

MAG – 055 – Pest Control

Content Warnings:

- Infestation
- Insects
- Suffocation
- Fire & burns
- Physical violence

Discussions of: rot, mould, fire, screaming, threats

Mentions of: smoking, hive minds

SFX: low drone, low rumbling

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode fifty-five. Pest Control.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro *Continued*]

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Say it again please.

JORDAN

Excuse me?

ARCHIVIST

What you just said. Can you say it again, so I have it on tape?

JORDAN

Uh, okay, Jane Prentiss is dead.

ARCHIVIST

You're sure? Completely?

JORDAN

Yeah, I watched the incineration.

ARCHIVIST

And there were no complications?

JORDAN

Like what?

ARCHIVIST

Surviving worms that escaped. Movement from the body during incineration. Noises from it, like screams or chanting. Weird feelings like a thousand tiny crawling things are moving across your skin.

JORDAN

Wow. No, nothing like that. Just the smell, but I mean, I'll get to that. It went well. Nothing left but the ashes I gave to your friend. Which I shouldn't have, by the way, so keep it to yourself.

ARCHIVIST

Of course. And thank you.

JORDAN

Sure.

ARCHIVIST

It's been months though. Why are you just looking to make your statement now?

JORDAN

Uh, it's not really... it's not just burning her body. I was also the one that was first called in to deal with the nest in her old apartment.

ARCHIVIST

Oh.

JORDAN

Yeah, but there are a few things I've been thinking about. Putting some pieces together and I thought, well, you guys should probably know.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Well, start from the beginning, wherever you feel... comfortable.

Statement of Jordan Kennedy regarding...

JORDAN

Several weird things I've found while working in pest control.

ARCHIVIST

Statement taken direct from subject, 3rd November 2016. Statement begins.

JORDAN (STATEMENT)

I've worked as an exterminator for the better part of ten years now. I should say 'pest controller' really. The BPCA generally advise against using the E word. They feel it sounds a bit too unpleasant, harms our public image. I've never really minded. I mean, I guess I could say killing things is sort of exerting control over them, but I've always felt that trying to sanitise my job is somehow a bit dishonest. Like trying to help people forget that what they're actually doing is commissioning the deaths of creatures which we've deemed too disgusting or unhealthy to live. It needs doing, don't get me wrong, and I'm happy enough to do it. But it isn't my job to hold people's hands and make them feel better about it.

I've done places all over London, mainly big commercial buildings where I have to work at night, while all the bankers and the like have gone home. Setting traps, putting down poison boxes, the usual. Residential homes don't call me out quite so much for rats and mice, especially if it's a rental place. Most landlords don't bother paying out for that sort of thing or try to deal with it themselves. You get a lot of calls about bedbugs though. Those little bastards are a devil to get rid of, and of course, come summer, we have to deal with plenty of wasps' nests. Sprinkle a generous handful of cockroaches, ants and occasionally even birds or foxes, and you have a pretty good idea of what my working life consists of. Pretty normal.

I got my first weird call about five years ago. It was ants, or so I was told, down in Bromley. The house itself looked like a pretty standard suburban home – maybe a bit more rundown than its neighbours, but nothing particularly unusual about that, especially if they were calling me in. There was no car in the driveway and the blinds were all drawn, despite the summer sun. It didn't look like there was anyone home. I found out later that it had actually been one of the neighbours that called me in, a woman named Laura Starr, but at that point I was still expecting to be met by someone at the house. I knocked on the door, but obviously there was no answer. Now, I always wear gloves when I'm on the job and, when I noticed my hand, I noticed a very faint sheen where the thin leather had touched the wood. It seemed to be some sort of oily residue. I was feeling less comfortable with the job by the second.

I couldn't hear anything from inside, so I knocked again. The woman who hired me had said to let myself in, but I didn't want to just waltz in unannounced. After a few seconds of silence, I tried the handle and, sure enough, the door opened. There were no lights on the inside and the place seemed almost completely empty of furniture. I could see faint movement on the wooden floor as I looked around for the light switch. I found it quickly enough and flicked it on to reveal exactly what I'd expected. Ants. I just hadn't expected that many. And there were so very many of them.

To this day, I've never seen more ants inside a building at once. There must have been thousands, carpeting the floor and swarming over the walls. I drew my hand back from the light switch as I noticed dozens of them crawling around it. Even the bulb seemed to be covered with them, causing the light in the room to be covered with twitching shadow. The house itself didn't look much better. Wherever there was a gap in the ants, I could see that same oily rot and I couldn't escape the idea that the building was somehow sick.

Now, I've seen plenty of disgusting things in this job, but I reckon that moment was one of the most intense. I fled briefly back to my van to decide on my next move. Normally I'd leave out some poisoned bait for them to take back to their colony, eliminating the problem at its source, but an infestation that bad, well, that doesn't come from nothing. I needed to get a sense of exactly what I was dealing with. Even from the road, I could see a steady stream flowing out the open door and over the step.

I kitted up with pesticide spray and headed in for a closer look. I wouldn't normally bother using spray on ants, but this wasn't normal and the formula I was using worked on ants just fine. That said, I didn't actually see any of them die. I wouldn't have expected to immediately anyway, and what was important is that wherever I sprayed, they fled, clearing a path of discoloured floor for me to walk. It was slow going, but I got through most of the ground floor like that

and didn't see anything except more ants. No people, no furniture, nothing. At least until I reached the kitchen and saw the fridge.

There was nothing else in that kitchen. Even the sink had been removed, leaving just the water pipes sticking out of the wall like rusty, diseased bones. But up against the far wall stood an old fridge. Its once white skin was now a jaundiced yellow and I couldn't quite shake the feeling that it was pulsing ever so gently. A thick, black mass of ants swarmed from the crack in its door and I had no doubt that whatever was at the heart of this incredibly unpleasant situation, it was going to be in that fridge. So, I decided it was probably a good idea to step outside for a cigarette before I opened it.

The air outside seemed much fresher as I left the house. I walked a few yards away from the door, so that I wasn't too close, and then I lit up. It was as I took the first drag that I saw a car pull up to the driveway. It was a small, red compact and the licence plate seemed to indicate that it had only been bought the year before, but even so, I could see the rust starting to bubble the paint near the edges of the panelling. I watched as the door opened and a man stepped out. He was tall, maybe six and a half feet, but it was hard to be sure of his shape inside the huge, brown suit he was wearing. He took one look at me, then the sign on the side of my van that read 'Kennedy Pest Control' and his face began to crease with rage.

I took another drag on my cigarette. I was uneasy about the whole situation and was waiting to see what the strange looking man would do. He walked up to me, great strides that brought him close enough that I could see the unhealthy gloss of sweat on his skin. Was everything here sick? He leaned in far closer than I was comfortable with and demanded to know what I was doing. I told him that the homeowner had hired me to take care of an ant infestation and I'd been doing a preliminary sweep.

He started to shake his head violently, saying that *he* was the homeowner, that this was his house and I had no business being there. Well, those weren't his exact words. What he actually said was that I had no business "plying my vile trade on his property". I was about to get out my phone and call the woman who hired me, when his hand shot out without warning and grabbed me by the throat. He lifted me off my feet with a strength that terrified me, and I was very glad that, even with the hood down, my protective suit kept my neck covered. I could feel his hand through the thick plastic; it was hot, like he was running some incredibly high fever, and I started to panic.

He held me there, almost a foot off the ground, and my vision began to swim as he squeezed my throat. As I struggled for breath, I flailed for something to fight him off with and realised that I was still holding my lighter. With a degree

of composure that, looking back on it now, still surprises me, I flicked the lighter on and raised it to just below his arm.

The result was a lot more dramatic than I expected. His loose, brown suit sleeve caught almost immediately, and within a few moments, his whole arm was alight. He yelped and dropped me onto the ground as he began to flail about, trying to stop the fire spreading further across his body. I staggered to my van. By then, it didn't matter who the rightful owner of that house was; I was done with that job. It was as I was climbing into the van that I smelled it.

It is the most disgusting thing I have ever encountered, halfway between sun-cooked roadkill, stale sweat and rotten eggs, with just a hint of burning rubber. And underneath it all is that undefinable scent of sickness. You know that smell you get when you enter a room where someone's been ill for several days? No matter what else it smells like, beneath it all there's that vague but undeniable whiff of disease. That's what this man smelled like, as he desperately tried to extinguish his burning flesh.

I drove away, trying not to gag, and I didn't look back. I didn't call the police either, as I felt they might not look too kindly on me setting a man alight, even if he did attack me. I assume he didn't file a report either, as no one ever turned up to question me about it.

So that was the first time I encountered that smell.

ARCHIVIST

I see. And the other time was when you burned Jane Prentiss.

JORDAN

Not just. I mean, I didn't actually see her. The incineration was the first time I ever saw her in person. But a couple of years ago, I was called in to deal with a wasps' nest. That is what the landlord had called it on the phone, at least.

Apparently, it had injured one of his tenants earlier that day and I was the first pest control service he had called that was free immediately. He didn't tell me the name of the tenant, though obviously I now know who it was. He didn't give me any real details on the phone, but he seemed happy to pay the emergency call-out charge, so I bundled up my wasp gear and headed out to Prospero Road.

It was a bit strange to get a call about wasps at that time of year. It was late February or early March, I think, and still quite cold. Still, if it was a warm enough building, they could easily be getting active. Regardless, I made sure to check over the thick suit I used for that sort of job, to make sure there was no weakness or damage. If they were aggressive enough to injure someone, I wasn't going to take any chances.

The landlord's name was Arthur Nolan. He was a short man with a constant scowl, thinning white hair and a well-chewed cigar. It looked like his denim shirt had once contained quite an athletic build, but it had long since settled. He looked me up and down as I left my van and I saw his mouth twist briefly in irritation. Clearly, he wasn't impressed. I gave him the usual talk through, what was going to happen, and he nodded absently before pressing the keys to flat 4 into my hands and pointing me towards it. If I needed anything, he said, he'd be in flat 1, where he lived. I advised him and the other tenants to stay out of the building while I was dealing with the wasps, but he just grunted and told me again that he'd be in flat 1. The other tenants had apparently already left. I loaded up on Ficam D insecticide and headed in.

It was a lot quieter than I expected. By the time I was outside flat 4, I would normally have expected to be hearing the buzzing sound of wasps, but the evening was quiet. I opened the door slowly – no sudden movements that might alarm anything on the other side, but again the flat seemed to be empty. It looked like there'd been some chaos though, with books and clothes strewn across the floor and a shattered TV screen in the corner. I found the ladder up into the loft space in the centre of the bedroom. It was quite small and climbing it in my bulky suit was tricky, but I got up there. Still no wasps, but it was very dark, so I rooted around again until I found the switch to a single bare

bulb. The light was very faint, but enough to make out a thick, pulpy lump up against the far wall.

It certainly didn't look like any wasps' nest I'd seen before. I mean, the shape was familiar enough, but the texture of the surface was way off. It seemed a lot less papery than would have been normal, and the whorls were less regular, going off at odd angles and making it kind of hard to look away. The whole thing was spongy, pocked with tiny holes, and generally looking very unhealthy indeed. And most disconcerting of all, there were still no wasps.

None of this changed the job I had to do, so I figured I'd start off like any other wasps' nest and see if it worked. I reached forward, staying as far from this thing as the nozzle would let me, and I pushed it into one of the larger holes. It sank in with almost no resistance at all. I took a deep breath and pulled the trigger, spraying the insecticide dust deep into the mass.

The effect was immediate. The whole thing started to pulse and spasm, the spongy flesh of it throbbing and bubbling like some sort of vile putty. It began to grow in size, blossoming out and covering the rest of the nozzle, reaching out for me. And then it began to scream. Not the sound of air escaping or a buzzing that sounded like screaming, the weird nest thing was letting out a

long, warbling cry of anger and pain. I dropped the pump and was down the ladder so fast I almost fell into the flat below.

I could still hear it as I reached the door to the corridor. I threw it open, only to be confronted by the face of Arthur Nolan, the landlord, staring at me with a look of disappointment. He nodded and began to walk down the hall. I

followed him, desperate for answers, but he just ignored my questions about what the hell was going on or what that thing was and kept walking down the stairs to his own flat. At one point, he shook his head and mumbled something about hoping it wouldn't get this far, but he didn't seem to be saying it to me.

As soon as the door opened, I became aware of how uncomfortably warm flat 1 was. The air was thick and dry and made my throat feel a bit scratchy. The landlord continued to ignore my presence and walked over to an old armchair in the centre of the room. As he did so, he started to unbutton his denim shirt. More so than anything else that had happened, that was the thing that finally stopped me in confusion. I couldn't understand what he was doing. As he sat down, his shirt flapped open and I saw what looked to be an intricate scar on his chest. If I had to guess what it was, I'd have said it looked like a stylised flame, but it also made me think of a face contorted in pain.

Time seemed to move slowly as he reached for the ash tray on the arm of the chair and picked up a pack of matches. He struck one and, without even looking at me, he gently pressed the small flame to the centre of the scar. His flesh caught fire immediately, the flames spreading across his body like rippling water. The armchair caught, then the floor, and then I was running out of the building before the rolling inferno covered me as well.

This time, I didn't drive away. I stood there and I watched it burn until the fire brigade arrived. It was when the fire hit that attic space of the top floor – where I knew that awful nest still sat – that was when I smelled it, the same grotesque stench that had come from that oily, fevered man three years before. At the time, I didn't really connect the two – I was too busy trying to comprehend what had just happened and, when trucks from the ECDC showed up to put me in quarantine, it slipped my mind entirely.

They were surprisingly forthcoming about Jane Prentiss and what had happened, and after an extensive debriefing, they actually offered me a job. Apparently, disease control and pest control often go hand in hand, and I've been working for them since. Most of the jobs have been mundane, a couple slightly weird, but nothing like those two.

ARCHIVIST

So, why make your statement now?

JORDAN

When I helped incinerate her body, I smelled it again. Like before. Took me a while to piece the two together, but I thought you should know.

ARCHIVIST

Are you saying there might be more out there like her?

JORDAN

God, I hope not. I don't know. The man from the ant house, he wasn't like her, not at all, but that smell when they burned... I think they're connected, somehow. And that scares me.

ARCHIVIST

Yes... yes, it rather scares me too.

[Tape clicks off.]

ARCHIVIST

Mr Kennedy's statement has left me somewhat rattled. While I am always glad of any further closure to the case of Jane Prentiss, this seems to come with the rather serious caveat that she might not have been working alone. No, that

doesn't sound right. Jane Prentiss, or whatever this 'flesh hive' was that took her, does not seem like the sort of being that would work well with others.

The house in Bromley was torn down last year, but Martin managed to locate the ownership records. It was listed as belonging to John Amherst. The dates aren't entirely clear as to whether this was just before or just after he apparently took charge of Ivy Meadows nursing home, but there can be no doubt that it was the same person. All the ownership records from the ant house lead to dead ends or deactivated bank accounts. It doesn't sound like he's another flesh hive and yet... no connection except disease and insects. And a foul smell when they burn.

Jane Prentiss is dead, but this is a long way from over.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental. I... I don't have much to report actually. It's been Halloween week, which means the research department is always inundated with statements. Most of them are patently false, but the volume means that they've called in the Archive to assist with the overflow.

It's been nice, actually. Disproving piles of nonsense felt good, like real work, not just driving myself to distraction with conspiracy theories and paranoia. I even got a good night's sleep. I miss those days. End supplemental.

[Tape clicks off.]

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Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.

It featured: Jonathan Sims as The Archivist and Tim Ledsam as Jordan Kennedy.