

1996

Wednesday 22 May

It's 9.30 a.m. and I am on the horns of a dilemma. Not for the first time this morning, I let my fingers play across Paul McGann's handsome, shrink-wrapped face.

Am I dreaming? Is *Doctor Who* really coming back? Did the BBC really manage to negotiate a multimillion-dollar US co-production deal, and did they really cast one of the best actors of our generation – and Sylvester McCoy – to play the Doctor? And if I wanted to, could I really remove this videocassette from its box, slide the tape into my VCR, and watch a brand-new episode of my favourite TV show for the first time in six and a half years, right now?

No, I couldn't. Not yet.

Not until Sue gets home.

Her parting words to me as she left for work this morning:

Sue: Whatever you do, don't watch it without me.

I was down at Woolworth's before they opened. I didn't want to run the risk that the shop would be swamped with eager fans like me and they might sell out of stock, and, sure enough, a small crowd had already gathered when I got there. But as it happened, I was the only one queuing outside the doors who didn't work for Woolworth's. Copies of the tape hadn't even made it to the shelves yet, and the staff suggested I go for a walk while they hunted through their

stock room. I declined. After a tense fifteen-minute wait – still no other fans around – I returned home, £12.99 poorer, to begin the longer, no less agonising wait for Sue.

I studied the box again. Paul McGann was wearing a stiff-looking wig and a frock coat. Well, there was no shame in that. After all, William Hartnell had worn a wig and a frock coat too. (Jon Pertwee's bouffant and Tom Baker's curls only looked like wigs.) I scanned the blurb on the back of the box again, just in case I'd missed something vitally important the seventeen times I read it previously, and I thought about removing the shrink-wrap and just staring at the cassette for a bit.

Sue: Whatever you do, don't watch it without me.

I decide to leave the shrink-wrap alone.

To be honest, I was anxious about this new *Doctor Who*. The omens weren't good. And it wasn't just the wig and the frock coat – everything about the BBC's intended reboot of the franchise seemed slightly off. They hadn't even come up with a proper title for it, not 'Return of the Doctor' or 'The Deadly Regeneration' or anything like that, just *The TV Movie*. Worse still, the movie had been shown in America and Canada already. I mean, seriously, *Canada*? I wouldn't have minded so much if the BBC had released the VHS a week earlier, like they'd promised to, but last-minute editing delayed its release until it eventually went on sale just a few days before it was due to be broadcast on BBC One. Or as Sue put it:

Sue: Why not save your money and wait for it to turn up on the telly for free?

Because that's not how we Whovians roll, as no one said in 1996.

Furthermore, this unexpected delay severely disrupted my dream of sharing the return of *Doctor Who* with Sue.

This had been the original plan: because I couldn't drive, Sue would take me to the special midnight opening at HMV in Newcastle. I would queue from 9 p.m. and she would visit her brother, Gary, who lived in nearby Gateshead. She would return for me at 12.15 a.m. and we would be home by 1 a.m., and we would watch the first new *Doctor Who* to be produced since its cancellation in 1989 together. And it would definitely be brilliant.

It didn't turn out that way. Instead, the tape's release got pushed back to a date when Sue was working, and the only midnight opening still scheduled to take place was down in London; I did ask Sue if it might be possible for her to drive me to the capital in her battered Renault Clio, but her answer was both unequivocal and peppered with four-letter words, none of which were 'okay', 'sure' or 'good idea'.

So here I am. It's 10 a.m. and there are another eight hours to wait until Sue gets home.

Sue: Whatever you do, don't watch it without me.

What did Sue mean by that, I wondered. Did it mean she was as excited about *Doctor Who's* imminent return as I was? Was her display of total indifference in the weeks leading up to its release just a clever smokescreen? Was it possible she was losing as much sleep over the return of the show as I was? Or – and this was much more likely – was she taking the piss? If she was taking the piss, I could go ahead and

watch it without her, no harm done. But what if she wasn't taking the piss? What if it was a sincere romantic gesture on her part?

Hmm. Maybe it was possible to re-seal shrink-wrap with wood glue or something. Or maybe I could return to Woolies to buy a second copy. If I watched that one instead, I'd still have a pristine, shrink-wrapped tape in my hands when she returned. Money was tight, though, and even if I could afford two copies, could I really go three days without a cigarette? Plus, while we watched it together, I would have to pretend that I hadn't already seen it earlier in the day, probably several times, and feign spontaneous surprise or suspense or delight at this new Doctor's adventures, and that seemed wrong somehow – like cheating.

Behind his plastic prison, Paul McGann sure looks tempting. But it's no good. I can't do it.

I want to watch it with Sue.

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My heart skips a beat when I hear Sue's car pull up outside just after 7 p.m. In just a few minutes we will be watching new *Doctor Who* together. Thankfully, Nicol is staying at a friend's tonight. I wasn't that upset to learn she'd miss Paul McGann's debut as the Doctor as she'd only spend the evening throwing salt and vinegar hula-hoops at his face, because right now she's only eight.

I wave the tape in Sue's face as she takes her coat off. Its shrink-wrap is still unblemished, except for a very small tear where I'd rubbed Paul's face a little *too* hard.

Me: I haven't watched it yet. Look, it's still in its wrapper.

Sue: That's nice, love, I thought you'd have worn it out by now.

Me: But . . . but you told me to wait for you.

Sue: I was joking, you idiot. But it was very sweet of you to wait . . . Hang on a minute – you didn't buy two copies, did you?

Me: The thought never even crossed my mind. Now, can we just sit down and watch it? *Please?*

Sue: Can I get something to eat first? I'll only be a minute.

She sat down next to me on the sofa forty-five minutes later, a plate of lasagne balanced delicately on her knee. Swallowing a mouthful of pasta, she motioned towards the television with her fork.

Sue: Off you go, then.

Me: But you won't be able to concentrate on the plot if you're eating at the same time.

Sue: I'm fine. I can listen to it. Press Play.

Ninety minutes later . . .

Sue: That wasn't bad.

Me: Yes it was. It was a disaster!

Sue: Don't worry. I'm sure they'll get it right when it goes to a series.

The Master: The Doctor is half human!

Sue: Eh? Since when?

I pause the DVD.

Me: What do you make of that, then?

Sue: It makes sense, I suppose.

Me: WHAT?

Sue: Well, he's obsessed with Earth. He can't keep away from the place. Why isn't he saving Mars every week? There has to be a reason for it and that's a good enough reason as any.

Me: So, do you think Paul McGann counts?

Sue: Of course he f**king counts. Why wouldn't he?

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When Sue went to bed, I stayed up and watched *The TV Movie* again, just to be sure. Yes, the Americans had achieved the seemingly impossible – they had taken the thing that nobody liked very much and ruined it.

It wasn't just that the Doctor was being played by someone good-looking or that the character was half-human all of a sudden. This Doctor kissed women on the lips. His TARDIS could bring people back from the dead. The plot felt both rushed and too complicated. The music was blaring and intrusive. The whole production looked unsustainably expensive. There was no way this version of *Doctor Who*, or one like it, would ever go to a series.

It was time to face up to it. The hiatus was back on – possibly for ever. And do you know something? I was almost relieved. There was some stuff I had to get on with.