

"The Mistress of the Magical Bus"

In the Sixties

Paul Magrs

Thanks to Paul Magrs for agreeing to my putting this Iris story online.

First published in *Walking in Eternity*, ed. Jay Eales, in support of the [Foundation for the Study of Infant Death](#).

Were there really Quarks and Krotons queuing peacefully on the platform at King's Cross? Bustling gently and eager; lumpen crystalline beings awaiting enlightenment. That was just a dream, just a dream. All those pilgrimages they went on, all those mystics. A dream we were all in. Under somebody's laconic spell. We went on a steam train up to Wales, to spend a wet weekend in an old Butlins camp, which had been commandeered for the purposes of the spiritual revolution. We went to liberate ourselves and dressed in all our feathered finery because we knew the press would be there to see us off. A gorgeous jamboree on the platform, and the train's engines and carriages bedecked with flowers and charms.

The chalets of the holiday camp reeked of incense and drugs. Music blared through the tannoy system. We arrived in hopeful droves, moving in a kind of bleeding elastic tango of compulsive need, bells and cymbals clashing, bongos bonging. And the corrupt old mystic sat on his tasseled cushion under the fiery glitter ball in the dance hall. He had us kneeling at his feet and chanting. Did we see through his shenanigans? His hokum and blarney? Of course he was the Master under his saffron robes and beads and flowers, with his ray gun close to his twin black hearts. Once we were firmly under his heady influence, swaying and orchestrated, this otherworldly demon was exhorting us: "You must return to London. There you must destroy Dr Who!" But we were too far gone other than to shrug and puzzle over the meaning of our spiritual leader's maniacal laughter.

Some of us got a bit of the true picture when, one night on our Welsh pilgrimage, he had us perform a full black mass and there was this awful stink of goat's cheese and boiled eggs in the dark. I remember Sylvia Plath and Stevie Smith telling em late one night in their chalet, that what he really wanted was for the Daleks to invade Britain. He'd have really loved it. He got off on their little blue bumps and their robot arms. Just before the Seventies began, he wanted to bring them on down in their ships the size of department stores. Land them displaying their glittering windows in Sloane Square, right beside Peter Jones and extend their escalators, letting their vile automata file onto the rainy street. Let's see them horde and lord it down the King's Road, shooting fashion victims, photographers, the rich.

Anyway, besieged on all sides, Sylvia said. Peculiar lizard men were meanwhile massing in caverns deep underground - did I mention them? And in the toppled, forgotten sunken cities of the sea - indignant fish people. It was a crazy time, full of schemes. Dr Who's response (and this infuriated the Master) was to become a quiz show host. A light celebrity. Get his face on the cover of the Radio Times. He'd given up the crazy stuff, though he threw magnificent parties for freaks and hangers on at his house in Maida Vale. His old Police Box was the centre-piece, though only the selected few were allowed to venture in for a peek during those weeklong festivals of hallucinogens and duty free.

Tall, skinny fella with a gaunt, alert face. Looked like he might have been a B movie idol in the forties, early fifties. Now in his sixties with a twitchy silver tash and combed back hair and bright blue eyes. He chime din with the

raffish Bohemianism of the time by affecting Edwardian-cut clothes in extravagant shades of velvet and silk. The young girls loved him, flocking to his sides. He did them card tricks, passed out Quaaludes and enticed them into his shambolic time machine. It was like *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* with the added piquant threat of alien attack and enslavement. Dr Who had retired, though, and all he did was throw parties. The sixties had, unequivocally, been his decade, and that decade was shutting up shop. He wanted to go out in a delicious burst of decadence and glamour, waving a big fuck-you-very-much to those, up above, who had mysteriously decided that his travelling days were done. When he was very stoned and bitter-sounding on some nights, he would rail against the myriad injustices of the universe. His gathered guests would wonder and nod. All the great and the good, and some of the wicked. I saw Dusty Springfield once, with Mida Slike, the international spy, Brigadier Lethbridge Stewart whispering sweet nothings into the ear of Shirley Bassey and then Tom Jones, while a stern robot dog sniffed his crotch and Reggie Kray kept an eye on the door. Cilla Black and Lulu sang a combative "Step Inside Love" on a gin-sodden stage, to a small crowd that included Angus Wilson, Judy Garland, Iris Murdoch, Marianne Faithfull, Brian Jones, Dirk Bogarde, John and Yoko, Michael Moorcock, Angela Carter, Joe Orton, Jackie O, Beryl Reid, a Cyberman and Jamie McCrimmon. I saw Joe Orton take brawny misplaced Highlander Jamie to one side, into the gleaming kitchen, press him up against the spit-level grill and explain how he, the greatest playwright of the age, was prepared to let the kilted, time-travelling tyke take his cock in his mouth and suck him off. It was all in Orton's diaries, found by his agent, the day after he was murdered, how he'd always longed to take McCrimmon down the throat. "One day, Jamie, it'll all be filth like this. It'll all be fan fiction. Slash fiction. Do-what-you-want fiction. That's what we're starting here." And of course Jamie would do it - but only if the Cybermen could watch. It was a Cybermen mark two model, fresh from dusty Telos. The kind in extra bright and tight tinfoil and an arrogant slot for a mouth.

Angus Wilson and Iris Murdoch were, yet again, discussing the problem of portraying authentic evil in the modern novel. They were on bean bags and getting through the champagne at a terrifying rate. He was all togged out like a Victorian gent, only every stitch of his apparel was a florid pink (as was his beaming face) and Iris Murdoch had her floppy-collared blouse untucked, her tweedy skirt awry. From her hair, you'd think she'd just woken up. Dr Who breezed past and told them, if they really wanted to know about the problem of evil, they ought to get themselves to the nightmare world of Skaro, where everyone was a vicious bastard. If they'd seen the final assault on the dread Dalek city, then the two of them - dilettante bourgeois humanists that they were - would understand it all. Angus smiled gently, beguilingly, and told him that the Dalek city was simply an effusion; a symptom of the same quandary. How else was it generated in the mass unconsciousness; how else had it caught light in the public imagination, burning with such fervour in the hearts and minds of a nation's mechanic school children (sending them spinning round playgrounds, arms and fists extended, chanting evil lines?) - if it wasn't all a result, a dreaded psychic, delayed fallout from the not-too-distant Second World War? Weren't Dr Who's dreams of easy travel elsewhere just a vision of how the world might have been? Dr Who sniffed his warm cherry brandy and curded novelists of all persuasions.

"He still believes that he could take us there," Iris Murdoch said benignly. She fixed him with a baleful stare. "That's his inner landscape he's sailing into - peopled by Mechanoids, Thals and Voords. He's an authentic English fantasist, plain as any Tolkien or Lewis. It's all whimsy with him and we ought to respect that, Angus." Dr Who looked slightly mollified, but felt subtly miffed. He had a certain respect for this Iris (unlike the other Iris, currently rolling around on the floor of the cloakroom with Robin, Batman's fantastically-endowed boy companion.) Though he thought Murdoch's imagination tainted by a certain continental inflection. "If it's true," she said carefully, "the fourth and fifth dimension, all of that, perhaps you'd care to round off the night by taking us there?" Angus shook his head and chuckled. "It was just a dream, Dr Who. It's just a dream." Then his eyes lit up, because Steed and Emma Peel had, at last, shown up, with more champagne. They were always good for a laugh. "I get all my information from the Ministry and the divinely lissom Mrs Peel," Wilson purred. "That's how I move from the comedy of errors, the country house - to the global novel of paranoia, multi-culturalism and desire on a phenomenal scale. Iris Murdoch was explaining to Dr Who that Angus Wilson had been the same since the mid-sixties, when he had started teaching English Literature at the University of East Anglia. "Talk about the Dalek city!" she cried. Mrs Peel flung herself down on a plastic inflatable and cast a smoldering look at Mrs Gale who was dancing in a quite vulgar fashion in the knocked-through lounge with a delirious Jerry Cornelius.

'Put me in a novel, Angus,' Emma sighed. 'Rescue me from kitsch.' Angus was dismayed. 'I'm afraid it's all downhill from here, my dear. Everything we do now, at this fag-end of time, it'll all end kitsch quite soon.' Iris Murdoch struggled to her feet, taking hold of Susan Songtag's proffered arm. And, on the stage, David Bowie was doing a storming rendition of *The Laughing Gnome*. Then he went into some rambling account of how his songs were transmitted into his brain by a transsexual alien being who lived in a gorgeous pyramid on Mars.

Anais Nin, diarist and globe-trotting nymphomaniac arrived, evidently believing it was a Come-As-Your-Own-

Madness party (another one). She had dressed, to that end, in a vast, gilded birdcage, with eyes painted on her breasts. 'it'll do, dear,' said Dr Who., as he made his way through the press of the crowd, Marianne on his arm, murmuring softly. Not quite the end of the decade. It was November the twelfth, 1969. John and Yoko, hairy and stoned, were still in their white wedding suits. They were wanting another bed-in, to protest something or other, but there wasn't enough futons and duvets to go round and, anyway, Dr Who didn't quite approve of that kind of thing. Not bed-ins per se, but directionless protest was a drag.

It was my birthday. I mean, the very day I was born. Not in Maida Vale, not at this gaudy carnival, in the midst of all the tinseling and streamers. I was born in Jarrow, Tyne and Wear. I didn't know it then (how could I?) but I really wanted to tell them not to get too excited, not to get too whipped up in their premature pre-millennial fever and fervour. I wanted them not to self-destruct or to wake, queasily despondent, with massive, decades-long hangovers. I wanted the party to go on till I got time to catch up and join it. It poured down. A very black night. The rain coming down silver and black. Early global warming and the streets heaved and pulsed with rain. trees crackling and tumbling, shops underwater, cars and Daleks floating helplessly away. Catastrophes of JG Ballardian dimensions. I fell to grateful sleep that first, that very first night of my incredibly long life and I was content and sure that the party would go on.

It was very early morning and Maida Vale was flooding out. Waves of party guests were leaving, trashed, distressed. Noel Coward swanned in late with Dietrich piggying on his back, both decked in peacock sequins. They watched, delighted, as the dregs of Dr Who's end of the sixties do followed him into his police box. That night, an impossible number of the clamorous throng, vanished inside. You could hear them shrieking with pleasure within. What a magician! Noel took hold of Dietrich's tiny hand. 'Shall we?' She shrugged and took a sip from her black cigarette. 'Who will miss us if we go? We might as leave with them all.' the two of them brought up the rear, nodding a curt hello to Jamie the Highlander, who looked sated and licked, bleary-eyed and sheepish. The wooden doors shut behind them all. After a few seconds, the light on the the top of the box started to flash white, spasmodically. Then, with what sounded very much like the closing chords of the Beatles' A Day in the Life (or was it the start of Help?), it disappeared.

Silence dropped on the ruinous interior of the house in Maida Vale. Champagne soaked into the white woolen carpets. A half-finished drawing of Orton by Proctor caught light from the tip of Susan Foreman's abandoned fag. And in the North East of England, in a hospital cot, I rolled my eyes in my sleep for the very first time. Having the first of many amused responses to a dream.

© Paul Magrs
