

A STONE'S THROW

by JOHN SALWAY

PART ONE

Title image: Ripples by Veggier15.

A VERY LONG TIME AGO, there lived a wise man with his two daughters. Their wooden home was modest and small; but the daughters did not mind, for it overlooked a vast, beautiful pond, and every day, once their chores were complete, they would play on its banks while their father cooked their supper.

The younger of the sisters had a favourite spot on the eastern side of the pond, for this was where the water lilies grew. These green and pink flowers hovered on the water like little saucers, and were close enough to the bank that she could grab them with her butterfly net, and wear the pretty blooms in her hair.

One day, while fishing for lilies, she could see her sister on the other side of the pond. The older girl was picking up stones from the rocky shore and skimming them across the clear surface of the water. Deciding that she wanted to try as well, the little girl picked up a small, glimmering pebble, and threw it towards the water.

The stone did not glide over the pool as her sister's had done, but sank to the bottom of the shallow waters with a loud plop. As it broke the liquid's fragile skin, it created large ripples, pushing the surrounding water lilies away from the shore's edge.

The little girl began to cry, for the precious water lilies that she loved were now drifting hopelessly out of her reach. She ran back home to her father, who saw her distress, got up from his chair, and asked her what the problem was.

'I want the lilies back!' she sobbed. 'I threw a stone into the water and now they're gone!'

'Well,' her father replied calmly. 'If you take the stone back out of the water, perhaps the lilies will return.'

He walked with her back to the eastern shore, and eagerly she strode out into the pond, bent down to collect the pebble, and waded back onto dry land. But as she looked out onto the pond's surface, she saw that her actions had been in vain. She had created even more vibrations in the water, moving her goal further still out of her reach.

She looked up towards her father, confused. He gave her a kind smile in reply.

'Now let this be a lesson to you, young girl. Some doings can never be undone. And every pebble we throw will have a consequence, though we may not realise it at the time. We must learn to anticipate such things, and try not to disturb the way that things should be!'

The little girl promised her father that she would never throw stones into the pond again, but he wondered whether she had truly understood his lesson. Surely another day would come when his daughter would ask him to right another of her mistakes.

Indeed, it seemed almost inevitable.

Old Gallifreyan fable

'Well, Doctor, I think it looks safe enough.'

'Are you sure? The Black Guardian can be very cunning when he wants to be.'

The Doctor and Romana stuck their heads round the door of the blue police box that passed as their home, scanning their surroundings for any obvious signs of danger.

The TARDIS, which passed as that blue police box had landed in what appeared to be a small study, that might have been found in Edwardian England. On one side of the room sat a large desk and accompanying chair. Next to that towered a row of bookshelves, each packed with hardbound, dusty tomes. A single doorway on the opposite wall appeared to lead out of the room.

'You're right, Romana. It looks fairly innocuous.'

'Yes, almost boringly so.'

'There's nothing for it, then, but to head out and have a bit of a nose round, hmm?'

The travellers left the safety of the TARDIS's doorway, and closed the ship behind them. They were both immediately drawn towards the room's exit, hungry for more precise knowledge of their whereabouts and whenabouts.

'After you, Romana, ladies first,' gestured the Doctor, performing a minor bow.

'Oh, thank you.' Romana, surprised by the Doctor's sudden turn towards decorum, grabbed the door handle and jiggled it about unsuccessfully. 'Oh,' she sighed with resignation, 'it's locked.'

'I *know*. Isn't it marvellous?'

'I fail to see quite what's so marvellous about it.'

'A locked door is *always* three times as interesting as an unlocked one. There could be anything on the other side of that!'

Romana frowned. Surely, she thought, the same could be said of any door, locked or otherwise, but she knew further discussion of this point would be quite futile. 'I suppose that means you'll be opening it, then?'

'Well, it would be *rather* difficult to get through otherwise. Pass me my sonic

screwdriver.’

‘I haven’t got your sonic screwdriver! Isn’t it in your coat somewhere?’

‘Oh, probably. I suppose I’ll have to look.’

The Doctor began emptying his pockets onto a small mahogany table to the right of the door. One by one, he slowly drew out a trove of trinkets. Among them were three train tickets to Brighton, dated 1950; a small, tea-stained spoon; the dried husk of a well-eaten pear; two conkers tied to impossibly long strings; and a small round stone which promptly rolled away from the unlikely collection and onto the floor. Romana found herself imagining the objects stored in a large glass case at a particularly eccentric and shabby museum.

Finally, the Doctor drew his trusty sonic screwdriver from his pocket, and flashed Romana a toothy grin. However, before he could thrust the trusted device towards beckoning door, she gave a pointed look towards the pile of detritus he had accumulated on the poor, unsuspecting table. Sheepishly, he began placing the objects back into his coat pockets.

‘Now then!’ he boomed, finishing his task, ‘the door!’ He spun around with an air of theatricality, swirling his scarf around his neck, before presenting the sonic screwdriver to the sealed gateway. As the device made its familiar whir, a loud clunk emanated from its target. The Doctor twisted the handle of the now-unlocked door, and yanked it open, revealing a corridor leading further into the house.

‘Right, well, off we go!’ he cheerfully yelped, gesturing for Romana to follow him into the passageway beyond, who shook her head in slight exasperation, but followed nonetheless.

As the Doctor and Romana strode confidently through the doorway, and towards a new adventure, neither had noticed the small, round stone that still lay on the room’s floor, for the Doctor had forgotten to return it to his pocket. For a few days, it remained there, unmoved and neglected underneath the solemn table. It was still there when the Doctor and Romana breathlessly returned to the TARDIS, cheerfully going over the highlights of their recent escapades, as they hurried back into their blue box.

It was only after the TARDIS had left that the pebble began to tremble and vibrate, creating tiny, but ever growing ripples in the air around it. Ripples that could never be undone.

TO BE CONTINUED