

## ENTERTAINING MR O

Thanks to Paul Magrs for agreeing to my putting this online.  
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When I looked up I could see the back of his head and his forgettable face from every conceivable angle. Know your enemy.

I hate spying and all that subterfuge nonsense. I crossed my legs and addressed him thus: "What's all this nonsense about, then?"

He glowered at me inasmuch as he could. "I take it Alistair sent you?"

"Oh yes. He gets me to do his dirty work for him these days."

"Not his unpaid scientific advisor?"

"I gather he was pensioned off rather suddenly. All his papers taken off him. Now he's a non person living in Wales. It's quite hush hush."

Hidden within, a separate space. Filled with stolen chairs and filing cabinets and odds and sods of Ministry equipment.

"It really was a sham," Tom said. "Anti matter doesn't exist."

"It certainly looks that way." I poked around in my carpet bag for a crow bar. "Help me with this crate."

Much groaning and rending of fresh wood. The first three crates we opened were empty apart from saw dust.

"This is hopeless, Iris," he said. "What are we looking for?"

"The way out," I said.

The fourth crate was much more successful.

When its lid came away we could only see solid matte black within. A black that trembled and shivered at our touch.

Then it rose up, an obelisk of black. It tumbled and twirled and, before we could budge an inch, it dropped the two of us, swift as night fall in the tropics.

We were falling and falling and then we had arrived.

And so had everyone else.

"And you're his replacement?"

"Iris," I said, and didn't offer my hand. Down to business now, I thought. "What's all this wild talk about anti-matter?"

He shrugged. "It's all quite true. I'm holding you to ransom."

"Are you really?"

"I don't come from round here. This isn't even me. I'm projecting this self from a universe of anti-matter and..."

"Oh, come on now..."

He looked almost hurt at that. "I am trapped there. They left me there."

And he started to tell me his tale.

Quick body check. At this time in my immensely long and rather glamorously breakneck career I was elderly Iris; burly and haggard, stuffed into my sheepskin coat. I was travelling on my bus with Tom, a human boy whom I had only recently allowed to join my select crew. I had picked him up one night in Soho, where he had dashed aboard the bus, thinking it (not unnaturally) bound for Putney Common. But no ordinary 22 mine, oh no! Tom in his orange bomber jacket and crop top and combat pants - bless him - suddenly finding himself whisked into the

Elizabethan Court and a set of malign intrigues which were, I must confess, largely down to me...and now my unshakeable travelling companion during the time in my life when I was - albeit slightly unwillingly, and rather surlily - employed by the ministry.

This particular jaunt had begun right outside the Tate. We were parked in 1973, up some back alley off Vauxhall Road.

I think he must have jumped. By the time I was at the water's edge there was nothing, of course, no ripples, to mark his passing. What a strange man.

He's left his coat on a vandalised bench. It was greasy and damp to the touch. I rifled the pockets, but the sample of supposed anti-matter had gone with him into the Thames. I found a card in the top right hand pocket.

Personal Storage. S. Foreman.

It turned out to be a warehouse in South London.

"Tom, he doesn't need a ticket..."

Tom wasn't pleased. He'd been rather enjoying his role as conductor and wasn't pleased to let the dapper Alistair on without paying. He looked the newcomer up and down. Alistair was undercover. Camel hair coat. Nifty briefcase. I gathered him up in a bear hug and he coughed politely to be released.

He was nodding at a woman fiddling with a connection and soldering busily at a profusion of wires. Without looking at us, she said, "I'm trying to keep the pruple nasty at bay. Not too well, I'm afraid."

She was in a silver catsuit bikini affair and leather boots. She had masses of golden blond hair and green eyeshadow. When she finally turned I gasped. I thought she looked rather marvellous and I could tell that Tom and Alistair thought so, too.

"Oh no," she said, frowning. "You're who I think you are, aren't you?"

I should have been mystified. But I wasn't.

At which point the jelly like being shot out one its vile excrescences and lightly brushed her shoulder. And with, as Alistair described it, a bang and a flash and a crash, she disappeared, along with the vreature itself, a swivel chair and various bits of electronic doo-dahs.

Next thing, he comes to sit by me before I've even got a drink in my hand, settling comfily onto the faded chintz by the sofa. He thrust a sheaf of X rays in my face. Crackling silver photographs I couldn't make head nor tail of. "What are these?" asked Alistair, his little caterpillar tash twitching in its usual irritable interrogative way.

It was downstairs in the hideously overpriced cafe at the Tate where we met. Alistair had arranged the whole thing as usual and I was to expect Mr O to be wearing a single red carnation in his buttonhole. I found him in that circular room lined with mirrors; the blandest looking fella I'd ever seen. Head like an egg, no features to speak of, nondescript suit. Toying with a cafetiere. I had an orange juice. Two pounds. I'd charge that back to the Ministry. Alistair's always going on about my bar bills.

I sidled up to Mr O who, though we were the only art-lovers present that afternoon, pretended he hadn't noticed me. Funny, that room of mirrors.

"They look like pictures of space," I said, "but in negative." Between us, Alistair and I kept up the pretence that I had never been to outer space. Almost as if I had a prison record he was politely disregarding.

I looked at these snaps and, all of a sudden, plain as day, I could suddenly see some poor old chap's face with his mouth hanging open. As if he was being zapped through space.

"My tame experts reckon," said Alistair, licking his lips, "that this game keeper has been transported off to an alternative dimension somewhere."

"Oh dear," I said. I heard Tom tut. I asked, "Did they by chance mention a universe of anti matter?"

"Something like that," said Alistair, sounding surprised.

"Hm," I gave an authoritative grunt.

"Will you step in and help us, Iris?" he asked earnestly.

I could never say no to him. I don't know why.

"Tom," I alerted my sceptical companion wryly, "we're needed."

"What do you make of them, Iris?" he said. "Taken by some kind of experimental weather balloon. Wretched thing, brought down on an estuary, a bird sanctuary near the coast..."

"Come and sit down Tom," I said, "this is going to be scary."

He tufted and yanke dopen a cupboard door. He's so nosy.

A body topple dout on top of him. He shrieked once and disappeared beneath a glistening, purple mass of anti-flesh.

"It's quite dead," I said, manhandling the beastie off him.

He looked completely revolted.

I prodded the body, which was no longer crackling. "I've got a suspicion..." I said, and yanked the head off the thing. It was a rubber head. The we both stared down at the pallid, suffocated face of Mr O.

"What..." began Tom.

There was a loud burst of static from the television. We lost our picture.

"I don't believe in anti-matter," I told Mr O patiently. I fished out my cigarettes and wondered if I was allowed to light up here. Let them stop me.

"That's your choice," he said.

"I thin it's something they've just made up."

That was when he pulled a viscous purple substance fomr his coat pocket. It appeared to be wrapped in cling film. I gave it the once over.

"Do you believe me now?"

The disgusting package crackled at me.

Of course we took a leisurely turn around the Tate, where they were showing the dappled and generously gaudy canvases of Pierre Bonnard, and Alistair talked a little more about his secret headquarters being under attack from these globular gellike creatures who crept up from the drains and made things disappear with a single touch of an extended glistening tentacle.

"Sounds horrid," I said, peering at Bonnard's poor wife, submerged and at peace in her bath. He painted her again and again in the bath.

Tom tossed his head/ "Alien incursions, you mean?"

"Amongst other things."

At this stage Tom was being rather purist. Not quite believing in my forays into the future. He thought the whole concept embarrassingly quaint. He had no truck with outer space. He'd learn, poor lamb.

"Who trapped you?" I asked Mr O. "You keep saying 'They'."

"You know," he said wheedlingly. "They sent me into a black hole to harness the forces beyond it. When they were developing time travel."

"Sorry," I shrugged. "You'll have to tell me more."

Mr O started to collect his things together. The small bundle of livid matter went back into his pocket. "I think I'm wasting our time."

Suddenly he looked shabby and defeated.

"The sisterhood of Karn are there. The revenants of Morbius. It's terrible thing. We're all summoned, Iris."

"Well, I'm not going."

The ancient woman barked with laughter. "You have no choice, dear..."

Then she was gone.

"The days are just packed, aren't they?" asked Tom, as the phone rang. "It's Alistair," he hissed at me, hand over the receiver. "He says we have to get down to Demon's Rest right now. It's that dig on the telly. they've..."

"I'm not going there," I told him.

I wanted to go to this warehouse instead.

South London. After midnight. Dusty cracked panes. Broken glass cemented into the walls. We ram raided the gates. We set the alarms and klaxons blaring. We jemmied the locks. Inside, boxes on boxes on boxes.

"Who's this one?" asked Alistair, returning Tom's suspicious glare. I made the introductions and told Tom to pour us some drinks.

Alistair was never very approving of my delectable male assistants, Considered them a security risk. Probably sensible.

At the Ministry, a day later, we saw the empty spaces where the missing furniture had been. As invasions and incursions go, it wasn't that spectacular. A bare patch of lino here and there; missing doors, too.

In came Benton, in a Bond Street suit and he saidm breathlessly, that they had one of amorphous culprits held captive in their basement. Did we want to take a look?

"Iris?" inquired Alistair politely. He was opening a packet of digestives.

"Why not," I smiled, and noted that this Benton chap was giving me a funny look. As we went down in the narrow lift, Tom was sulking. "She's Iris?" Benton asked Alistair, who nodded quickly, as if he didn't want to discuss it right now.

I followed him out to the steps at the front of the gallery. There was a school party there, and tourists, and art students rolling their own fags as they slouched about on the stone. In the crush and push I almost lost him. He was heading out the main gates and I kept a discreet distance. He was heading for the water. The brown stretch of the Thames, languid in the muggy heat. He shot over the road with a surprising burst of speed.

I couldn't cross for a while. The road was full of red double deckers snorting and stamping between us.

"Well," said Alistair, "you see, it's rather urgent. The headquarters are disappearing piece by piece; filing cabinets, desks, valuable files, equipment, all vanishing with a flash and a crash into this universe of purported anti-matter."

Beside me, Tom was looking annoyed. I could tell he didn't believe a word of it. I was having doubts myself. We sat on the ox blood leather of the seats and stared at portraits of Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots and mulled it over. Tom didn't know much about my various dealings with the Ministry and he'd hadn't taken well to Alistair's bluff manner.

"Iris has got us out of a number of awful scrapes," Alistair gallantly explained.

In the cellar, we found the globular monstrosity; a cowering, coruscating behemoth hulking in the dimly lit recess and held back by an amazing array of machines and devices and wires, safety pins, crocodile clips. Somebody's amazing lash-up. A kind of force field, I would have guessed.

Benton was saying, "You were looking for her. I assume she got here before you."

Benton seemed at last to accept that I was, in fact, Iris, though I'd appeared to have been superseded in that role, for an hour or two at least, by a much more slinky version. He disguised his disappointment and saw to arrangements for putting Tom and I up in their oh-so secret headquarters. Brought us corned beef and pickle sandwiches on a tray. Hot chocolate. Tom and I were both gagging for a real drink.

We watched telly. Alistair had gone off somewhere to check out some other happening that had broken out.

We watched a live broadcast from a village where an archaeologist was going to break into a sacred tomb on the dot of midnight. It was pretty thrilling stuff.

Tom wandered about, fiddled with the phone extension, the plastic daffodils in a jar. He sighed.

The screen went black, lime green, black again. There was a swirl of mist. then a voice.

"There you are..." it came imperiously.

I felt the blood drain out of my face.

A very old, haughty looking woman swam into view. It was like coming before your headmistress once more. She had on the most fantastic jewels. "Where's the other one?"

"I reckon she's been zapped off to this universe of anti-matter." I said carelessly.

"Rubbish," snapped the woman on the screen. "She's been kidnapped. Several of us have.

We're in the Death Zone. Remember that?"

"There's no such thing."

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