in the mid-west? Some were adopted. Some were indentured. Some were separated from their brothers and sisters and never saw them again. Yes, that does sound harsh, but it was the beginning of the foster care system and while it wasn't perfect, it was usually better than starving to death on the streets. Believe me, young man, starving to death is no picnic. But you know all about that, don't you? Being hungry. Being lonely. Being abandoned. I thought as much. How can I tell? Your eyes, dear. I can see it in your eyes. You remind of someone I met a long time ago.

Yes, I agree. Never mind that. You asked for my story. You can tell me yours later. Are you writing all this down?

Where was I? Yes, yes. I remember. I'm not as feeble-minded as all that. You know about the orphans, but what you may not know is this: Not all of those children—or the trains they rode on—can be accounted for. I know the last one I rode on can't be. I tried to tell the authorities years ago, but they didn't believe a word of it. I don't know if that's because I was a girl, or a girl born in the wrong century, but mark my words, the Number Nine, bound for Michigan, rolled out of history and into mystery. For a minute, anyway. Yes, it was a long time ago, but my memory is as sharp today as it was then. Now, do you want to hear a story or not? All right then. Settle down and let me tell you what really happened...

Whistle Stop

by the Bunny in the Tardis

Every podunk town the train had pulled into for the last 3,000 miles since leaving Grand Central Station looked the same: mills, manure, and mud. We were on the return trip from the Indian Territories, having criss-crossed what seemed like the entire country; we were the ones no one seemed to want. I guess they were going to try one more town, then it was back East. By the time we reached the orphan asylum, I was convinced I'd be the only one left on the train. It would be all

mud and tears there, too.

As we drew slowly into the station, I leaned my cheek against the cold glass window and blew softly until a fog formed. In it, I carefully wrote the name inscribed inside my locket – backwards, that it might be read from outside the train: E S O R. Truth told, I was tiring of the routine, but I had my instructions. At every station, at every switch, at every whistle stop, I was to trace those letters on the window. That's what the pretty lady had told me back in New York. *It will make sense later.* Adults always say things like that. But I did as I was told. In those days, at least, I was an obedient child. Usually.

Miss McCrimmon, who had travelled with us since we left St. Luke's and made our way first to the city and then up the Hudson on a crowded ferry, was already in motion: waking the sleepy heads, wiping noses, chastising the mischief makers. Not that there were many of those left. No, we were just a rag tag band of nobodies singing the same sad song. Tired of traveling. Tired of life.

Mr. Sneed, the weasel-faced agent we'd picked up prior to loading onto the first of too many trains, came sniveling into our coach looking more than a little uncomfortable as he patted his red, puckered face with a handkerchief. His neat brown suit was creased after so many miles of travel and his hat didn't look near as crisp as it had at the start of our journey. Not a father, I had decided, or a grandfather either. If he had been, he would at least have spared a smile for the gaggle of tired children. To him, we were little more than cargo – and noisy cargo at that.

"M'am," he tipped his hat at our sponsor. "I'm afraid we shall be parting company. Nurse Pettiford and I are to remain aboard and continue on to New York. You're to take the next train to Michigan which, I understand, has been delayed due to inclement weather to the north. I trust the church has an agent here that can arrange accommodations for those charges remaining with you?"

"Here?" she squawked, drawing a crumpled time table from beneath her lap robe. "But, there's no scheduled stop for another 40 miles!"

"My dear woman, you would do well to control that Irish temper—"

"Scottish, Mr. Sneed," she growled at him, and not for the first time.

"Never the less..."

"Never nothing! Mr. Sneed, might I remind you of the contract you have with St. Luke's? You are to see these children safely delivered to their new homes whether that is in Arkansas, Idaho, or Michigan." Miss McCrimmon flicked a wisp of escaped hair back into her bun. It was of no use. Her red hair was as disheveled as the rest of her. As the rest of us.

The man smiled coolly. "I have no control over either the weather or the train lines and a

telegram with the change in plans was waiting for us upon our arrival. Unexpected as that might be, it is the truth of the matter. I can only surmise that another group of children await our arrival. We'll be escorting them back west as we no doubt now have a good number of farming families waiting and you can rest assured not a one has asked for trouble makers, wee babes, the mentally infirm, or," here he cast a glance at me, "girls of questionable intelligence."

I pulled my straw hat down over my eyes and tried to sink out of sight. As much as I longed for a family to call my own, I didn't want to be anywhere I wasn't needed – or wanted.

"You're to proceed to Michigan and anyone that's left will be returned to St. Luke's. I do wish you well, Miss McCrimmon. Good day to you."

"But, Mister Sneed," Miss McCrimmon cried, trailing after him, pleading our case. "We've already *been* to Michigan. Are you saying additional applications came in? Mr. Sneed? Mr. Sneed, do wait for me – "

It was true. We'd been to Michigan once already. I couldn't remember how many days ago it was. Twelve? A hundred and twelve? We numbered nearly 90 at the outset, enough to fill two passenger cars, but as the days passed most of the older boys and girls had congregated in the coach ahead of us. Nurse Pettiford followed soon after.

I glanced around our carriage, at Patrick and Colin wrestling in the aisle. The twins were always doing that. Not that they looked anything alike. Mr. Sneed didn't even think they *were* twins. Twice they had refused to be separated, causing such a ruckus that they'd been sent back just as our train was due to leave the station.

Behind them, looking as sad as I had ever seen him, sat little Kipp. I remembered the summer day he had been brought to the first orphanage I had lived in. St. Christopher's Day. That's how he had got his name because the Sisters said they had to call him something. Something terrible must have happened to him because he wouldn't talk to anyone. The only time he'd ever spoken to me was when it was discovered neither of us were Catholic and we were unloaded on the Society. I can't repeat what he said, but between you and me, it was awful funny.

Comely, towheaded Piotr sat quietly across the aisle, staring out a window, rolling a red leather ball back and forth between his hands. I asked him about it once, but it took longer to explain the game it was used for than I suspect the game itself took to play. Willie was behind him, scowling, his arms crossed over his chest as he sat hunched and brooding. Whenever Miss McCrimmon started reciting her Second Chances speech, he huffed and puffed like a grumpy old man and pulled his peaked wool hat down over his eyes. I couldn't see Mac, but I could hear the merry tap of spoons, so I knew he was nearby. Mac had a deck of playing cards that he had kept

tucked up under his straw hat since one of the older boys, now gone, had nabbed it from him. Upon inspection we discovered cards were missing, but Mac said he could get by as long as he still had one Ace to keep up his sleeve.

Jean was nowhere to be seen, but I wasn't surprised. He had made it his business to explore every inch of our train from the locomotive on back to the caboose. He knew what every switch and lever did and how to make it all operate in reverse order. Paul and Thomas – named after Saints because no one could pronounce the names they had arrived with – were deep in conversation in a language I couldn't begin to describe. I liked Paul. I was rarely at a loss for words, even as a young girl, but when he was around it felt like butterflies were fluttering around my tummy and I said the stupidest things. Thomas, on the other hand, made me laugh. He was tall and strong and I couldn't imagine why he hadn't been placed out yet. I was sort of glad, though, because he had always watched out for me as well as little Daivi and baby Matieu, who just needed a chance to charm someone. I couldn't believe they were still on the train either, but secretly hoped wherever they went, I could go too.

I slumped a little more in my seat, smearing the spot where I had so carefully written on the fogged glass. It was time to face the music. No one was coming for me. No more second chances. Not here. Not ever.

A tap at the window drew my attention and I looked down. There, on the platform, stood a serious looking man that I hadn't noticed just moments before. I wasn't sure which was stranger, the man's leather coat that made him look like a boat captain without a hat—or a boat for that matter – or the enormous blue telegraph box that stood a short distance away. I could scarcely believe the size of it. *Why*, you might step *inside* it, it was so large! A proper little hut, better than the dirty coal shed I had slept in for a forgotten number of days back East, before a pair of kind souls had found me and I was taken to the local parish orphanage and from there to St. Luke's.

He pointed at me or, I should say, at the window, pursing his lips slightly to mimic what at first I thought was a whistle. A moment later I understood and blew softly again over the place where I had traced the letters. It reappeared as if by magic and the man lifted his eyebrows in question. I struggled to lower the window and peered out at him. The boys, alerted by this new change in events, clustered around me, snubbed noses pressed against cool glass.

"Hallo!" the man said. His tone was cheerful, but his blue eyes were sad. Sometimes you can just tell that about a person.

"Hello."

"You write that?" the man asked me.

"I... Yes," I replied.

"Well, hurry up. I haven't got all day."

At my insistence, Miss McCrimmon gave up pleading with the quarrelsome Walter P. Sneed and, as the train departed in a cloud of smoke and steam, we flocked around her like chicks around a mother hen. Soon enough, she turned her attention to the man standing beside the tall, blue telegraph box. She shook his hand vigorously.

"Thank God you made it! We understood that our train was a full day behind and that we were going to be delayed, which is just intolerable after such an emotional journey. As you can imagine, these children are exhausted and hungry and eager to be placed out with their new families and I've studied the time table numerous times, but this, this *pitiful* excuse for a town is *not* on the schedule, nor do we have any agents within 100 miles!" She barely paused for breath before adding. "Where are my manners? I'm Carolynn McCrimmon from St. Luke's."

"St. Luke's?"

"Upstate," she said, as if that explained everything. Maybe it did, because the man didn't ask for any further explanation. Which was probably just as well, because Miss McCrimmon was on again and there was just no stopping her.

The man glanced left and right as she was talking and I had a feeling that he wasn't who she thought he was, but he was too polite to tell her so. That or her barrage of words was taking him by surprise. Or a little of both. After a moment he seemed to get the gist of what she was telling him, though, and he pursed his lips, his brow drawing together.

"You say this Mr. Sneed was just going to leave you here and expect you to make your way to Michigan on your own? I'd have a word with him – "

"Oh, I'd be much obliged if you would Mister...? I'm sorry should I already – ?"

"No, I don't imagine you should. And it isn't Mister. Just Doctor."

"I'd be much obliged, Doctor," Miss McCrimmon said, sounding so greatly relieved it made a heart glad.

"Right... but I haven't the time." He looked over the group of us and pointed at me. "You're all welcome to come, but I'm only here for that one."

"That?" Miss McCrimmon turned to look at me, standing just outside the group, Daivi gripping one hand, Matieu riding on my hip.

"Yup," the Doctor said. "That's the one."

"You've put in an application?" Miss McCrimmon asked him.

"For what?" the Doctor asked.

Half of the boys began to snigger. The other half pointed at the water-logged advertisement plastered to the station wall alongside a host of long-outdated schedules and a faded billboard for the carnival that had come into whatever once passed for a town some years before. It seemed to me we were a carnival all by ourselves. All we needed were some fine white horses, a dancing bear, and some clowns. On second thought, forget the clowns. The Doctor turned to look at the array of peeling signs, then turned back, obviously puzzled. The girl on the circus poster – the one with the beard, riding what looked like a two-headed camel – looked an awful lot like me. Aside from the whiskers. I did my best to blend into the background, wishing the rain would start again and I could disappear into the stream presently creasing the dirt and snow between the station platform and the rails.

“What?” he asked.

“Not too bright, is he?” Colin asked the other lads.

“Blind in one eye...”

“Can’t see out the other..”

“What? I don’t see any... Oooh,” the Doctor said after a moment. He read out loud: *“Homes wanted for a company of homeless children, having been thrown friendless into the world... Well. I know how that is,”* he said, then read further. *“Persons wanting these children must make application and be approved by the local committee.”*

“I assume the papers you and your Misses turned in are all in order?”

“Oh, there’s no Misses,” the Doctor sputtered. “Not anymore. There was someone, for a while. I thought... Anyway, you don’t need to listen to my tongue wag. No Misses. Just me.”

He mustered a grin right there at the end, but we all saw the truth in his eyes. We all knew what it was like to lose our families. Even if we couldn’t remember them. Miss McCrimmon blinked back tears. For all she jabbered like a parrot, she was a sentimental soul. All the boys sort of sighed at the news, too. She could have done her Second Chances speech just then and no one would have minded.

“Forgive me, Doctor. I’m terribly sorry.”

The shrill blast of a far-off train whistle sliced the afternoon in twain.

The Doctor consulted his wrist watch. “That, if I’m not mistaken, is the train to Michigan. It won’t be the most comfortable trip if you come with me, but it’s bound to be more exciting than standing here in the rain.”

Paul tugged at the Doctor’s sleeve. “Are there homes for all of us in Michigan?”

“Don’t know. Maybe.”

“Will it be dangerous?” asked Mac, wagging a finger at our new escort.

“Probably.”

“Oh, dear!” groaned Patrick as he dragged a hand over his face.

“At last!” clapped Jean. “I could do with an adventure.”

“That’s the spirit! Well, then, I hope you have your luggage.”

“Lost,” Piotr explained. “Somewhere in Utah. Or Iowa. Or Indiana.” The others murmured in agreement.

“You don’t have anything?” asked the Doctor.

“Just what we got in our pockets,” Thomas said, pulling out a fistful of marbles, a handkerchief, three smooth knucklebones, and a large apple with a bite taken out of it. “Don’t need more than that.”

“Is that so?” smiled the Doctor. “Good for you. I like to travel light, too.”

“Careful now, you’ll scratch the paint!”

I honestly couldn’t imagine it looking any more battered, but for the better part of 20 minutes we watched from the shelter of the station’s rickety porch as four men wrestled the big telegraph box onto the train in a downpour. The porters had been complaining almost the entire time because nothing of that size was listed in the cargo manifest for this trip, but the Doctor seemed to have his paperwork and credentials in order and, by gum, that box was going where we were.

As soon as the telegraph box was stowed, the boys made a break for it, piling into the freight car the Doctor had commandeered for us like a swarm of ants to a drop of honey. Not for the first time, the smartly dressed conductor breezed by, wringing his hands, insisting that he had no authorization to take on more than a handful of chance passengers, let alone a dozen orphaned children. The Doctor pulled his small leather purse from his pocket, waved it in front of the man’s nose, and that was that. How all of his documents fit into that little wallet, I didn’t know.

A pair of burly men in dirty blue overalls lifted Miss McCrimmon into the carriage, handed the baby up to her, then tossed her carpet bag in. It snapped open on impact and a puff of lacey-whiteness popped out for a split second before she put it all in order and took a hesitant seat on a bale of hay. That left me and the Doctor standing motionless on the platform, as if each was waiting for the other one to make the first move. I was still mulling over what he had said. Me. He was here for me. I wasn’t sure what that meant. He was here to escort me? He was here to take me with him? Why was he here and why me and...?

“So,” he said brightly, “what’s your story?”

“My what?”

“Your story,” he repeated, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder at the advertisement that had been put up prior to our arrival. That there were no families waiting for us to be trotted out for at the local opera house or church seemed strange. Then again, given the state of disrepair of the buildings, I had a sneaking suspicion that a next meal was as much a concern here as it was for the countless children roaming the streets of New York City. The Doctor and his telegraph box were as out of place here as any of us. Which begged the question how he had arrived here at all. And why. Which brought us back to the first question.

“I don’t have a story,” I told him. I did, of course. We all do, but I wasn’t going to tell him. Not that easily.

“You must have. A story I mean. Everyone does.”

“Including you?”

“Oh, I’ve got lifetimes full of stories. Don’t get me started...”

But he didn’t elaborate and I knew, in an instant, that he wouldn’t.

Not that easily.

“The thing about stories,” he confided, “is that the ones that haven’t been written yet may be the best of all.”

I didn’t want to tell him that the only thing I could write was the name inscribed in my locket.

The boys were whooping and hollering as they climbed over bales of hay bound for some far-off stock yard. I shivered as blowing rain seeped through my wool collar and ran cold as melted snow down my back. Is that what we were now? Cattle? But it looked warm and smelled like summer, and the thought of laying down my head on something other than a hard wooden bench was appealing. Not a one of us had had a good night’s sleep in more days than I could remember.

I was so lost in my thoughts that the sharp whistle of the train made me jump.

“All aboard,” the Doctor said cheerfully, ignoring the gusting wind, the rain pelting down on us, soaking us to the skin. After another long whistle prompted us to leave the platform or be left behind, I took a deep breath and looked up at him.

“Do you think it will ever stop raining?” I asked him.

“Always does,” he told me.

He was so right. Of course he didn’t mention that after the calm, the oncoming storm might be even worse.

As the sun began to shine and the train picked up speed, our spirits began to rise. I cast off my soaking wet coat and Mrs. Mc Crimmon wrapped a dry blanket around me. There were plenty to

go around. I could have done with forty winks, but for the first time in days, we were all full of beans. We had a sing song and Mac played the spoons on Colin's head and we all laughed so hard when the Doctor told us where he was from and Patrick, brimming with inspiration serenaded us with:

*“Tra la la boom de ay
We met a man today
He comes from Gallifrey
He took us all away.
He has a big blue box
We tried to pick the locks
We think there's more inside
than he could ever hide.
We're on the Number Nine
The weather's fair and fine
Not much more I can say
Tra la la boom de ay!”*

As we rolled along, the Doctor heaved open the cargo doors to let in the fresh air and sunshine, cautioning the boys to keep away from the edge. Some of them even listened. He only had to grab one or two before they fell out.

Miss McCrimmon was all fluttery in the company of the Doctor. Her face turned three shades of crimson when he sat beside her. In the space of a few hours she had told him the entire history of St. Luke's, the Children's Aid Society, her previous excursions out west placing children with good Christian families and how she had met Charles Loring Brace personally at a church picnic when she was still a young girl. He seemed to be doing his best to keep smiling and nodding, but every so often I saw him glancing around as if he expected something to happen. More than once he looked at me and I pulled the blanket closer. Eventually, he excused himself to check on the boys at the other end of the carriage. I heard him chastising one of them for the looping chalk art that now adorned the side of the telegraph box.

After he'd walked away, Miss McCrimmon started to breath again. “A man of few words, isn't he?”

“Well,” I told her, “someone has to listen.” It seemed to me that the Doctor was right good at listening.

That's exactly what he was doing, only this time it wasn't to her, it was to the boys, who were all talking at once, asking question about the box, about him, about what it was like to travel about with that box of his (as if he took it everywhere he went). Someone asked him if the telegraph box belonged to the coppers as apparently that's what the big white letters at the top said. He laughed at them and said no, it was his, but the way he said it we all knew. He'd nicked it for sure. The boys thought the whole affair was quite a hoot, though. Before you could say "Bob's your uncle," and ignoring his protests, Daivi was on the Doctor's back, Mac was picking his pockets (he had more in them than Thomas did!) and at least four others were pulling him down into the hay. In no time they'd have him shooting marbles and playing Old Sledge or Beggar-My-Neighbor. Even Kipp had been drawn out of his customary solitude and had moved into the rowdy group. By his expression, the Doctor was completely out of his depth.

A loud rumble interrupted our merriment, sending a shudder through the floor and a shiver up every spine. Above us, a kerosene lantern swayed as the freight car shifted side to side.

"Thunder," Miss McCrimmon assured us, settling herself again in as ladylike a position as could be had sitting on a hay bale as the train rushed—clackity, clackity, clackity—over the rails. "Inclement northern weather. We're safe as houses in here. We have all this warm hay, and wool blankets and, oh, children, I was saving it, but we have muffins and a jar of apple butter! Gather closer now – "

Another rumble rolled slowly over us, this one ending with a splintering crash. The Doctor was on his feet, gently lowering Daivi to the floor, and extricating himself from a tangle of wide-eyed boys. For a full ten count all I could hear was the grating and squealing of iron as if the brakeman felt our very lives depended on the train coming to a timely stop.

I looked at the Doctor and he looked at me.

"We aren't stopping," I said at last, feeling foolish for stating the obvious.

"No, we aren't," he agreed.

More rumbling followed, and popping and shuddering and grating and all manner of distressing sounds that swept over us as if the train was being pulled apart, starting up front at the engine and ending at the tail end in the caboose.

"That's not thunder," Piotr observed.

"Sounded like blasting caps!" Jean said, excitedly.

"You say that like it's a good thing," Mac told him.

"Depends on what you're doing, hmmm?" Willie pointed out.

"True enough," the Doctor agreed. "But we aren't in mining country yet and besides,

explosions *on* trains are rarely a good thing.”

The word *explosions* got everyone’s dander up and they were all babbling at once again with dear Miss McCrimmon trying to corral the lot. Might as well have tried to put a dozen frogs back in a box.

“Oh my giddy aunt – ”

“Hmm, I wonder – -”

“...poppycock!”

“Fantastic!”

The Doctor turned sharply toward the usually silent Kipp. “Hey – “

Paul drew me close to him so he could whisper in my ear. He smelled like sweat and hay and apple butter. “When he says run, be sure to run.”

What?

The next explosion sent the lot of us tumbling to the inside wall of the freight car. A good thing seeing as the cargo door was still open, wind and snow whipping loose hay into a storm around us. The undercarriage creaked and groaned and for a long moment it felt like the train had pitched so far to the side it had lifted from the tracks. I could almost imagine what it might look like, tipped sideways, running along on one side of the track, sparks flying. Daivi buried his head against my shoulder, Kipp clung to the other arm, and somewhere in the maelstrom of hay and snow, little Matieu was crying. Colin scooped him up and put him into my arms and I held them all as close as I could. The smell of smoke and sulfur was suffocating and I felt a sudden dread about those kerosene lamps hanging above us and all that hay.

All eyes were on the Doctor. In his hand, balanced mere inches from the hay, was one of the kerosene lanterns. He reached up and nonchalantly put it back into place as the carriage shuddered right way up again. We all gasped.

“What?” he asked.

Another loud boom made us all jump and the boys, well some of the boys, couldn’t help but giggle. They tussled and punched one another and called one another featherbrained nimenogs. No one was looking outside anymore. No one except me.

“Rose?” It took me a moment to realize he was talking to me.

“I think something’s wrong,” I whispered, breathless and not half frightened.

“Why’s that?” asked the Doctor.

I pointed at the open door. It wasn’t snowing anymore. It wasn’t daylight anymore. It wasn’t anything I’d ever seen with my waking eyes. We were hurtling through what looked like a million

shooting stars.

“Is that – ?”

“Are we – ?”

“Well, that seems highly improbable.”

“We aren’t in Michigan anymore.”

“We aren’t on *Earth* anymore.”

“Goodness gracious me. That wasn’t supposed to happen,” said Miss McCrimmon, and she fainted dead away.

“Well, it’s about time,” the Doctor muttered, glancing over at me. “Com’on then, stop playing with the kids. We have work to do.”

Jean was fit to be tied when the Doctor told him to stay put while we investigated the next carriage up. Instead, the Doctor instructed him to help Thomas close the cargo door before someone fell out—Miss McCrimmon in particular, seeing as she was wilted away and not even the smelling salts the Doctor offered up were having any effect. At least not on poor Miss McCrimmon. With a shrug, he extinguished the kerosene lamps, cut away the straps holding the telegraph box in place, stepped inside and lit the flame at the top of the box.

“If things get too rough,” he told the boys, entrusting a key to Paul, “get in the box. And don’t touch anything, you lot, you hear?”

Next thing I knew, the Doctor told me to put on my coat, grabbed me by the hand and dragged me outside. I clung to him, blinded by ash and soot and swirling starlight. The noise of the train rushing over unseen tracks was deafening. We were racing at a fearsome speed, too fast for us to jump to safety. Even if we could jump to safety. I couldn’t bear to look up or down or anywhere except for at the Doctor.

He jumped from one carriage porch to the next like there was nothing to it and held out his hand.

“Come with me,” he said, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t move. I didn’t know what I was thinking, following him onto that train, following him out here into something that I couldn’t tell was a dream or a flight of fancy or a nightmare. I squeezed my eyes closed and wished for it all to go away. It didn’t. I’d as goods go back to the orphan asylum.

“Well, you can’t just stand there,” the Doctor pointed out, looking more than a little put out. I got the keen sense he was accustomed to getting his way. Colin was like that. They all were, come to think on it. Different as the phases of the moon, but somehow the same.

“Can’t I? I mean... you don’t need me. I’ll just slow you down. You need Jean or Thomas or

Mac. They're sharp as pins. They can even *read*. Jean was practically begging you to take him along and, and, and..." I was talking faster than Miss McCrimmon and making about as much sense as a jabbering monkey.

"Are you done now?"

"No!" I cried. I'm nobody, I wanted to tell him. I'm nothing. You don't need me here and I don't want to be here and...

He rolled his eyes and settled back with crossed arms against the door into the next compartment. "Hurry up, then. Get it over with."

"Why are you doing this? Why did you pick me? I don't know what you expect me to do! I'm not smart and I'm not pretty and I'm not even remotely brave, and I don't know why I'm following you! I don't know who you are or where Gallililly is—"

"Gallifrey."

"I don't where that is either!"

"I never said that you did."

"Who the devil *are* you?"

"Seriously? We're going to do this now? Theof the universe may be hanging in the balance and you're going to stand there asking foolish questions and having a pity party?"

I wasn't entirely sure I understood what he meant by that, but the disapproval in his eyes was enough to tell me that I was disappointing him.

"This isn't what I expected from you—" he began.

"Why would you expect anything of me? We've only just met!"

"You know, that's the trouble with time travel," he said. "And I ought to know better after this long, but it never ceases to amaze me how *stupid* people can be before you've met them properly."

I don't know what sort of a chowderhead he thought I was, but that made no sense at all. At least this time he seemed to understand that I hadn't a clue what he was on about and that every word he said was laying more track between us. I turned to go back to the boys, the only family I expected to ever have.

"You can't do that," the Doctor called after me.

"Why?" I yelled back, gripping the doorframe, my hair twisting around me as we hurtled deeper and deeper into my worst nightmare.

"Because you didn't."

I stared at him. "How could you possibly know that?"

"I'll explain later."

I scowled. Adults always say things like that, but they never explain anything.

“All right. You want to know the real answer? Because you told me. You told me about all of this. Well, you will tell me. From your perspective. It’s complicated, and, quite frankly, we don’t have time to debate temporal physics right now. Now, are you coming or not? Rose,” the name caught in his throat once again and I turned back to him. “Trust me.”

I must have been completely mad, but there was something about his stern face in the shifting light, cinder and ash and the smell of the night sky and his blue eyes beacons of hope, wide as eternity, offering me the chance of a lifetime. He knew me from a future I could only imagine. A future I had come to doubt I would ever have. Here, now, we were writing the pages of the story of my life. The story I would tell him. *Trust me.*

I jumped the gap between what I understood and what I didn’t, and the Doctor was there on the other side to catch me.

The next freight car up was as dark as a moonless night and filled with ??? hay if I were to trust my nose. The Doctor scrambled through it without any problem, but it was harder for me without any light, my frock and long coat catching me up. Outside the train, it was as cold as a winter day, but inside, crawling over crates filled with good cloth and bad liquor, squeezing past barrels packed with dry goods I could only guess at, I was growing warm enough to offend myself. Every time I thought I might want to shuck that moth-eaten old coat, we’d emerge from a carriage into the bracing wind and no matter how much I smelled like a basket of dirty stockings, I’d have a powerful change of heart. What I wouldn’t have given for a bottle of Miss McCrimmon’s *Jicky Guerlain*.

We hopped knuckle coupler after knuckle coupler, edging ever closer to the front of the train. At last, the Doctor stopped.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him, steadying myself on the swaying carriage porch.

“Door’s jammed,” the Doctor told me, rattling the brass handle. He pulled with both hands, then put his shoulder into it, all to no avail. With a shrug of resignation, he reached into his coat pocket, then caught himself. Whatever tool he had hidden there remained hidden. Instead, his hand closed around the rung of a ladder that went up to the roof.

“Oh no,” I told him, backing away. Playing leap frog over janney couplers on a hell-bent train was bad enough. By all that was sensible and good, I was not about to climb up *there*, in the dark, on a train hurtling through the heavens.

“Ladies first,” he grinned.

“Doctor, please! My hands are cold, I’ve barked both shins, snagged my frock on a nail, torn

my stockings, and this train doesn't seem to have an end. Please, can't we go back to the boys and Miss McCrimmon?"

"Well, we could," the Doctor told me without looking at me. He did that, talked without looking at you. "But if memory serves, they aren't there anymore. We have to keep going forward to find them again."

Not there? What sort of balderdash was he expecting me to believe now?

"Come on. You'll understand soon enough."

I wanted to understand *now*. Was that really so unreasonable?

"Where are they if they aren't where we left them? What aren't you telling me?"

"Plenty," he stated, ushering me ahead of him up the ladder.

Well that did it. I was tired of being told what to do and when to do it by people I hardly knew. It was about time I spoke up. About time I made a stand. The incongruity of my sudden surge of feminist zeal arriving as I stood on train flying through the night sky with a strange man from Gali—Galifri—Galifriboomdeeay—failed to dawn on me at the time, but I had a wealth of things on my mind and was about to express it all to the Doctor. To say I was feeling stubborn would have been an understatement. I planted my hands on my hips, preparing my own version of the *Second Chances* speech.

Just then, a familiar voice called from atop the carriage.

"Come on, then! Quit the shenanigans. Shake a leg!"

Whatever I had been about to say went down with a deep swallow. I blinked hard. "Doctor, did you hear that?"

If he did, he wasn't saying. Instead, he lifted me onto the ladder and pointed up. "Let's go Catherine Booth. You can lecture me later."

We staggered atop the roof, the Doctor gripping my arm that I might not be swept away in the roaring wind and swirl of flickering lights like jack-o-lanterns spinning around us in the starlight. I do declare, I had never been so terrified in all my life, but the view! I could see all the way to eternity. After that, the dark interior of train cars and jumping knuckle couplers was nothing.

We dropped down into the empty cargo car and proceeded through another car or two when I heard it again. That same voice, calling out to me. The Doctor was busy at the far end of the stock car, bent over a stubborn door latch. I retreated to the back on the carriage, rubbing the grimy glass window with my sleeve.

"Oi!" the Doctor yelled behind me. He'd sprung the door latch and the wind and roar of the locomotive filled the compartment. "This way, Rose. We have to keep going forward."

“But someone’s following us,” I insisted, straining to see who was out there. I unlocked the door and stepped out onto the porch. The wind buffeted me again, twisting my hair around my face as I jumped back a carriage. To the one loaded with Bibles and Methodist hymn books and smaller pamphlets printed in what the Doctor had identified as the language of the Potawatomi tribe. He grudgingly agreed to stop long enough to read to me in the strange, clipped syllables of a language so unlike any I had ever heard. Standing outside the car, I could still hear the words. In fact, I could hear many voices, as if the entire company of boys were there behind the closed door. I cupped my hands to my mouth and yelled so the Doctor could hear me over the din of the runaway train. “I’m going to see who it is—“

“Rose, don’t,” he told me, reaching after me. “Don’t look back. You have to keep moving forward—“

Ignoring the Doctor, I twisted the knob and went back the way we had come. The door slammed shut behind me.

At first, the carriage was dark, the rich scent of hay filling me with sleepy thoughts. I never did catch those forty winks earlier and the exertion it was taking to keep up with the Doctor had left me exhausted. I felt around for the nearest bale of hay in the dim light, lowering myself down. It was after the glow of a kerosene lamp washed over my surroundings that I realized that instead of the car filled with Bibles and hymnals, I was back in the freight car we had started out in.

The compartment in which we had ridden so merrily together earlier was empty save the Doctor’s big blue box. It stood in the far corner, tall and solid, casting a dark, deep shadow over the space. Mac’s straw hat sat on a hay bale besides Miss McCrimmon’s carpet bag. Wherever she was, she was going to be mighty displeased not to have her lap robe and her time tables and those lacy bloomers we’d burned our innocence away with by seeing earlier. Scattered all about were bits and bobs I recognized as belonging to the boys. Marbles and playing cards and tiny tin soldiers. One by one I swept them into Mac’s hat as I made my way closer to the telegraph box they must have taken refuge in. The key on the chain that the Doctor had given to Paul earlier had been slid neatly into the lock. I wondered what sort of machine existed inside. A machine to take a man forward and backward in Time.

We met a man today,

He comes from Gallifrey...

My fingers closed on the door handle as I twisted the key, pushed open the door, and promptly fell out of the train.

Wherever I was when I woke up, one thing was for certain: it was as quiet as a church during

silent prayer. I found that rather comforting after the affairs of the day. I was sitting on the floor in a vaulted room awash in twisting light and cool, gentle shadows. Peaceful sounds that reminded me of long lost summers I didn't even realize I still remembered reverberated around me. Summer nights. Summer breezes. Summer skies filled with stars. For a moment I was even further transported to the days before I had resorted to sleeping in a coal shed because I no longer had a home. Or a family. My eyes stung with tears, but I wasn't the only one crying.

There, down a long, tunnel that glimmered like the setting sun, I could just make out the outline of one of the older boys, his dark head nodded forward.

Leaving the hat and all manner of boyish treasures behind, I scrambled to my feet, tearing a hole clean through the torn hem on my frock. Miss McCrimmon was going to need more than a needle and thread to repair that before our next introduction to prospective kin.

The boy was crying. He didn't want anyone to know that he was crying. I could tell that from his face, the way he turned away, the way he blinked back the tears. To have a friend, you must first be one, and this poor lad looked like he hadn't a friend in the whole wide world.

"Hello? Are you hurt?"

If he heard me, he made no answer. Instead, he cradled a large leather book in his arms as dearly as I might have held our family Bible. His lips were moving silently, his body rocking to a tune that seemed to rise from the pages themselves. A haunting song, unlike any I had ever heard. All at once, I was crying, too.

*DEATH, rock me asleep,
Bring me to quiet rest,
Let pass my weary guiltless ghost
Out of my careful breast.
Toll on, thou passing bell;
Ring out my doleful knell;
Let thy sound my death tell.
Death doth draw nigh;
There is no remedy.*

The Doctor's low voice interrupted the song. "There you are! I told you not to—"

The image of the boy shimmered like ripples in a pond until it was just the Doctor and I in the cavernous room. He steered me down a ramp, past a hat stand, to a set of windowed doors.

“Come on, Alice. Time we go back through the looking glass.”

And just like that, we stepped back into the train. I glanced over my shoulder once to get a proper look of where I had just been, then wished I had some of those smelling salts we had tried to wake Miss McCrimmon with.

“Wakey, wakey—” The Doctor patted my cheek with cool fingers.

“Don’t be afraid,” Paul told me, smiling down at me. Smiling that smile that always made my knees weak. His voice was sweet. His face sweeter.

“Paul?” I threw my arms around his neck, breathing in his scent, hoping I wasn’t committing a sin when I had to admit I liked what I smelled.

“You might not want to do that,” the Doctor said, rocking back on his heels.

Aside from the obvious impropriety, I couldn’t imagine why. Nor could I have imagined what transpired next. Paul lifted me to my feet, only it wasn’t Paul anymore. It was Thomas. No. No, it was Piotr, smiling warmly. After that, it wasn’t even a person anymore.

Surprised, I stumbled back and the Doctor caught me and hauled me back to unsteady feet. I was much obliged and felt as foolish as ever for not having listened to him when he warned me before. He said not to go back after all. More than once. I looked up at him, all kinds of sorry on my face, but he was too busy looking this, this *Thing* up and down to pay me much mind.

“You can’t just go around changing your face,” the Doctor scolded.

“Says the Time Lord,” scoffed the Thing that, until a moment before, looked like someone I thought I knew as well as anyone.

I wasn’t sure who or what it looked like now; sort of stretched and slippery like a bowl of noodles, only without the bowl. It had too many glimmering parts, especially eyes, and I felt like every one of them was fixed on me. I was beginning to think masquerading as one of the boys was better. I was also hoping Miss McCrimmon wouldn’t walk in and see it.

Then it hit me. Just before she fainted dead away, what had she said about the explosions and the train wandering between the stars? *That wasn’t supposed to happen.* The Thing reached out a long slippery arm and patted me on the head. It smelled like apple butter. Oh. Oh dear. We were in a bad box now.

“Don’t be afraid,” it said again.

“What *are* you?” I cried, recoiling into the Doctor. “What have you done to Paul and Miss McCrimmon and the boys?” I thought of little Daivi, lost somewhere on the train, his big dark eyes brimming with tears. Of baby Mattieu, who couldn’t look after himself. Of Mac and Willie and the rest.

“They are here,” the Thing said, a dozen arms waving and embracing, and all at once they were. Every familiar face, every happy smile, every uncombed hair on every unwashed face. They surrounded me, whispering, patting my arms, touching my hair, breaking my heart.

I put my hands over my eyes. “Stop it! Stop it! You’ve taken them!”

“There, there,” said Pat.

“Stop crying child,” said Willie.

Daivi slipped his small hand in mine. “We’re sorry.”

“You’re not helping,” the Doctor told the Thing. “Seriously. You’re terrifying her. Time to tell her the truth and then it’s off with you. Back into the realm you came from before I tell the Shadow Proclamation you’ve been mucking about Earth in this century. Shame on you. These stupid little apes don’t understand a thing about Shifters and whifferdils and multi-forms.”

Tell me the truth about... Wait just one cotton-pickin’ minute. Who was he calling a stupid ape? I peered between my fingers as the thing continued to change like shadows in a mirror.

“No harm was intended,” the Thing said. “The truth was too painful. The pain saddened me.”

What truth was so painful? But it didn’t have to explain. Seeing their faces now, I admitted what I had known for days in my heart. They were gone. They were all gone and if we didn’t die in a train crash in this impossible place, I was going to end up back at St. Luke’s. Alone.

“No harm was intended,” the Thing stressed the words, noodle arms waving, too many eyes blinking. “The girl did not want them to leave. They were the ones that mattered most. Her memories were enough to create the illusion—“

“That was more than an illusion,” the Doctor said, shaking a finger at the Thing. “Those boys had individual corporeal form. Personalities. They acted independently of one another. To have divided yourself on that scale and maintained it so long—“

“Has been arduous, but necessary. An honor. A gift. The girl could not lose hope. Her journey is not yet over. Please, allow me to take a familiar form so I can explain.”

It looked at me, but I shook my head. *Don’t you dare.*

“Very well, then. A familiar form for you, Time Lord.”

It shimmered, took shape, and now it was the Doctor’s turn to step back.

“The boy with the book,” I whispered, able to see him clearly for the first time. His eyes were deep and dark, his brown hair as unkempt as...

“What do you mean, the boy with the book?” the Doctor asked me. “And I told *you*, you can’t go around changing faces like that.”

“He was crying. I saw him—“

"In the *Tardis*?" the Doctor asked. When I didn't answer he pointed. "The box there. It's called the *Tardis*. And this is a face I haven't seen in there in a long time. You can stop it now. You don't need to borrow Adric to make your point."

Adric. I liked the sound of that name. "Who is he?"

"Someone that didn't get a second chance," the Doctor said softly.

"Precisely..." answered the Thing as it faded from view.

And quick at you please we were on mortal ground again, the bright sun blinding us as the train barreled on through drifts of snow that sprayed in every direction. For a long moment neither of us said anything, I was about to ask the obvious questions when he Doctor clapped his hands loudly together.

"Well, that's done and dusted. Just one problem left." He raised an eyebrow at me.

"The train won't stop," I said slowly, still wanting to understand what had just happened and realizing, sadly, that the Doctor was not going to tell me any of his stories. Not today.

"Gold star! The train won't stop," he agreed. "Simplest solution is we disconnect from the car in front of us."

"Shouldn't the engineer—"

"By now, yes, he should have. I don't think anyone's left on board. They might never have really been on board to begin with. Impressive trick. Almost had me fooled. Poor planning, though, requiring so much energy that when it couldn't keep up it derailed a little bit of reality with it. Leaving with the train in motion like that wasn't very bright either."

I did not even try to understand. "How long will the locomotive keep going?"

"Either until it runs out of fuel or reaches the end of the line, I suppose." I swallowed deeply. "We have to stop it, don't we?"

"Do we?"

I hesitated. He knew the future, didn't he? He knew what happened to the train... didn't he? "D-didn't I tell you? I mean, won't I tell you?" I was still mighty unclear about how all that worked.

"Not entirely, no," he conceded. "More fun this way, don't you think?"

If this was his idea of fun... "And you wouldn't tell me if you did."

He tapped a forefinger against the side of his nose. *That* I understood.

"All right then. What do we need to stop a train?"

"Dunno. What do we have to work with?"

I picked up the hat full of inconsequential items. Tokens from the boys. I remembered now. They'd each given me something before they left with their new families. Marbles, a Jacob's

Ladder, knucklebones, a Bilbo catcher, a deck of cards, some small toy soldiers, a small knife, a handful of seeds, several tangled moonwinders and Miss McCrimmon's jar of apple butter. Where, I wondered, had *she* gone? "What do you have?"

The Doctor whipped some sort of tool from his pocket. "Screwdriver."

It was by far the strangest screwdriver I'd ever seen, but the Doctor was the strangest man I'd ever met. It seemed only fitting.

The noise in the locomotive was horrible, but the Doctor was right. No one else seemed to be on board. That left it up to us to stop the train. The Doctor ignored the noise and smoke and the snow being cast in every direction by the cow catcher up front. On we plowed through winter's grip, chugging deeper and deeper into the Michigan wilderness, the Doctor setting his attention on dismantling what he identified as a broken valve. I asked him how many trains he had worked on and he grinned at me and told me to break the seal on the apple butter.

"What do you need me to do?"

The Doctor tipped the contents of the jar into the exposed cylinder.

"After I seal this up, I need you to open the valve to re-pressurize the system; then we haul on the hand brake, hold on for dear life, and pray. Think you can handle that?"

I wrapped my fingers around brake handle and the Doctor wrapped his hands around mine. The pressure valve sputtered and I gave it a swift kick, never letting go the brake.

"A Stitch in Time Saves Nine," I pointed out.

The Doctor grinned. "I can live with that."

I didn't know why he thought it was so funny, but I had every intention of doing exactly what he said. Remember? I really was an obedient child in those days.

"Is this going to work?" I asked, then laughed at myself. "I guess it had to have worked, right? Otherwise we wouldn't be doing it. Right?"

"Dunno," he told me, adjusting his hold on the brake handle. "Things are changing every step of the way. Small things. Should all work out in the end, but you never know. We might crash."

"We might not," I pointed out, knowing that if wishes were fishes, no one would ever go hungry again. "Doctor, tell me one thing. The boys—the real ones, I mean. Are they all right?" I had to shout to be heard over the squealing as we hauled on the brakes for all we were worth.

"Right as rain," he grinned back at me, pulling the whistle cord to announce our impending arrival. "Always wanted to do that."

"Your story isn't over yet, and neither is theirs."

Snow whispered to the ground, glistening like starlight across the open fields.

The train crew, no worse for wear after our adventure, stumbled out of the caboose after the great steel behemoth had ground to a trembling halt. Confused, they stumped along the rails in heavy coats and tall boots, inspecting the damage to the Number Nine. All considering, the train looked good and the nervous conductor congratulated the Doctor for his heroism. Another few miles and we would have reached the end of the line, quite literally. The Doctor thanked them as he hopped down, swinging me down to the ground as the porters began the struggle of unloading the *Tardis*. Alerted by the terrific noise, a farmer and his wife had arrived in a mule-drawn sleigh and offered to take us into town where they said an agent from St. Luke's, a Miss Carolyn McCrimmon, waited for me.

It was now or never. I turned to the Doctor. "You ever left anyone behind?"

He laughed a bit. I took that to mean that he had. Often.

"Anyone you wish you hadn't?"

"All the time. Well," he amended, "sometimes. And some people more than other people. Some people a lot more. But I don't beg. I'm not desperate, you know. I like being on my own. Set my own schedule. Go... where I want to."

I kept nodding. I wasn't sure which one of us he was trying to convince.

"Anyway, that was ages ago. She's probably back to working in a shop somewhere, married to that dumb lug by now."

I wasn't sure what a dumb lug was, but it didn't sound very romantic. Not one bit. I lowered my voice. "But didn't you say this was a time machine?"

"Just because it's a time machine doesn't mean I can just pop back and change things. It doesn't work that way. Not always," he said, gazing off into the distance. "There are things we can't change. Not even me."

"Like Adric?"

He didn't answer.

"Sometimes I can change things. But I don't go back for people who say no. She made her choice and I left her right there in that alley with Mickey the Idiot," the Doctor said, arms folded across his chest. He looked miserable. "Her name was Rose, too. Rose Tyler."

Oh. Oh, my. The woman in the snow. The pretty woman with the man in the long coat who found me in the coal shed and took me to the local parish and gave me the locket and told me that when my turn came to ride the train I was to write that name in the window. Every town. Every station. Every whistle stop. Someone would find me. Someone indeed. But if the Doctor left her standing in an alley, none of this would ever happen. I thought of Miss McCrimmon, the *real* Miss

McCrimmon waiting for me—for *me!* – and her speech about Second Chances.

“Maybe you could give her a second chance.” He had to. He just had to. I looked at the *Tardis*. “Maybe you should tell her it’s a time machine?”

The Doctor’s eyebrows drew slowly together as if he were deep in thought. Slowly, a pained expression worked over his soot-stained face.

“She told you, didn’t she? Rose Tyler told you to write your name so I’d see it.”

“No,” I told him, taking the locket from around my neck and handing it to him. “She told me to write this name.”

He snapped open the locket. I knew what it said. I’d looked at it so many times. *To Rose.*

“She gave this to you?”

“On the way to the parish,” I nodded. “They found me in the – “

The Doctor shushed me. “Not another word. Hasn’t happened yet.”

I blinked. Hadn’t happened? How could it not have happened. “But that was years ago!”

“ehh!” the Doctor put his hands over his ears. It was just then I noticed how big they were.

“Not for me!”

“But...?”

The Doctor jerked a thumb at the blue box.

“Oooh. Yes, I see.” But I was lying. I didn’t understand. I thought about it hard. It didn’t help.

“Doctor, why do I remember Rose and not you?”

“You wouldn’t,” he told me, sweeping me up into the sleigh with the nice people who had come to our aid. “You haven’t met me yet.”

“So you said.”

But you will. A long time from now. And you’ll tell me the story of the Number 9 bound for Michigan – but I won’t remember it, because for me it wouldn’t have happened yet. And I must have told Rose later, which means I went back for her.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that all I could do was nod. Then he looked crestfallen. “Thing is, she might not come with me. Could change everything. Funny thing, life of a time traveller. Do you understand?”

I nodded, then slowly shook my head. The nice lady had bundled me up in a blanket and given me a proper winter hat. The nice man shook the mule harness and the sleigh began to move.

“All you need to know is—“ he furrowed his brow. “Wait. What *is* your name?”

“Emily,” I told him.

“Emily Rose,” he emphasized the second name, “you’re going to have a *fantastic* life.”

I wanted to tell him the same thing, but why spoil the fun?

And do you know what? I did have a fantastic life. Oh, it wasn't all wine and song. No sir. But those are stories for another day and I can see that you're ready to be on your way. Places to go, people to see? No, you aren't being rude at all. You asked for a story and I told you one. Well, no, I didn't tell you everything, but then a girl has to have some secrets, doesn't she? That's right. Even at my age. Just know this: it was a good life and one I'm not ready to stop living yet. How's that for a pearl of wisdom?

Oh, one more thing before you go. You'll need this. See the lovely inscription inside? Yes, I suppose I will miss it, dear, but I've had it long enough, don't you think? Time it was given to a younger girl.

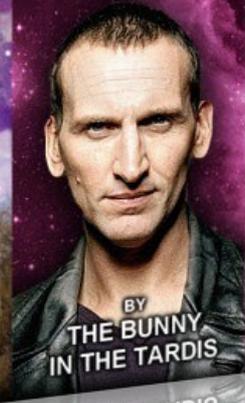
Go on now. You have so much to do and the Doctor was right. Sometimes the best stories of our lives are the ones we haven't written yet. But you already knew that, didn't you?

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DOCTOR WHO

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WHISTLE STOP



BY
THE BUNNY
IN THE TARDIS



CCPS VOL IV · DIATRIBES OF THE DEMICENTENNIAL

IN THE TARDIS
THE BUNNY
BA

CCPS VOL IV · DIATRIBES OF THE DEMICENTENNIAL