**Burgers in Time**

“Two astronauts become stranded on a jungle planet. When they run out of supplies, one is forced to eat the other to survive,” Yasmin Kahn read.

“Two princes become stranded on a methane underwater base. When they run out of supplies, one is forced to eat the other to survive,” Dan Lewis responded with a snicker.

“Two web designers become stranded on a desert planet. When they run out of supplies, one is forced to eat the other to survive.” Yasmin laughed out loud.

“Here’s a different one. A story about two aliens who accidentally kill the Russian President….”

“If anything like that happened, we’d give them medals….”

“What in the cosmos are you reading?” The Doctor asked looking across the console at her two human companions.

“It’s a random space adventure generator,” Dan explained. “For sci-fi authors with writers block.”

“Time and space machine lands in a London junk yard disguised as a police box…” Yas continued.

“What?” The Doctor’s expression changed to one of concern.

“Only kidding,” Yas assured her. “You told me all about the junk yard that time when we were in that bar on the Scallis X. when you claimed that Time Lords don’t get drunk and that Daerusian freight pilot challenged you. I had to be referee. It was embarrassing. And afterwards you couldn’t stop talking.”

“Shame I missed that,” Dan said with a wide grin. “Anyway, Doctor, where are we headed, next?”

“Ummm… not entirely sure. I’m getting some conflicting readings. It SHOULD be California in 1968, but it’s also saying 2022.”

“Either would be ok, wouldn’t they?” Yas asked. “There were no earthquakes or forest fires or – KKK marches, were there?”

“No, nothing like that. There is a slight risk of a Covid variant in ’22. But you both have your omni-vaccinations from the trip to Mars in the 26th century, so you’re covered. Let’s see WHEN we end up.”

Well, after all, few of their journeys had been planned. What was one more mystery tour?

The materialisation wasn’t in the most exciting place. They looked around in less than enthusiasm at the interior of a disused burger restaurant.

It clearly WAS disused. The doors and windows had been boarded up. But curiously, it had been left intact. Tables and chairs were still in place. There were swing bins for rubbish and plant pots containing artificial plants. In front of a closed hatch that should lead to the kitchen there was a long, gleaming counter. At one end was a stack of trays, at the other, cutlery and napkins in a dispenser. In the middle was a soda dispenser with five different flavours advertised as available. A rack for various chocolate bars had been stripped of its contents.

They saw all of this by the TARDIS roof lamp, which was far brighter than might be expected.

No dust,” The Doctor noted. “Odd. Dust gets everywhere except on space stations with cyber extractors.”

“How long do you think it’s been abandoned?” Yas asked. She looked at the panels that had sealed the entrance. They weren’t just plain wood. Somebody had painted a mural in the style known as hyper-realism with bold colours and cleanly defined lines. It depicted a shopping centre – or perhaps, if they actually had landed in America - a mall. Yes, probably, America. There was a supermarket called Winn-Dixie with an old-fashioned style that suggested 1960s, and a shopfront with some very old-fashioned televisions on display.

Dan looked the other way and saw a picture of what might be outside the windows. A car park with what he would call ‘classic’ cars. On the far side was a cinema with huge, colourful billboards advertising ‘Speedway' starring Elvis Presley. The cars and the films suggested late 1960s, though he didn’t know enough about Elvis films or American cars to pinpoint a year.

“Not an actual burger franchise,” he said. The mural included an image of a huge, succulent stacked burger with a crown hovering over it. The words ‘McQueens Burger’ was in reverse, to be viewed from outside. “It’s a wonder McDonalds AND Burger King weren’t after them for copyright infringement. It’s a shame a local business couldn't keep going, though, in the face of mega-commercialism.

“It is going,” Yas responded. “Closed down, trapped in time, but still alive and kicking.”

The Doctor looked at her curiously.

“What made you say that?” she asked. “About it being trapped in time?”

“Just….” Yas looked around, thinking about her own words. “I don’t know. I felt… the thought just came into my head… that it was trapped. Why?”

“Because… if this place is trapped… we’re trapped with it. I just tried to go back to the TARDIS and… my key wouldn’t turn.”

Dan looked at them both, then went to the police box and tried his key.

“Not that I didn’t believe you,” he said. “What does it mean….”

“It means we’re trapped,” The Doctor answered. “Until I figure out what’s going on or… time sorts itself out by itself – which is perfectly possible.”

“Are you just saying that to make us feel better?” Dan asked.

“I’m saying it to make ME feel better,” The Doctor replied. “This is a new situation for me. Trapped in a hysteresis without access to the TARDIS….”

“Hysteresis?” Yas queried.

“I think you can get pills for it,” Dan suggested.

“I’m afraid not,” The Doctor said but she smiled at the joke. “We may just have to wait it out.”

“Well, there are two problems with that,” Yas said. She glanced around the room and headed towards the doors marked with standard male and female silhouettes. “One of them is easy since we landed in a time when indoor plumbing existed.”

She half dreaded the doors being locked or somehow not real – just part of the scenery. But she went into a clean, airy room with cubicles and wash basins. There were only three issues – no light from the high, frosted window which had been painted blue on the outside, no toilet rolls and no soap in the dispensers. But there was running water and the last two problems were solved by the packet of wet wipes in her bag – an essential of time and space travel.

When she came back out of the toilets she was surprised to find the burger bar open for business. The lights were on, music was playing, the soda fountain was flowing, oranges floated about in the fresh orange juice dispenser.

And people were eating at the tables – eating burgers dispensed by a chubby, rosy-cheeked young man in a colourful apron behind the counter.

Dan waved Yas over to a table where he and The Doctor were eating burgers. He had gone for what looked like a triple-decker with burgers, sauce, lettuce and cheese slices hanging out of the bun on all sides. He had a large portion of fries and a huge cardboard cup of coke. The Doctor had a more moderate burger and fresh orange juice. A juice and a meal was set for Yas, too.

“You know I can’t eat ANYTHING they put in buns, here,” she said cautiously as she sat.

“I got him to put cheese slices, tomatoes and lettuce in for you,” Dan told her as she lifted the top part and saw for herself. “It’s 1968 – the veggie burger is a couple of decades away.”

“This is very kind of you,” Yas said. “Thanks for thinking of me.”

“I used to make sure there was a non-meat option at the soup kitchen,” he answered. “I don’t believe in ‘beggars can’t be choosers’.”

“Quite right,” The Doctor agreed. “And… in fact….” She looked around the café. The people eating looked as if they were 1968’s versions of Dan’s soup kitchen customers. Clothes were shabby, faces and hair hadn’t seen a beauty regime for a while. Of course, this was the age of the dropout, the hippy ideal. But she had a sense that these people were even lower down the social order of this time.

“No money needed,” she said.

“I noticed that right away,” Dan pointed out. “There's a cash register for the look of things, but the bloke just gives the food away.”

The ‘customers’ were eating as if they REALLY needed the food,” The Doctor noted to herself. People who usually went to fast food restaurants did so as a stopping off point during shopping or as a social meeting point. They weren’t hungry as such and the food was secondary – which was just as well since burger and fries was a rather indifferent sort of meal. But these people were eating because they were really hungry and despite Dan’s assertion, beggars really couldn’t turn down free food.

“It’s not 1968, any more,” Yas said, glancing at the mural window. The film advertised at the cinema was The Poseidon Adventure. She was no expert, but she was sure that film was early 1970s rather than late 1960s.

“1972,” The Doctor confirmed. Yas looked the other way. The TV shop now boasted that ALL their models were colour. No black and white. The screens were getting bigger, too, though far from the wall sized home cinema of her time.

The Doctor looked at the people and noticed that they weren’t the same people, though they were still mostly shabby and hungry.

Dan popped to the men’s room and when he got back, confirmed that soap and loo roll were now available. They were part of the fixtures along with the napkin and drinking straw dispensers.

The ‘bloke’ at the counter was the one thing that hadn’t changed. He was still a chubby, rosy-cheeked young man. Four years dishing out burgers and fries hadn’t aged him at all.

“So, time is passing at an accelerated rate,” Yas said. “But we’re not getting older, so we’re not part of it. Neither is….”She looked at the boy in the apron but couldn't see his name tag from the table.

“Chet,” Dan confirmed.

“Chet?” Yas giggled. “Really? Real people are called Chet?”

“Somebody has to be,” Dan answered a bit defensively.

“I knew a Chet at the Prydonian Academy,” The Doctor admitted.” “Short for Chetya-Zorkotho-Drustrumigo.”

“Well, anyway OUR Chet isn’t older,” Dan said after a long pause in which neither he nor Yas could think of a comment about Time Lord students. “But he IS a trainee manager now.”

When Dan got them all more drinks and ‘Hostess cup cakes’ in individual wrappers for dessert, he noticed that Chet was STILL a trainee manager but when he turned back to the table The Towering Inferno was the film showing at the cinema.

“1974,” The Doctor said without being asked. “As for Chet, you can be a trainee manager in places like this for years. But I think he is part of the illusion, too. A Human avatar… the typical burger restaurant worker.”

“Illusion?” Yas queried.

“Remember that isn’t a window – it’s a painted mural of a window. Yet the film keeps changing. The cars are different styles.”

“The people eating….” Dan wondered aloud.

“The people are real,” The Doctor assured him. “And, yes, they do seem to be the down-and-outs of the locality.”

“How do they get in?” Yas asked. “There are no doors.”

“This is just a theory,” The Doctor answers. “I think the restaurant sort of… sucks them in. It… finds people who need to eat anywhere near it and….”

“Feeds them.” Dan grinned widely. “A philanthropic restaurant.”

“A philanthropic genius loci,” The Doctor suggested. “I’ve heard of such a thing….”

“Me too,” Dan said. Yas was still puzzled. “It’s like… the spirit of a place. Rivers have them. Like, old Father Thames, or Old Man River, the Mississippi, Sabrina, spirit of the River Severn who has it in for men who hurt women. There’s even a spirit of the Mersey. She’s a Red, of course. And she loves the Beatles and Gerry Marsden. Hates all Tories, especially Margaret Thatcher and NEVER reads The Sun.”

Yas laughed at his description of the Spirit of the River Mersey, using the most typical traits of a working-class scouser. It sounded about right to her.

“Old houses, ships, big shops like Harrods, anything that has seen a lot of life, will have a genius loci,” The Doctor said. “The creepy clown at Blackpool Pleasure Beach. Some people think the London Underground or the phone network might have one. The scariest possibility is the internet having a sentient life of its own. That might have to be dealt with if it ever happens.”

“But this place looked brand new in the 1960s,” Dan pointed out. “And never actually used. Like it closed down before it even opened. Where does it get the ‘lot of life’? From the down-and-outs it feeds or…. Is IT feeding on them?”

“Not in a parasite sense,” The Doctor assured him. “Genius loci, in the original understanding, were local gods – especially the rivers and other natural features. They were worshipped. In China, there was Chenghuangshen, a city God, with characteristics matching the city or town. By the way, Dan, Balisama is the god*dess* of the river Mersey, but you had her about right. A party girl but no fan of the Tories or The Sun.”

“So… these homeless people being fed… are the worshippers of the McQueen Burger spirit?” Yas conjectured. “By the way, 1974 took ages… and the cinema now has two screens showing Alien and Rocky II. I’ve lost count of how many of either were made.”

“1979,” The Doctor said. “We seem to be getting edited highlights of the decade. I wonder if it fixed on 1979 because we mentioned Margaret Thatcher. That was the year she became Prime Minister.”

“Let’s STOP talking about Margaret Thatcher,” Dan suggested. Nobody objected.

“E.T. and Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan….” Yas said. “And diet Coke is available at the counter.”

“1982,” The Doctor noted. “A three year gap this time. It’s a better way to see time passing than clothes in a fashion shop,” she added. Her two friends looked puzzled. “The 1960 film of the Time Machine by my old pal Herbert George Wells – time travel was depicted by the fashions altering in a boutique across the road from Rod Taylor’s laboratory. You’ve never seen it?”

Neither had.

“Shame, it’s a good talking point when time travelling. The amazing thing is that the premises remained a clothes shop for about seventy years. Most small businesses change hands a little bit more.”

“Speaking of time travel….” Dan nodded towards the mural. Back to the Future was the big feature at the cinema with a huge 3D DeLorean bursting out of the billboard.

“1985. I know that one,” Yas said with a satisfied grin. “Because I remember in 2010, twenty-five years after, people were asking where their hover boards and rehydrated pizzas were.”

“The future is never what science-fiction writers imagine,” The Doctor confirmed with a wry smile.

“People needing to eat doesn’t change,” Dan remarked, looking at a still busy restaurant. Clothes had changed, even for those at the bottom end of the market, but hunger was the same.

The films showing at the mural cinema were an indicator of time passing. Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade was the main feature, now. The Doctor confirmed it was released in 1989.

“That far back!” Dan commented. “The best of the three, if you ask me. The Holy Grail. Classic!”

The Doctor smiled knowingly at Yas, who returned the grin.

“We went to Petra in the 1930s,” Yas explained. “Graham and Ryan were there as well. I wanted to visit at the time Agatha Christie’s Appointment with Death was set. We’d already done the Orient Express and a Nile Cruise. Petra is amazing, but there are no ancient knights guarding the Grail. Only a very shy bunch of red silica-based lifeforms who hide out in the caves, pretending to be rocky outcrops when people were about.”

“Which was all the time,” The Doctor confirmed. “It was a major tourist spot in the day. Which would have made it tricky for Indiana Jones, in fact.”

Dan laughed and insisted that the film was still a classic. As was Speed, released in 1994.

“Graham likes that one,” Yas said. “But he swore he wouldn’t take that jump, no way, no how.”

Dan laughed with them and expressed the hope of meeting the old gang some time.

“A scouser in Sheffield… might be dangerous,” Yas answered. “We’d better go somewhere neutral – Preston bus station or Blackpool Prom.”

“Sounds good to me,” Dan conceded. “The prom, for preference. Preston Bus Station has a certain brutalist charm, but they can’t do a decent cuppa in their caff.”

Yas thought that would be a good day out for all, providing that The Doctor didn’t find something nasty crawling out of the sea.

“Wayne’s World,” Dan said as 1995 rolled around. “Good music but didn’t think much of the plot.”

He stood and went to the counter, obtaining more drinks. After delivering them to Yas and The Doctor he returned to the counter and stood beside Chet, the eternal assistant manager and helped give out food to the never-ending line of people. Yas noticed him talking to some of them, but there was little time to strike up a long conversation.

“He’s great, though, isn’t he,” Yas commented, watching Dan at work. “He can’t resist pitching in there. We don’t even know what’s going on, here, exactly. But he sees hungry people and goes for it, helping out.”

“He’s a remarkable human being,” The Doctor agreed. “We’re in 1998, by the way. The Truman Show is on at the cinema. The years have slowed down a bit. I saw the film titles for 1996 and 1997 while you were watching Dan. Up till now, they jumped years. Now we’re seeing them year by year.”

To prove it, Fight Club and The Perfect Storm brought them to the Millennium while Dan took a coffee break.

With coffee. They sold coffee, now. New meu items were being added, too, like salads. Though not many people were taking them up on it.

“There’s a lady called Sal who’s been coming here most of the 1990s. I say lady, she’s only twenty-two. She ran away from home when she was fourteen. Lived rough all that time. She says, most of the homeless know there’s a place around here, but not how to get in.They just find themselves here all of a sudden, and ger to eat their fill. People who would never get a hot meal, or a jumbo coke. I know it’s not healthy food, but when you’re hungry and cold, its FOOD.”

The Doctor agreed with that sentiment, but she was interested in the fact that the people didn’t know how they got into the restaurant. Also that an urban legend was growing – one believed in only by people to whom nobody else would be listening.

But surely it couldn’t last forever? She glanced at the window mural and noted that Finding Nemo represented the films of 2003. She had a theory she hadn’t shared with Yas and Dan – in case she was wrong.

The Day After Tomorrow was the film of 2004 – at least in the cinema painted on the boards – its aerial view of a frozen New York one of the first film posters to show the ‘gap’ in the city from the real-world catastrophe of 9-11. While The Doctor was thinking about that, Batman Begins heralded 2005 and then The Da Vinci Code, the most controversial film of 2006 followed on.

“Sal isn’t coming any more,” Dan noted with a tense expression. There were a lot of bad things that could happen to a homeless young woman. At least six of them passed through his mind in a heartbeat.

“Maybe she had a happy ending,” Yas suggested. “A job, home, a husband… kids.”

“Maybe,” Dan agreed, though he wasn’t entirely convinced. “I shouldn’t have asked her name - found out about her. Now I’m wortried for her. I know its daft – well soft – after all, hundreds of them have been here. I don’t even remember their faces. But I got to know Sal….”

“I understand,” Yas told him. “They tell us in police training - not to get too emotionally involved. When its battered women and bruised kids – the stuff we pass on to social services. We can’t fix everything.”

“We had a course at the Prydonian Academy,” The Doctor admitted. “Emotional Detachment. I was no good at it. Sometimes, you have to care…. About a planet, a city, about a person….”

Dan nodded. That was it. You knew that for everyone who got fed at your soup-kitchen there were fifty more going hungry. You just did your smell bit and hoped it helped.

But he kept thinking about Sal. He was worried about her, even though he knew he shouldn’t – couldn’t – do anything to help her.

Yas noticed his mood and tried to cheer him by talking about Despicable Me and Kung Fu Panda II that represented 2010 and 2011 passing by. Or how much of a let-down Men in Black 3 – 2012 – was compared to the first two and how much bigger the televisions in the mall shop had become.

“When we get out of this….” He said. “I need to know. Doctor… you can find out with the TARDIS. Even if she’s ‘off-grid’ to welfare or the tax office, you can do it….”

The Doctor didn’t point out that the TARDIS databases accumulated knowledge by accessing local technology like tax and welfare records. If Sal remained a street person without any kind of bank account, Facebook profile, streaming service subscription, she really could be invisible even to the TARDIS. Perhaps they would never know the fate of that one woman – one of millions of Americans who kept that sort of low profile.

Dan at least agreed with Yas that Frozen was the most over-rated film of 2013 and the song REALLY irritating and that The Amazing Spider-Man 2 in 2014 was worse than the first one. He agreed that Spectre, the Bond movie of 2015 was pretty good, if overlong, but his heart wasn’t in it. He went back to the counter and carried on serving alongside Chet. He talked to the customers, but perhaps with a little self-protecting reserve.

The Doctor watched the films change, not because she had any opinion about Deadpool (2016), Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) or even Bohemian Rhapsody - though she had broken the Time Lord rule about trivial use of a TARDIS to see the London premiere in 2018 – but because she was sure the whole thing was coming to a close , soon, and she felt there was going to be an optimum moment to get back into the TARDIS and leave the scene.

She trusted they WOULD be able to get into the TARDIS.

That moment came just as the cinema started to advertise Top Gun: Maverick, the big box office smash of 2022. For a few minutes Dan and Chet had been handing out take away food rather than sit-in. Then Chet wasn’t there. Nobody was there.

The lights were off. The counter was empty. No snacks, no diet Coke tins, no leaflets for the cinema.

And there were noises outside the mursal eindow that they vhadnt hewarde before now.

“Time to go,” The Doctor said, heading for the TARDIS and hoping the door would open.

It did. She stepped inside, followed by Yas and Dan. She went to the console and pushed a few buttons, pulled a lever. For a very brief time there was a sensation of movement.

The door opened again. They stepped out, unnoticed, into a car park between a mega-sized shopping mall as beloved by American consumers and what was, now, a multiplex cinema at which Top Gun: Maverick was only one of a dozen choices.

A crowd had gsthered to watch something happrning at the Mall.

Dan looked artound and spotteds a catering vsn which, according to the sign, gave out free food to the homeless. He wandered over and struck up a conjveedsaton with the young man givijg out burgers and fries and cups of cdoffee.

“It’s a weird story,” the yoiung man told him. “Fifty odd years sgo, the msall was readyv tov open. A young couple had bpught the freehold or leasehold, whcihevere it is – for a diner. Ben and Tessa McQueen – They were going to cvsll the bplcre McQureen’s butgered. It was all ready like everuthijg rlse. Only teo weeks before the grand opening they were killed vin a car crash.”

“Oh no,” Dan responded, because he felt a response to such tragedy was required, even if it was fifty years too late.

“Thing is, neither of them had any family and no will. Nobody to take over the place. When the mall opened, the boards stayed up on the diner. And they stayed up. The people who owned the Mall then couldn’t touch it because of the legalities. then the whole place was sold to another owner and I guess they forgot it was even there. People just thought it was a wall, usually covered in cinema posters.”

That explained some of the story, Dan realised.

“So... what’s happening now?” he asked.

“Well, couple of months back it was ‘found again’. The whole thing like a time capsule – a fully functional diner, kitchen restrooms, the lot. And it was all down to that lady over there giving the TV interview.”

Dan looked and recognised Sal, about ten years older than when he’d first met her, and dressed like somebody who’d fallen on her feet financially.

“Sal….” He murmured.

“Yeah, that’s right, Sal Browning as we knew her. Mrs Sally Everington, now. She used to be one of us – street sleeper, half starved. Then the lawyers tracked her down – her father was dead and she inherited a whole property portfolio from him. She’s rich, now. But she didn’t forget us. That diner – her lawyers got the freehold sorted easily enough. And as of tomorrow, we’re not going to be giving out the burgers from this old van. We’re moving in to the diner. Free food for the hungry, from a proper diner. Nobody turned away. The bills all paid.”

“Wow.” Dwn turned back to look at Sal. He wondered if he could talk to her. Would she know him? Would he just be part of a vivid dream from back when she was a runaway from her rich dad?

What would he say anyway?

It didn’t matter.

What mattered, was that it had all come round in the best possible way for her and for everyone – everyone except the mall owners who, he suspected would have liked to get rid of the homeless hangers-on and now had them by the bucketload.

He grinned widely and drifted back to where The Doctor and Yas waited by the TARDIS, that had surely never been ignored in a crowded place as much as it was right now. they went inside. The door shut. Moments later it was gone.

He told them the story. Yas was thrilled to know Sal was ok. So was The Doctor.

I'd been thinking about it since the mid-90s,” Dan admitted. “Like… getting you to take me back in time to set up a bank account - you know, twenty quid in high interest – that would set something up after the genius loci shut up shop. I figured it would. You said the TARDIS wasn’t sure if it was 1968 or 2022. So that was the window - it was all going to come to an end. But... Sal’s way is better and you don’t have to break any rules. I’ll bet there are some about making money that way.”

“Tons of them,” The Doctor agreed. “And, yes, Sal’s way is better. The ordinary human way.”

“What about the Genius Loci?” Yas asked. “Is it still there?”

“I expect so,” The Doctor answered. “Funny, I’ve never heard of one of them fixed on a brand new building,. I’ll bet if we looked into it there’d be some old native burial site on the spot or something. But we don’t need to. She’s there… feeding the hungry – fed in return by their… their love… gratitude… no, not really. Just by their presence. That’s obviously what she craved in the find place. That’s why she put the idea in Sal’s head, I expect.”

It was all guesswork, but Dan nodded, still grinning. It all make sense to him – after a fashion.

“So… next stop Blackpool prom?”