**Busman's Holiday - I**

Graham O’Brien sat back in the most comfortable bus seat he had ever known. It was as wide as a good drawing room armchair with thick, padded armrests and a comfy footrest in plenty of space for a tall man to stretch out and settle down for the long haul.

National Express could certainly learn something from this lot.

Of course, this was another planet, Carmoia in the Capriconus sector, and almost certainly some future century. National Express, Stagecoach, even Sheffield City Transport were a long way behind – if they were still in existence at all.

Was Earth still there at all in this time? With all the doom and gloom about the environment and climate change, and North Korea and Iran making noises about their nukes, it didn’t seem like Earth had much future.

“Graham, don’t worry. Earth makes it through all those problems,” The Doctor whispered from the seat beside him. Even on another planet bus seats were in pairs with an aisle down the middle. It seemed to be a universal design.

“First, how did you know what I was thinking,” Graham said. “And second... How do you know about Earth's future?”

“First, I wasn’t snooping or anything. Worried thoughts like that kind of ‘leak’ into nearby telepathic minds. They're hard to miss. Second, I’ve visited Earth's future many times. I had a wife from the fiftieth century for quite a long time. “

“A wife....” Graham smiled as he looked at The Doctor’s pretty blonde features. It always caused a moment or two of rethinking when she dropped reminders of her previous life as a man.

“Stuff like that doesn’t shock me,” Graham told her, deciding not to be drawn into the questions. “I was married to a black woman. That was ‘unnatural' enough for a lot of people. But... When you say ‘had’....”

The Doctor picked up that question telepathically. It didn’t need saying, and a simple nod was enough of a reply for a widower to understand.

“Some things are the same in any century or any planet,” Graham admitted.

The Doctor started to say something else, but the tour guide at the front of the super-fast, super-comfortable bus made one of the announcements she was paid to make from time to time.

“Ladies, gentlemen, undecided, variforms and other... We will be shortly arriving at the famous Cloud Falls where picnic lunches will be provided during a stay of two solar hours.”

“Cloud falls!” Yasmin commented from her seat across the aisle. “Do the clouds do the falling or what? “

“Wait and see,” The Doctor told her. “It is well worth it. Trust me.”

“We do,” Ryan commented. “That’s why we knew a bus tour you suggested wouldn’t be boring. And it hasn’t been. Yesterday, when the bus folded up its wheels and turned into a hovercraft to cross that purple coloured sea was amazing. “

“Magenta,” Yasmin corrected him. “It was the Magenta Sea. Not Purple.”

“I meant that the bus changing to hover mode was amazing,” Ryan pointed out. “The colour of the sea wasn’t a big deal. We've got a Red and a Black Sea on Earth. And a Coral Sea. And a Dead Sea. That's clever enough.”

“There was a Magenta war... Between France and Austria,” Graham commented. Ryan and Yasmin looked at him curiously. “It was a question on Pointless,” he admitted.

“This is why I travel with humans,” The Doctor said with a grin. “The COLOURFUL conversation. “

The groans at the obvious pun were what The Doctor was aiming for. The good humour kept them going until the bus came to a stop in the coach park next to the interpretive centre and gift shop in front of the Cloud Falls.

The chief complaint about ‘Interpretive Centres’ around the Galaxy has always been that they obscured the very site of interest they were interpreting.

But that couldn’t be said about the centre at Cloud Falls. The Shanghai Tower with the Burj Khalifa, Canary Wharf and the Gherkin all on top of each other couldn’t obscure that natural wonder, thought Yasmin and Ryan, missing out on a few of Earth’s tallest buildings, but still managing a fascinating imagery.

Graham was mentally measuring it against a dozen or so Preston Bus Stations piled on top of each other.

The Doctor knew exactly how big it was, in yards, metres and Caramoian micons, the unit of measurement on this planet that was a very difficult measurement to convert, ending up as something like fifty-five-point-three-six-eight of a metre. Even a Time Lord mind wasn’t going to attempt conversion to imperial measurements.

Suffice to say, the Falls were so high the precipice they tumbled over was hidden by permanent cloud banks – hence the name. They were so wide that ordinary humanoid vision couldn’t see that far.

Time Lords COULD see that far, but The Doctor didn’t bother trying. She remembered, without any regret or sadness, taking three women who had counted as special in three different lives, to see the top of the falls by TARDIS – the only safe transport in a place where updrafts and crosswinds had killed many an adventurer in balloons, microlites and hang-gliders.

River Song had been the last of the three. Being safe behind a gravity field had chafed at her spectacularly reckless mind. She had to have a bungee rope and a drop down until her hair dipped into the raging torrent. Her rapturous cries at such an experience were one of countless reasons why she was, at one and the same time, so easy and so hard to love.

Ryan and Yasmin were experiencing that rapture in a ‘safe’ way. Wearing bright red ponchos handed out by an assistant they stepped onto a glass walkway with handholds either side that passed straight under the falls and became invisible to onlookers for more than a quarter of a mile – or any given measurement of length. By this point the water was almost entirely converted to vapour and passing through it was like entering an ice cold steam room.

There was an old path cut into the rock itself, but too many people had slipped off the continuously wet surface, so the authorities had built the safe walkway.

The Doctor had been there before Health and Safety existed, before bus tours had ever crossed the Magenta Sea, bringing the masses to the Cloud Falls. It was in his ninth incarnation when he was slowly getting over the tight knot of held-in rage and grief about the Time War - that time between meeting Jack Harkness in Blitz-ravaged London and what should have been the final confrontation with the Daleks. The only problem was working out who the romance was with – Rose or Jack. The overtures had been coming from both directions!

Again, there were no regrets. Not now. The Doctor just smiled and looked up at the Falls. Much further up, the water was still rushing water, and in a certain place not accessible to anyone without a TARDIS, was a cave where peace and privacy were assured….

The Doctor stopped her thoughts at that point. There were still no regrets, but those memories were a bit like the part of Cloud Falls that was covered by the clouds. It was enough to know they were there without looking too deeply for them. As she once told somebody else, ‘they sleep in my mind’.

Graham’s memories didn’t sleep in his mind. There hadn’t been quite long enough, yet. But he was able to recall a happy time without regret.

Wain Wath Force was nothing compared to Cloud Falls. Even the rather impressive limestone cliffs of Cotterby Scar only measured up to four or five Preston Bus Stations. But Cloud Falls was a place where couples held hands, and the memory unfold"ed of holding hands with Grace by that gentle landmark in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. It was one of many day and evenings ‘out’ that younger couples would call ‘dates’, though he and Grace never really used that word. They had held hands by Wain Wath Force and thought about the future with unexpected optimism.

"Grace would have loved this place," he said out loud. He hadn’t intended to, but it came out unbidden.

The only person who heard was The Doctor. She smiled and nodded and again telepathy wasn’t needed to know she understood.

Exhilarated by their walk through the mist of Cloud Falls, Ryan and Yasmin returned their ponchos and walked back to the dry viewing point where The Doctor and Graham were waiting.

“Malham Cove,” Ryan said.

“What about it?” Yasmin asked.

“Remember the school trips – nearly every year – to Malham.”

“I remember,” Yasmin agreed.

“I was trying to think what was the most breathtaking, awesome place I’d been to before we knew The Doctor and could come to places like this. It has to be Malham Cove. We’ve never been to Niagara or Victoria Falls or… what’s the one that’s the highest in the world….”

“Angel Falls, in Venezuela. Yes, Malham Cove is the best we can do without The Doctor. We’ve got a lot to thank her for.”

“Sometimes, do you think all this is… a bit… too much?” Ryan suggested. “Like these other planets are just showing off. Me and you, with two corn beef sandwiches each, a boiled egg, packet of crisps, an apple and an individual bottle of Tizer might be just as happy at Malham Cove.”

“My lunchbox had onion bhajis instead of the boiled egg,” Yasmin said, wondering how both of them had such eidetic memories of their packed lunches from so long ago.

“I think I know what you mean,” she added. “Like… eventually, I suppose, we’ll go back to our normal lives in Sheffield, in the Twenty-first century… and a day trip to Malham Cove or… Mother Shipton’s Cave or… wherever… won’t seem like an anti-climax to all this.”

“Well… I ALWAYS thought Mother Shipton’s Cave was a let down,” Ryan conceded. “But, yes. I think that’s exactly what I mean.”

Packed lunches were still in the forefront of their minds as they made their way back to the picnic area where lunches were being handed out by the driver and the tour guide. Yesterday, the boxes no bigger than a small Milk Tray selection had puzzled the three Earth visitors. This time they knew what to expect and were enthusiastically anticipating their al fresco meal.

“I still can’t believe somebody in the universe invented rehydrating meals,” Graham enthused as he took a flat oblong the size of a postcard from his box and pressed the middle. It expanded and deepened and when he took the lid off he was assailed by mouth-watering smells. He dug enthusiastically into tandoori chicken nearly as good as Grace used to cook.

Yasmin and Ryan had chicken curries, too, and remarked on the taste and texture of the pieces of ‘meat’. It really did seem like the real thing, even though that was clearly impossible.

The Doctor ate a crab salad that seemed even more incredible. They could about believe that the crab meat, the sliced mixed peppers, the celery, could be reconstituted, but the delicate slices of sesame toast that went with it defied credulity.

“Micro-nutrition,” The Doctor said, though that was far from an explanation they could fully understand.

“It’s good,” Graham said. “Let’s leave it at that.”

“The technology has improved since I was a young Time Lord,” The Doctor admitted. “I only used rehydrated food if I absolutely had to. It used to taste artificial. Mind you, it was still better than the food machine in the TARDIS in my younger days.”

“Why, what was that like?” Yasmin asked.

“Imagine an energy bar that tasted almost, but not quite, like a roast beef sandwich,” The Doctor answered. “Or a little cube that was meant to be a cup of coffee. Never worked for me.”

As she spoke, she pressed the bottom of a circular foil and it turned into a hot cup of fragrant latte. Ryan was amused to find his lunchtime drink was Tizer. Others had hot or cold drinks to their taste and preferred temperatures.

“There must be something a bit telepathic about it,” Ryan observed. “Nobody in this part of the universe knows about Tizer, surely?”

“That’s entirely possible,” The Doctor admitted. Then her attention was distracted by a high pitched scream and a lower-pitched cry of distress, drowned out a beat later by a surge of excitement amongst the onlookers who pressed forward in undisguised prurient interest.

“The glass walkway has collapsed,” The Doctor interpreted from the gabble of voices. “There are people in the water. Come on.”

She was already running. Yasmin was right behind. Graham and Ryan were a few paces in the rear, wondering what The Doctor could do in this kind of situation. Facing down Daleks and other assorted villains of the universe with nerves of steel and an apparently inoffensive sonic screwdriver was one thing, but rescue missions involving ice cold water and drowning people was another.

Not everyone was standing around talking about the crisis. Two young men had climbed down the precariously swinging section of the walkway and were passing up a child and his mother who had clung onto the handrail. Wiling hands reached to pull them to safety.

But three more souls were in serious danger in the roiling pool twenty feet below. The water WAS ice cold and in the place where the falls finally lost their fight with gravity it was a swirling, treacherous mix of currents and undercurrents.

Yasmin didn’t even think twice. She grabbed a bright red lifebelt and jumped, feet first, as she had learnt in life saving classes at the police training school.

But this was much more dangerous than the wide, deep, but reasonably placid River Don as it passed through Sheffield. Ryan and Graham both called out in utter panic. She surely couldn’t help herself, let alone others

Then there was another movement. The Doctor had also gone in feet first, clutching a lifebelt under one arm and holding her sonic aloft with her free hand.

The fascinated onlookers expecting to see five people drowning in the maelstrom gasped in new ways when they saw the famously unmastered Cloud Falls slide over an invisible ‘roof’ that expanded out from the sonic screwdriver, leaving calm waters beneath as The Doctor plunged into the water

She immediately struck out towards one of the struggling victims while Yasmin trod water safely now with one of the others.

It was Graham who jumped to reach the third man in difficulties. Meanwhile, Ryan had been directing operations from above. A hoist was lowered with a kind of cage attached. Yasmin and her rescuee were pulled up first, then it was as quickly lowered again for the other two unconscious victims. As they rose up to safety, The Doctor grasped hold of Graham in a manner that, in any other circumstances would seem over-familiar.

“I can regulate my body temperature,” she told him in the eerie silence beneath the sonic ‘umbrella’. “Keep close and you’ll avoid hypothermia. It won’t be long.”

“Were we all completely daft jumping in?” he asked as The Doctor’s warmth kept him from the extreme cold. “None of the locals did anything.”

“Carmoians can’t swim – its something to do with their bone structure. Falling into places like this usually means death.”

She reached out for the cage and they both clambered in. “This isn’t for rescue, normally, but fishing out the dead.”

“Oh!” Graham dealt with that philosophically. “That’ll make Ryan feel less like he bottled it. He can’t swim, either. The dyspraxia….”

The Doctor had no intention of making Ryan feel inadequate. He had played his part well enough, organising the lift out of the water.

When she and Graham clambered onto solid ground and received a silver emergency blanket each, they couldn’t help noticing that Ryan was sharing his body heat with Yasmin under her blanket. They saw the three rescued Carmoians wrapped up before they were put into a hover ambulance. The rescuers, meanwhile were taken to the interpretive centre where they were offered hot drinks – real, not rehydrated – and souvenir hooded track suits swapped for soaking wet clothes.

“They really don’t know what to do with survivors,” Yasmin noted. “They're used to tragedy. I'm surprised they even have the emergency blankets. They just don’t expect to need them.”

“Carmaions are a fragile people," The Doctor explained. “Their skulls are thin, their bones brittle. Falls humans would recover from with medical attention would kill them out right. But they don’t give in to their limitations. They wear helmets and protective kit and go out doing sports enthusiastically.”

“Well, good for them," Graham said with feeling. After his fight with cancer he might have taken the cautious route. It was Grace who got him outdoors – to places like Wain Wrath Force where a certain amount of clambering over rocks and walking uphill had been involved. And it had been the remaking of him as a man.

“We’ve got one problem,” The Doctor said. “Did anyone notice that two of the survivors of this episode were our driver and tour guide. They’ve been flown off to hospital leaving the passengers stranded."

Nobody had. In truth, even two days into their visit to the planet they couldn’t always tell one Carmaoin from another. The Doctor had talked about racial preferences and ‘like recognising like’, but these people, while charming and friendly, and giving nobody any reason to fear them were hard to tell apart. The men all looked like clones of Brian May, with huge curling hair down to their shoulders which started white with the young men and turned darker as they aged. The women all had very fine blonde hair, usually close cut so that their pink scalps were visible.

“So, the whole bus party are stuck here?” Yasmin queried. “That’s about sixty people in total and no hotel for miles. We were meant to get there in time for dinner in the evening after seeing a couple more sights.”

“Are they going to send somebody to pick us up?” Ryan asked. “A replacement driver or whatever?”

“That’s what’s causing them problems at the moment,” The Doctor explained. “For lots of complicated reasons they can’t get anyone out until tomorrow… to meet us at the hotel. They seem to think sixty people and a bus can get there under their own steam.”

“Well, of course we can,” Graham said with a wide grin. “I had a chat with the driver last night. That bus is easier than a Routemaster.”

“You mean you’ll drive?” Yasmin asked in surprise, then wondered why she was surprised. Graham was a bus driver. It didn’t matter what sort of bus or what planet it was on.

“This was already a busman’s holiday,” Graham added.

“Let’s round up the passengers, then, and away we go,” Ryan said. “Cloud Falls is wonderful, but I think we’ve all seen enough of them for a lifetime.”

The idea that an alien visitor was going to drive the bus surprised the Carmaions aboard the bus, but either they were too glad to be getting away from Cloud Falls or they were too polite to complain. Either way they set off only an hour later than scheduled.

“We can make up time by handing out the teatime packages on the bus instead of stopping at the Galligoan Gorge,” Graham suggested as he steered the bus onto the smooth, straight tourist road, used only for travellers viewing the wonders of the Carmaoin outlands.

“We can see just as much of it from the bridge as the viewing platform,” The Doctor agreed. “And crossing it is part of the itinerary anyway.”

“Right we are,” Graham agreed. He didn’t mind. He was enjoying himself. Even driving this bus was comfortable compared to some boneshakers he'd known. The smooth, quiet road helped. There was nothing to worry about.

“How come this road is so quiet?” he asked The Doctor. “Don’t they have traffic jams on this planet?”

“Not on the tourist road. Fifty miles east of here is a twelve lane motorway for regular traffic. But the government wants to encourage tourism, so the roads to the tourist sites like Cloud Falls are strictly for those with tour licences.”

“I'm not sure if that’s brilliant or weird. They really think their tourism is that important? “

“Tourism replaced religion on this planet,” The Doctor explained. “This road was originally made for pilgrims who prayed at places like the Magenta Sea or Cloud Falls, and the Gorge. They were Panentheists.” She saw Graham’s frown as he kept his eye on the road. He didn’t know what Panentheism was. “It means they have one god, found in all aspects of their natural world. You can imagine how Cloud Fall’s would feel like a manifestation of a great and powerful deity.”

“Yeah, I get that," Graham said. “But you used the past tense. So they don’t believe any more? What makes a whole population stop believing in their god?”

“A volcano buried their capital city. Something like Pompeii, sudden, unexpected and devastating. Amidst the grief, people started to ask questions like ‘why would a benevolent god do this’ and rapidly concluded that no omniscient god was looking over them at all. Almost at once atheism overwhelmed the population. Only a very few kept to their old faith, and they tend to be thought of as harmless cranks. Meanwhile, people come to see the sights, but to wonder at the great forces of nature that created them, not to worship an intelligent designer.“

“That’s rather sad for them," Graham considered. “Does tourism really replace a system of belief? “

“I’m not sure,” The Doctor answered. “The only place I’ve seen it work is the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Having been a cathedral and a mosque it became a museum. If you think of this as the same thing on a planetary scale it makes sense. The tourist trails ARE popular. Hundreds of buses use this road daily.”

“How come we haven’t seen any, then?" Graham asked.

“We're behind schedule. Usually there would be buses half an hour apart. “

“Ok... And what about coming back? Nothing has passed us on the return journey since the Falls.”

The Doctor looked at the road ahead and frowned. Graham was right. That was odd.

“Maybe... Perhaps... Well... What if... No. Graham, you’re right. That’s really odd. I can’t explain it.”

Graham gave another shrug and kept his eyes on the road in case it suddenly wasn’t empty. Accidents happened when drivers took such things for granted.

Signs along the way gave him the distance to Galligoan Gorge. He knew when they were less than a mile away. He was only a little concerned that he couldn’t see anything ahead except a straight road through a dry grassland that he thought might be called a veldt or something. It wasn’t the sort of countryside he saw driving a bus anywhere in England, anyway.

How soon would a gorge become visible? He slowed the bus, wary of a sudden end to the road. Even at a reduced speed the signs came thick and fast. He noticed that another road and the lines for a fancy, high speed rail system something like the Japanese Maglev were converging on his right hand side.

As he caught sight of the bridge over the gorge he saw why that was. It was wide enough for six lanes of traffic and four rail tracks, as well as a pedestrian or cycle track along the side. Any such pedestrians were in for a long walk, since the bridge was two miles long, spanning the gorge with twenty-five arches of open spandrel box girder steel.

He didn’t know that. The Doctor read the information out to the passengers as the bus passed onto the left hand lane of the bridge.

“What’s a spandrel?" Graham asked purely out of curiosity.

“It is a triangular space between the top of an arch and a rectangular frame,” The Doctor answered, knowing that probably didn’t explain much without a darkened room and a slide show of architectural examples. “There was a Chancellor Spandrel in my younger Time Lord days who would happily put on such a lecture. You'd be ready to chew your own leg off out of boredom before he was finished, though.”

Graham laughed. The Doctor stifled a sigh of regret for old Time Lords long gone even among that long-lived race.

Then she gave a gasp of horror. Graham saw the reason moments later and applied the brake.

“There's a blinking great gap in the blinking bridge," he said.

“Yes, there is,” The Doctor agreed.