

CLARA
OSWALD
THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES

A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE



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CLARA OSWALD

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CONTENT WARNING

The following story contains references to ??? and ??. Reader discretion is advised.

"Dwell on the beauty of life. Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them."

– Marcus Aurelius

PROLOGUE

There was no one else on Westminster Bridge that night, for few dared brave the storm. Like a force of reckoning it had descended upon London, draping the city in a thick veil. The ashen sky growled as if the clouds concealed a great beast that roamed out of sight, hunting those desperate or foolish enough to venture from the sanctuary of their homes. The stranger on the bridge gripped the rim of their hood against the gale while bitter raindrops struck their face. Lightning framed the Houses of Parliament and Elizabeth Tower as shadows waiting across the Thames, passing silent judgement on a woman out of time.

Clara ignored them, finding it preferable to stare at the pavement as she walked. The cold air caught in her lungs; a pungent infusion of coal smoke, manure and foul river water. *Lovely.* In hindsight, perhaps she should have just parked right outside. Of course, that wouldn't have given her time to think about what she was going to say when she got there.

... Yeah, she really should have parked right outside. Could've at least spared her the miserable stroll down memory bridge. What would she say? She pictured their puzzled expressions, the exchanged looks of concern, the unspoken words hovering between them like irksome flies. She knew the questions they'd have, and had no desire to answer them. Then there was the worst one of all to consider, no-doubt the first thing they'd ask:

"Where is the Doctor?"

It was this question that had led Clara to leave the TARDIS a fifteen-minute trek from her destination. She drifted over to the balustrade and watched the waters churn amber beneath the bridge's Gothic lanterns. Maybe Ashil— Me was right, maybe coming here had been a mistake. Not that she'd admit it.

She crossed over to the other side and proceeded up Victoria Embankment, a cortège of lampposts guiding her through the haze. The trees running parallel

to her swayed and creaked ominously; one had already fallen, its splintered remains littering the pathway. Voices hollered at the riverside, their owners trying in vain to steady the cargo on their steamboats amid the blare of distant foghorns. Further along a few valiant carriages clattered past. A peal of thunder resounded; the horses champed the bit and tossed their heads in alarm before yielding under their driver's whips. They paid no notice to Clara.



When the screaming started – shrill enough to pierce through the storm – Clara resisted the urge to roll her eyes. *Really? Now?* Could she not set foot anywhere without this happening? She hesitated: simply being here was a risk, getting involved was a luxury she couldn't afford. Not anymore. *Keep walking, keep walking...* That was all she could do, there wasn't another option. *Just keep walking...*

The screaming persisted; a siren in the tempest. Clara closed her eyes. Then, with a heavy sigh, she headed towards it.

A house was burning. Flames reared defiant against the downpour from the roof, coalescing into impressive plumes that bled into the London smog. Onlookers had amassed around the foot of the building, but their attention was not on the fire. Hunched before them was a sobbing woman wrapped in a shroud. A policeman squatted beside her.

“Mrs Deering, please,” he said softly. “Come into the warm. It’s no good you being out in this weather.”

The woman raised her stricken face. She couldn’t have been much older than Clara – younger, even – yet her appearance was haggard; her cheeks blotchy, her gaze unfocused. “You ain’t seen what I’ve seen,” she rasped. “It’s like they said in them sermons...”

“You’ve had a fright –”

"Not three days he's been in the ground. Facing eastward like they told me. But I must've done something wrong," she pointed a shaking finger at the house. "It was watching me, aflame..."

A man with mutton chops wearing a stained overcoat spoke up, "That's old Tearson's place, God rest his soul. No one's lived there in near a dozen years. You needn't worry missus. The Brigade'll be here soon, if the rain don't put it out first."

Mrs Deering wasn't listening. "Its form was as a child's..." Her lip trembled. "But no child has such a face."

Hanging back, Clara removed her hood and brushed her sodden hair from her forehead as she scanned the windows. Many were boarded up, others had panes missing. True enough the place looked long abandoned. There was a glint of... *something* protruding from near the chimney pipes, obscured by the blaze but distinguishable. Tracing her view downwards, she caught a flicker of movement in the topmost storey. Her stomach lurched.

It was a hand, grasping helplessly at a window latch. Someone *was* in there.

Nobody else had noticed; they were still preoccupied with Mrs Deering. Taking her chance, Clara skirted around them and hurried to the door. Wiping off the pair of sunglasses she had stowed in her coat pocket, she popped them on and focused on the lock, which – after a brief whirring – opened with a satisfying *click*.

The house was just as dilapidated on the inside. It was unfurnished save for a fallen bookcase, the plaster was cracked and the wallpaper peeling. Dust coated everything in sight, but there was no disturbance to indicate that anyone else had entered prior. Clara didn't have time to dwell on this detail. The fire hadn't yet reached the stairs, allowing her passage to the upper floors. She hoped she wasn't too late.

Dense smoke flooded the second landing, forcing her to navigate her way through at a crouch. It wasn't long before an orange glow penetrated it, growing

more fervent as she drew nearer. Coughing, She called out. No response. The stifling air bore down upon her. It was all she could do not to choke on the fumes, the acrid taste of soot stung the back of her throat. Her eyes watered and her skin pricked as the moisture evaporated from it. How much longer could she hold her breath in this?

Oh. A dangerous thought landed. You don't need it.

Tentatively, Clara exhaled. Though her every instinct objected, she didn't breathe in again. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, like being suffocated without the passing out and dying part. Still, better than the alternative of actually asphyxiating.

She made it to the loft. Her view cleared a little as the smoke dissipated, and the source of the fire became evident. The object she'd spotted from the exterior wasn't part of the structure, it had smashed clean through the roof. Sparking and hissing, it was no larger than a car, and could have been mistaken for one if it weren't for the lack of wheels. In any case, it didn't belong in the late nineteenth century. The capsule's hull – as best as she could describe it – had split open, spouting steam in a steady torrent. Not far from it someone was huddled in a corner, head buried in their knees, arms shielding their small frame. A child.

Clara stepped forward and almost lost her balance. The fire had weakened the floorboards, leaving a smoldering gap in the middle of the room. She rolled up her sleeves. Moving to the edge, she inched along a rafter, using the wall behind to steady herself. It groaned under her weight. The child looked up, revealing a startled face charred with soot and streaked by tear tracks. Peering out from under a mop of dirty hair were two wide, frightened eyes.

"Hey, it's alright, I'm here to help," said Clara, more hoarsely than she'd anticipated. "I need you to grab my hand, okay?"

She reached out. The child stared at her palm and backed into the corner.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

The capsule shifted, driving itself deeper into the floor. It wouldn't hold for much

longer. Changing tactic, Clara adopted a more conversational tone. “What’s your name?”

The child wiped their nose, confused. “Why?” they said.

“When you’re escaping from a burning building it’s always nice to know who you’re escaping with. I’m Clara, by the way.”

“Ser— Seren.”

“Well then Seren, I know you’re scared. I’ll let you in on a secret, so am I.” She glanced at the crackling flames below her. *But not of this.* “But there’s only one way out of here, so—”

“It’s too far!” Seren interrupted, their voice quavering with despair. “I don’t think I can make it.”

“You can, and you will. You know why?”

Seren shook their head.

“Because you’re gonna choose right here, right now, to live. That’s all fear really is, our bodies reminding us that we want to survive. And once you realise that, you can do anything.” She lent out farther. “Come on, let’s be brave together.”

Seconds passed. Wind whistled through the draughty shutters as the storm raged on outside. Embers and ash floated in the space between them, producing the effect of time slowing. Cautiously, Seren got to their feet and approached, treading across the creaking planks.

“There you go, see?” said Clara. “There’s nothing to worry abou—”

A sickening crack. What remained of the floor gave way in a crash of cinders and fractured wood.

With a terrified cry, Seren leapt. Clara caught them just in time, the force

knocking them both backwards onto the opposite ledge. She used her body to protect them from searing debris sent up by the collapse, the gust of heat scorching her exposed forearms. Seren clung to her waist, whimpering. Clara hugged them back. “I’ve got you, it’s okay.” She watched the fallen capsule erupt in the inferno, joined by the broken beam she’d been stood on a moment before. “You’re okay.”



Back on solid ground, Clara led Seren away from the house to an alley where they wouldn’t be seen or overheard.

“You came to this planet in that ship, didn’t you?” she surmised, getting down at their level. “An escape pod, judging by the size. But you lost control in the storm, and it crash landed?”

Seren nodded.

“What were you running from?”

They squeezed their eyes shut and didn’t reply.

Clara decided not to press that particular subject further. “Okay, where were you running to?”

“The safe place.” Seren whispered.

“Safe place?” Clara repeated. “As in, here – in London? Where –”

She broke off. A chill stole over her that had nothing to do with the frigid rain. Big Ben tolled in the background, heralding the arrival of midnight.

Composing herself, she said, “Listen, I’m not really from around here either – well, technically not. I was on my way to see some friends, it’ll be safe there.”

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They walked hand-in-hand through the streets, lamplight rippling on the paving stones. Clara's skirt stuck to the back of her legs and her damp jumper itched; she'd be more dry if she had jumped headfirst into the Thames. Seren wore her oversized coat, zipped to the top with the hood pulled up so as to hide their alien attire. The odd passerby would regard the two of them with pity, or else make an effort to look everywhere but in their general direction. Clara shot each of the latter with a glare that would make a Dalek wither. She supposed the two of them must have resembled an oddly-dressed pauper and her ailing son on a fruitless search for refuge.

A train rattled overhead as they passed under the station bridge to Ludgate Hill. Seren startled at the engine's whistle, looking to Clara for reassurance. She couldn't help but smile, squeezing their hand in response. The silhouette of St Paul's was wreathed in fog when they turned from it into a narrow lane, choir song echoing from it with such conviction one might believe a hymn could drown out thunder. Clara found herself stopping outside a rundown publisher's firm – the faded letters of 'Whittaker and Co.' emblazoned upon it – to read the sign to the adjacent street: Paternoster Row.

Why was she so anxious? Granted, the prospect of having to recount recent events was not an appealing one, but it couldn't be more daunting than explaining how she'd wound up in the oesophagus of a Tyrannosaurus Rex with a delirious old Scottish bloke, surely?

... No. This was definitely worse.

Thinking it best to be discreet, she came by the rear entrance to 13 Paternoster Row. She and Seren took cover behind a stone wall and surveyed the residence's muddy courtyard. It was just as she remembered it, bordered by tarnished granite buildings with their blue wooden doors. Of their own accord Clara's eyes rested on a straw-strewn spot of the courtyard, where something should have been. Her hand went to the chain around her neck and clasped the cool metal of the key that hung from it until it hurt.

Nearby someone coughed. Brought back to Earth, she hastily tucked the chain beneath her collar. A moustached man in a tweed jacket dithered at the back

doorstep, twiddling a bowler hat in his fingers. He appeared to be in the midst of an internal debate. Meanwhile through the house's mullioned windows Madame Vastra and Jenny were immersed in some style of waltz, accompanied by the throaty melody of a phonograph. Both dressed in sumptuous gowns after the period fashion, the two bobbed in and out of view in time with the music. Vastra led the dance, twirling Jenny expertly before pulling her in close. They shared a passionate kiss.

Making up his mind, the man rapped on the door. Inside the dancing couple froze. From her vantage point Clara could just make out Vastra's annoyed hiss, "Where is Strax?"

"He's upstairs, polishing his proton blaster," replied Jenny in an undertone. "He insisted that he not be disturbed – something about 'manning the barracks.' I think the storm's set 'im off."

Vastra huffed. She broke from their embrace and stalked from the room, shortly appearing in the doorway to greet the man waiting. The threshold cast a welcoming shaft of light into the gloom.

"Good evening Madam Vastra," the man said with a polite nod. "I tried the front, but the Turkish fell— Mr Strax, he—"

"Oh I will be dealing with him, don't you worry." Vastra's smile was taught. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure, Inspector Gregson?" It was quite clear that she did not consider his arrival unexpected nor much of a pleasure.

"Sorry to trouble you at this hour, Ma'am. We've had reports of the peculiar, you know how it is." The Inspector gave a nervous little laugh, then seemed to think better of it. "Mrs Deering's been in a right state, ranting and raving about a demon child running rampant 'round Wych Street. Tearson's bookseller's set ablaze as well, her wailing it's an act of divine retribution." He added under his breath, leaning in, "You know, the barber's widow, bit of an odd one. Sargent Porter swore he could smell whiskey on her."

"I am not wont to dismiss the account of someone in distress, however

outlandish their claims may be,” said Vastra in the manner of one choosing their words with care. “But... perhaps the witness in question is not the most reliable, given their present condition?”

“You’re quite right of course,” agreed the Inspector, as though he’d thought this all along. “I suppose it’s to be expected, a woman in her position. Prone to hysterics, fits of the fancies. She shouldn’t be out in public if you ask me, it’s not decent.”

Vastra scrutinised him coldly. “But I did *not* ask you, Inspector. Eleanor Deering has recently suffered a terrible bereavement. I’d admonish your lack of humanity, but humanity as it pertains to your species’ nature counts for little in my experience. She is to be treated with the utmost kindness, not shunned and demeaned for the supposed crime of losing her husband. Loss is the most relentless of monsters, one that haunts us all.”

The Inspector blanched. “My sincere apologies, I spoke in poor taste.” He bowed his head.

Fortunately for him, this was enough to mollify a distracted Vastra, whose gaze skated over where Clara and Seren were lurking after the latter had let out a loud sneeze. Clara withdrew behind their cover, pulling Seren with her and praying neither of them had been spotted. To her relief, Vastra addressed the Inspector again, having apparently not registered anything suspect, “Yes, well, I shall tend to the matter in the morning, after this dreadful storm has subsided. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have important business I must attend to.”

“Right you are Ma’am. I’ll be on my way then.” The Inspector – also relieved by the sound of it – donned and tipped his bowler hat then made to leave. “Oh – and Merry Christmas to you and your...” – he cleared his throat – “companion.”

Vastra returned the courtesy and closed the door. Once the Inspector had trudged away Clara took his vacated place, Seren still holding on to her. She lifted her free fist to the wood – it was shaking, why was it shaking? Music had resumed in the living room. She heard laughter.

Jaw clenched, her arm fell by her side.

After taking a moment to steel herself, she turned to Seren and gently placed her hands on their shoulders. “Seren, I am so, so sorry, but I have to go.”

The same fearful expression met those words. “Why?” they whispered.

“I need you to knock on this door, like that man did,” Clara continued with difficulty. “When someone comes, tell them... tell them the Doctor sent you. Tell them he said they’d help you... Don’t mention me.”

“Who’s the Doctor?”

Clara blinked back the rain – was it the rain? “That name will always find you help, wherever you are. Never forget that.”

“Can’t I come with you?”

“I wish you could, I really do, but...” Clara wished she were back in the burning attic; being in mortal peril was so much easier. “I’m...” *Dead*. “I’m not who you need right now. Please, do this for me. I promise you’ll be fine.”

Seren didn’t protest. Instead, to Clara’s surprise, they threw their arms around her. “I hope you’ll be fine, too,” they said. Clara was relieved they couldn’t see her face. “Thank you.”

While Clara kept watch from her position by the wall, Seren did as she had instructed. They cast a wary glance towards her. Clara nodded in encouragement.

“Jenny dear, would you get that?” called Vastra. “And kindly remind the Inspector that I have made my intentions clear. I fear I may lose my patience if I go again.”

“May I suggest an acid-based deterrent?” Interjected a familiar voice.

“Not now Strax! However I would like to have a word with you...”

Jenny, expecting someone several feet taller, didn’t notice Seren when she first opened the door. She couldn’t hide her bewilderment when she found, peeking

up at her, the little figure still enveloped cloak-like in Clara's anorak. She bent down to listen to Seren's message, murmured something in response, then put a comforting arm around them and led them indoors.

Clara didn't stick around. They'd take care of Seren, better than she ever could. Allowing herself a final glimpse of the courtyard, she set off into the dreary night alone.



The weather had eased by the time Clara reached the TARDIS, which was tucked among some shabby warehouses around the back of Waterloo Station. Me was leant against a wall perusing a copy of The London Evening Standard in the shelter of an awning. Spotting Clara, she folded it up and tossed it onto the ground.

Clara nodded to the discarded paper. "Read anything interesting?"

Me took in Clara's drenched clothes and dripping hair. "Not especially, I was merely trying to jog my memory. I believe around this time I was dealing with an outbreak of Kestila in my community. Though of course, I can only speculate."

"Just as well you didn't come with me then," Clara said. "Running into yourself really isn't as fun as it sounds."

"How did it go?"

Clara forced herself to make eye contact. "No one home. They must have been out on a case or something."

A locomotive screeched on its rails on the platform above them. "Do you want to try another time?" Me asked.

"Nah, probably wasn't worth it anyway," said Clara brightly, the effect belied somewhat by an involuntary sniff. "Let's get going."

Me stayed where she was. "What happened to your coat?"

Clara flushed and started wringing out her hair as though it might remove the evidence. "Oh, um, someone needed it more than me."

She had the distinct impression that Me was on the cusp of saying something, but the immortal conceded to enter the TARDIS. Alone once more, Clara allowed herself to relax. She examined her arms, running her fingers along skin miraculously unmarred by burns or blisters from the fire, then gazed up at the overcast sky, letting the drizzle fall on her face.

Whatever happened, she wasn't coming back to London. Never again.

The clouds parted. A waning moon gazed back at her, surrounded by a field of endless stars.

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