

DOUBT

Re-Incarnated

ON THE CORNER OF LONGBURROW LANE

ALEX SMITH



DOCTOR WHO: RE-INCARNATED PRESENTS

On The Corner Of Longburrow Lane

An original Doctor Who story

By Alex Smith

DOCTOR WHO: RE-INCARNATED

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On The Corner Of Longburrow Lane

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On the corner of Longburrow Lane, there isn't much at all. In fact, all of the objects of relevance on the lane can be counted on the fingers of one hand. There is; a post-box, which may have originally been red, but which has become so battered over the years that it now looks grey, with flecks of red here and there; a lamppost, that broke ten months ago and has still not been repaired, meaning that at night the street is in complete darkness; a manhole cover, in the centre of the road, which has only ever been opened by particularly mean-spirited yobs looking to cause trouble for the few cars that visit the lane; and, last but not least, a small and highly unusual clothes shop.

It is not the shop itself that is unusual. The building appears from outside to be cramped and claustrophobic, squatting low to the ground, flat-roofed and grey. There is a small sign on the front that reads '*Mrs. Miller's Clothes and Accessories – clothes sold and mended!*' in a cheery font, though the paint has long since become worn and cracked.

It is not that the contents of the shop are unusual. The shop's innards are filled with all manner of fabrics and colours, hung on long rails or folded inside cardboard boxes. Hats are hung on stands, and shoes are lined up in pairs along the back wall. A dressing mirror stands in one corner. It is a disorganised place, true, but then so are most independent clothes shops.

Nor is it that the owner of the store is unusual. Mrs. Miller is a small woman, with short, greying hair and thick rimmed spectacles. She dresses plainly, often in woollen cardigans, and shows none of the extravagance you might expect from a female clothes shop proprietor. There is a slightly dazed look in her eyes, and a hint of a bemused smile on her lips, though you would be mistaken if you took her expression to be one of eccentricity. In truth, Mrs. Miller is dazed and bemused quite regularly, and that is because of her customers. For actually, what is highly unusual about this particular clothes shop is the nature of the people who shop there.

It all started on the day she had opened up the store, some years ago. She had barely had time to flip the small 'closed' placard around so that it read 'open' in the front door before a man came striding in. A most abnormal fellow he had been, a mess of curled hair and gleaming eyes, with a wide mouth supporting a wider smile. Round his neck, he had seen fit to hang an almost preposterously long scarf, striped red and yellow and all sorts of other colours, despite the fact that it was the middle of summer when Mrs. Miller had first set up shop. He also wore a long, brown coat, which she recognised immediately to be a frock coat – though not a very new one, for it was quite battered and tatty in places.

'Why hello there,' he had said, in a deep voice that should have been imposing, but was actually quite comforting and filled with warmth. 'I was wondering if you could lend a traveller a hand. I've lost my way.'

Before Mrs. Miller could reply, he had pulled from his coat pocket a tiny slip of paper. Which he then folded out, and folded out again, and again, and on and on until he held in his hands a gargantuan sheet that she could only presume was a map. It was quite a spectacle.

'I'm looking for the house of Lungbarrow – I really should know my way around, of course, but it's been a few decades since my last trip to Gallifrey – I've been summoned, you see, very vague and

ominous, but then the high council always are, aren't they? (Mrs. Miller had nodded agreeably, though she had no idea what the man was talking about) – anyway, I saw the sign that read Lungbarrow on the street corner, and I thought “this looks promising!”, but now I'm inside I'm quite certain this *isn't* the house of Lungbarrow.'

He had peered at her over the top of his map questioningly. Mrs. Miller had paused for a few seconds to compute everything he had said, and then replied, 'I'm afraid the sign outside actually says Longburrow. As in Longburrow Lane. It's the street name.'

The man gave a deep sigh. 'Swing and a miss, as they say,' he'd said. Then he had sat down, pulling up one of the rickety wooden chairs that Mrs. Miller had dotted around the shop. 'I don't suppose you have any biscuits?'

Mrs. Miller had shaken her head. 'It's a clothes shop, I'm afraid,' she'd explained. This, however, had seemed to galvanise the man, who sat straight up, beaming.

'A clothes shop? Marvellous! Tell me, could you repair this?' he had held up the end of his long scarf, which trailed to a raggedy, torn mess of loose thread.

'I suppose so,' Mrs. Miller had said, thrown by the question. But nonetheless, she was happy to have her first proper customer – strange a man though he was – and so for the next half-hour, she had sat with this man, one hand on the sewing machine, the other on his scarf, while they chatted amiably about the weather, and biscuits, and the cost of houses these days (the man had looked a little lost there, and Mrs. Miller had wondered if perhaps he was homeless), until eventually the end of the scarf was as good as new, smooth and soft and fresh.

'Thank you most profusely,' the man had said, shaking her hand as he stood from his chair, rejuvenated scarf around his shoulders. 'Please accept this as a token of my gratitude. Now, must be off.'

And then he was gone, away through the door, scarf already trailing on the floor once again. Mrs. Miller had looked down into her right palm, where he had left a single, rounded gold coin, covered in strange symbols and markings. Later, when she had taken the coin to the bank, they told her that it was no form of currency that they'd ever seen; they did, however, notify her that it was solid gold, and as such was something of real value. Mrs. Miller never understood why the man had chosen to pay her that way, but felt that it was a good enough payment as any. Since then though, the oddities had not stopped.

She could only assume that the man had recommended her shop to his friends, as it was the only explanation for the concentrated madness all of her customers seemed to display. A man with long, auburn hair and a cravat had asked her, in an indubitably British accent, if she could find him a new chain for his pocket watch; a young fellow wearing what resembled a beige cricket suit had asked her if she sold sticks of celery, and had looked genuinely disappointed when she had told him she didn't; a tall, scrawny figure in a pin-striped suit had stuck his head through the door, shouted, 'Excuse me, when you next see the one with the umbrella, tell him not to go to Bristol last Wednesday, alright?' And run off. Utterly confused, she had passed on the message to the short, Scottish man who visited the shop a few days later, leaning as he was on a long, cream umbrella. The man had just smiled and said, 'Wonderful. Probably some trouble with the Malvarians again, I'd wager.'

The men also all acted as if they knew her, even when it was her first time meeting them. Indeed, one young man (with floppy hair that drooped over his eyes, dressed in an ancient tweed jacket) had run up to her and hugged her one day, shortly after he entered the shop, with a cry of 'Millie! It's been what, three years?!' before he was dragged away by a young woman with bright red hair who was accompanying him. Even more confusingly, none of them ever gave a name – they all credited themselves as doctors of some sort, though, so perhaps they were members of some club or consortium? Despite all of their quirks and oddities, however, she was glad of their custom, as between them they kept her in business. Indeed, some of them visited more often than they needed to – the floppy haired man had purchased a tall red fez from her, one stormy day last October, only to return a few minutes later look forlorn and hatless, asking if she had stocked up on fezzes since his last visit. When she told him he had only been gone a few minutes, he looked at his watch in surprise and said 'Really? I thought that said four *months*, not four minutes!' and hustled from the shop hurriedly. Truly the weirdest thing about all of them, however, had to be that they never aged – Mrs. Miller never saw any sign of time passing on the faces of the different men, even though they had all been visiting her shop for a period of many years, especially the man with the scarf.

After all those years of unusualities and eccentricities, on the corner of Longburrow Lane, the shop still stands, and Mrs. Miller still runs the business, making more than enough money by selling her wares to the group of strange individuals. On this particular day however, she is about to meet a new member of the doctor's little clique, and he is one of the strangest of the lot. It is around eight O'clock on a particularly dark September night, and Mrs. Miller is considering shutting up shop early and heading home. The building has been empty all day, save for herself. However, just as the concept of leaving early has fully formed itself in her mind, the front door swings open and a man steps into the low electric light. It is shadowy and black outside, so she only sees his face as he takes another step through the doorway. When she does, she sees deep, twinkling eyes, which seem to be smiling, and a slight mouth, which actually *is* smiling. His face is clean shaven; no, more than that – his skin is fresh, pure, almost as if it is brand new and he has only just put it on. His hair is dark, just a shade above jet black, and hangs down to the neck, framing his face by curving in slightly on either side. He is dressed in a suit of dark and grey, not quite the sombre colours of a funeral suit, more the cheery formality of a wedding tuxedo. The clothes have clearly not been well looked after, and the long, pronounced folds suggest the suit had been crumpled up somewhere for a long time before the man put it on. The suit is made up of a black jacket, a messily buttoned waistcoat, and sharp trousers. The only splash of colour in the man's attire is a bright red scarf, which he has folded loosely around his neck.

'Hello there, Mrs. Miller,' he says with a grin, and immediately she knows he is one of the doctors. She is certain of this, not because he knows her name – after all, her name is signposted in high letters on the sign above the door – but because he says her name with recognition and certainty, as all of the other doctors did.

'You haven't got the kettle on, by any chance, have you? I'd kill for a cuppa.' He says, in a most unusual voice, at once unerringly British and indescribably not. She smiles back at him, for of course she has just poured herself a warm mug of tea, and the kettle is still hot, with just enough water left for another cup. The doctors are always just in time for a cup of tea, and how they predict with such accuracy when she will boil the kettle is a question she has never asked, and one to which they have never given any answer.

She fetches him an earthenware mug from the musty, cramped back room, which is furnished solely with a kettle, a sink, and a microwave so old it could be written off as antique, which she never uses because it never works. She pours a few drops of milk and two teaspoons of sugar into the cup – she has found that, no matter how much or how little milk or sugar she adds, the doctors will always enjoy her tea, and compliment her on how fine each brew is. Indeed, sometimes Mrs. Miller has gone out of her way to make an extremely unappealing drink, over stewed and black, only to find the doctors delighted with it. That was one constant between the strange individuals; they shared a love of tea, and preferred to drink it the old-fashioned way, complete with a little spoon for mixing and a saucer to catch the droplets.

She is not disappointed. This Doctor throws back his tea at such a speed that it must be blistering his tongue, though he shows no discomfort. His eyes alight, and with his mouth full of tea he conveys his enjoyment through hand gestures and ‘mm mm mmmph!’s. When he is finished, he replaces the cup and saucer on her desk, and eases himself slowly onto a tiny wooden chair on the brink of collapse, which has been rickety since the day she bought it. He gives a contented sigh, and laces his fingers behind his head. He looks relaxed and at ease.

‘Nothing like a good cup of tea to start a new life, eh?’ he says, and Mrs. Miller says yes, she always feels refreshed and re-energized after a good cuppa (though in truth she feels that probably wasn’t what the Doctor meant), and then she takes the two empty mugs into the back room, where they are left to bob about in the lukewarm sink water.

‘So, Doctor,’ she says – for, over the years, she has learnt not to ask for a name, as they all answer only to Doctor – ‘What can I help you with today? Are you looking to get something repaired?’ The Doctor shakes his head, leaning forward in his chair. ‘Actually, I’ve come looking to buy something,’ he says, casting his gaze over the shop around him. He drinks in the rails and racks, the cardboard boxes, the shoes lined up in a row. Mrs. Miller wonders what unusual item the Doctor will settle on today, for in the past each doctor’s purchases have been somewhat extraordinary. Patches of rainbow coloured fabric, deerstalker hats, and a most curious pair of suspenders adorned with a question mark pattern, which one man had said were ‘more perfect than I ever could have guessed!’ before departing jubilantly with them in hand. This red-scarfed, dark-suited Doctor however, seems content to just sit and observe the shop, whereas previous doctors had walked in with a sense of purpose, like they already knew what they wanted to buy.

‘Do you know what you’re looking for?’ she asks him, after nearly a minute of silence.

‘Yes. Well, not really, no. But sort of,’ he replies, with what has to be the most unhelpful answer Mrs. Miller has ever received in all her years. He does not enlighten her further, instead continuing to stare around the shop quietly. His face is now furrowed with concentration. Then, as if reaching a decision, he stands, and begins slowly to move further into the shop. Mrs. Miller watches him carefully as he steps between the aisles of the shop, running his hands along the rails of clothing, taking in the feel of each shirt and jacket. His eyes are only slightly open, little more than blurred slits. He reaches the end of one line of hangars, turns on the spot, and calmly begins to walk back down it again, his head bowed in deep thought.

He pulls aside a long brown coat, and peers into the dark shadows behind it. He runs his fingers through a soft and straggly length of blue fabric. He reaches the far wall, where the shoes are lined up, and inspects them closely. He does all this in silence.

Then, suddenly; his eyes alight, his mouth curls upwards, his hands clap together, his voice shouts out.

'I remember!'

He leaps forward, his calm composure immediately torn aside. He jumps across the shop floor, accidentally knocking a hangar or two away from their railings as he scrambles to a tall and looming hat stand placed in one corner. He reaches up, stretches his thin arms inside his jacket, and plucks from atop the stand a plain dark trilby hat, thin brimmed and curved.

'Yes! Yes! Yes!' he cries, twirling the hat around on one finger. 'You are a *beauty!*'

He runs round to face the full length, head-to-toe dressing mirror that is propped up against the wall next to Mrs. Miller's desk. Without further prelude, he sets the hat on his head, tipping it to a jaunty angle so extreme it looks as if it might topple off again. He admires himself keenly, sweeping his head from left to right to view the hat from all angles. Mrs. Miller stays stood firmly behind her desk throughout all of this, utterly baffled by the Doctor's sudden change in character. She has held many an odd conversation with the doctors in her time (they all spoke fluent gibberish as a primary language, as far as she was concerned), but never has an individual been so excited by something they have seen in her shop.

'I was picking my new suit out,' he began to say, as if answering a question that nobody had asked. 'And I thought, I'm sure I remember there being something at Mrs. Miller's that would go perfectly with this. I just couldn't remember what that something was.' He smiles at his reflection, and turns back to face Mrs. Miller with the grin still wide across his face. 'That's the trouble with regeneration, your memories get scrambled up. But I'm here, and I remembered, and it was this hat!' he pulls the brim a little more firmly down across his fringe.

Mrs. Miller stays perplexed for just another moment, and then she breaks a weak grin; even when they are in the throes of utter madness, the happiness of the doctors is utterly infectious.

'Do you know what I am now, Mrs. Miller?' he asks. She decides to humour him.

'What are you, Doctor?'

A glint shines through in his eyes. 'I,' he almost shouts, raising his arms triumphantly, 'am ready! Ready for adventure, ready for danger, ready for anything. I'm a man with a hat, and I'm ready!'

He stays a little while longer, this strange new Doctor, as Mrs. Miller boils the kettle again and hands out another mug of steaming tea. They sit quietly for a few minutes, neither speaking, both smiling widely as they gulp down warm tea. The Doctor is happy for his new hat, which he continually touches and tweaks; Mrs. Miller is not entirely sure why she is happy, but she is happy nonetheless, and by god she'll smile about it.

'Well, time I was gone,' he says eventually, draining his cup and placing it back in its saucer. 'I've got a mystery to solve, and there's no time to waste.'

Mrs. Miller stands with him, as they both get up from their seats at her desk, and walk to the doorway, the only exit from the shop. It is even darker outside than it was when the Doctor entered, and clouds high above are obscuring the stars. The lane is in almost absolute darkness, the dull light from Mrs. Miller's electric bulbs barely penetrating the shadowy tendrils of night.

'Who are you, Doctor?' she asks on a whim. 'You and your friends, your doctor's club. Who are you, really?'

The Doctor shrugs as he pulls his jacket a little tighter around himself. 'Oh, I'd say we're just a bunch of old eccentrics, Mrs. Miller. Wandering about, getting into trouble and eating all the sandwiches at buffets.' There's that glint in his eyes again, and she knows he isn't telling her the truth. Really, it

doesn't matter to her; she's happy to accept that they have secrets, and that maybe someday they will be ready to share them.

They stand on the threshold of the doorway, and he shakes her hand. When their fingers break contact, she feels a tiny piece of card pressed into her palm. The same way the doctors always pay her, leaving something in her hand after a handshake. Why they couldn't pay her in pounds and pennies was beyond her, but they always left something valuable. Or interesting. Mostly interesting. 'What's the mystery then, Doctor? At least you could tell me that,' she says, though she doesn't expect him to tell her a thing. To her surprise, though, he pauses as he steps to leave the shop, turning back to her and away from the harsh outside. His face is quiet now, his mouth straight. 'It's... Complicated.' He pauses. 'I was dying. Properly, finally, dying. And then... I woke up, and I was fine.' He pauses again, as something sticks in his throat. 'The mystery is: Why am I still alive?'

And with those words, he turns and walks out into the darkness, the shadows swallowing him up. Mrs. Miller stands, stunned, and then calls out after him,

'And you need a hat to solve that?'

'You can't solve a mystery without a snazzy suit!' he shouts back, looking over his shoulder, a ghost of a smile returning to his lips. Then he is lost from sight completely, and Mrs. Miller is alone at the door of her shop, staring out into the blackness. After a few long seconds, she unfurls her right hand and looks down at the small slip that is sat there. It's a crumpled, battered lottery ticket, dated this Saturday.

'Doctors,' she says, under her breath. 'Bloody madmen, the lot of them.'

But there is a ghost of a smile on her lips, too.

The Doctor walks swiftly through the night. He passes round the corner of the lane, into an alleyway, and finds his path blocked by something tall and blue. He pats the front of it affectionately.

'Right, old girl,' he says, 'Let's go and solve us a mystery.'

And he mutters something else as well, under his breath, his words snatched away by a faint wind. So, even if there had been somebody else, standing there in the alleyway, the Doctor and the Doctor alone would have heard himself say, 'Or maybe go and have an adventure or two first.' And then he produces something small from his pocket, silver and shiny, and with it he opens up the old, blue box, and strolls inside.

For an ordinary human being to describe the room into which the Doctor steps would be completely impossible. Not only would the contradictory nature of the space confound most people into silence, but the vast and subtle complexities of the room are so numerous that no human eye, no matter how keen, could perceive them all. Fortunately, it is not a human who perceives the room at this present moment in time. It is the Doctor, and he is so much more than human; the paradoxical existence of his machine does not faze him, and the vast and subtle complexities are as clear to him as if presented through a magnifying glass. It is through his eyes, then, that we see one of the oldest and most beautiful things in the known universe.

At the centre of the room stands a huge pillar, translucent, and filled with a sort of eerie liquid that ebbs and flows, up and down like a lava lamp. At the base of the pillar is where the console stands, and so that is where the Doctor stands too; for this is the most important part of the room. It fits round the pillar in six segments, that seamlessly merge together to form a circular base, upon which dozens and dozens of controls are fitted. Levers, buttons, dials, gauges, a typewriter, a telephone, an alarm clock. In abstract, the console would look like a stall at some bizarre second-hand market. In its proper place, however, it looks like a finely crafted machine, capable of anything and ready for everything.

The rest of the room seems constructed around this central dais. A metal grille floor supports the pillar, spreading out from underneath it in a wide circle, the main floor of the machine. It is on this metal grille that the Doctor stands, as he leans against the console, deep in thought or maybe just tired. He closes his eyes, just for a few moments. The sounds of his breaths echo upwards through the room, all the way to the high ceiling, a mess of wires and cabling that obscures the true roof. Down from this ceiling stretch the walls of the room, which curve slowly down to encompass the floor which the Doctor stands on. There are two ways out; a door, inconspicuously embedded into one wall, with a small metal walkway connecting it to the central platform; and a steep spiral staircase, that starts on the far side of the console, and slowly curves down into the darkness beneath the metal grille floor. Not even the Doctor is entirely sure what is down there, for nobody, not even he, has ever fully explored this brilliant box.

That is what the Doctor's machine is. A blue box, maybe two meters high or slightly more, containing within itself a magical room. He calls it a TARDIS, and it is most definitely bigger on the inside.

On the corner of Longburrow Lane, there isn't much at all. However, if you were to count all of the objects of relevance on the street, on this particular night, you would need both the fingers of one hand, and the thumb. There is; the post-box, grey and flecked with red; the lamp post, still broken and unrepaired; the manhole cover, rarely lifted; Mrs. Millers Clothes and Accessories store; and finally, in an alleyway around the back of the shop, there is a blue box, higher than the post-box but shorter than the lamppost, panelled and wooden. There is a sign on the door, but it is too dark to make out what it says. A heavy lamp sits atop the box's head. The box is ancient, and impossible, and real.

On the corner of Longburrow Lane, for a moment, there is light. But it does not come from the broken lamppost, nor from the dull electric bulbs of Mrs. Miller's shop. It comes instead from the lantern above the box, which flashes and fades and flickers as, ever so slowly, the box fades from existence, slowly easing itself out of reality and off into the unknown.

Coming next month to
Doctor Who: Re-Incarnated...

Twister

By Mark Lee

'Only fools run for the stars. And trust me, it never ends very well.'

Mary-Lou, a lonely girl from Rinetown Place, is about to be thrown into adventure, as she tries to stop a frightened alien from adapting to planet Earth. Can the Doctor save the day with a girl who's never even dreamed of the stars?

October 1st 2011



'Do you know what you're looking for?'

Mrs. Miller's Clothes and Accessories is a quaint little shop at the back end of nowhere, but one customer in particular is very keen on coming back. When he returns one dark September night looking for something he can't quite remember, it will be the start his latest – and most exciting – life yet. There's a mystery to be solved, but what is it?

