

MAG – 066 – Held in Customs

Content Warnings:

- Cleithrophobia
- Claustrophobia
- Being crushed
- Isolation

Discussions of: non-consensual drug use, drug and people trafficking, buried alive

Mentions of: alcohol, panic, self-hatred, death, character death

SFX: low drone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode sixty-six. Held in Customs.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro *Continued*]

[Tape clicks on]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Vincent Yang, regarding his claimed imprisonment by Mikaele Salesa. Original statement given February 22nd, 2000. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

He drugged me. Obviously, he drugged me. That's the only explanation that makes sense. It was the only way he could get me in there and drugs can affect how you see all sorts of things. Even time. It's just... it felt so real. I felt every second and I checked my watch and... but I've taken all sorts of drugs in my life. I experimented plenty with psychedelics in my youth, and this didn't feel like being drugged. It felt like being eaten. No, not eaten ... entombed.

It was his own damn fault. I've been working Customs long enough and we all know the drill; he should too. You bust the sloppy ones; you bust the ones you think might involve whatever the higher ups are coming down on hard that month. But most smugglers are small fry. You keep your paperwork in order and we'll keep out of your way, as long as you give us the same courtesy. I know that Mikaele Salesa shipped through Portsmouth all the time. I never dealt with the man directly, but he should have made sure to keep his documents clean. As it was, I had to hold his shipment. Not enough grounds for an immediate full search, I made that clear to him, but if he didn't get his papers in order quickly, we'd have no choice.

I still remember how he stared at me, stood in that shipping container, surrounded by flight cases and sealed metal boxes. That level, even stare. He was appraising me like some sort of antique, like he was curious what my value might be at auction. Then his face turned to a scowl of irritation and he gestured widely to his cargo, offering me the chance to examine it if I thought him a criminal. His voice was deep, calm and measured, but his eyes had an anger in them that scared me. I looked around the container, not so much to look at the contents, but just to avoid his gaze. Truth be told, I hated my job. It wears you down, to be someone who nobody wants to see. Smugglers and traffickers hate me because I threaten to disrupt their business, I understand

that. But legitimate operators look at me in the exact same way, because they know that an error on the manifest can be far more important than whether they've got 2 kilos of heroin hidden in the boot of an imported car.

I began to walk around, giving a cursory examination to the assortment of mismatched boxes surrounding Salesa. I didn't open anything. I didn't want to. I just wanted to make a small show of the fact that I could. It was the 18th of January, about a month ago, and the container was ice cold. Fiddling around with locks and fastenings would have needed me to take my gloves off and that wasn't happening. Salesa stood there in a tank top and unbuttoned shirt, seemingly oblivious to the chill. If he was trying to make some show of toughness or bravado, then to be honest, it was working. I had no interest in crossing this man. More important though, was the fact that smuggled antiques were so far down the list of priorities at that point, that from a career point of view, bending down to stare at some flight case full of incorrectly declared pottery was a complete waste of my time.

I sighed, got to my feet, and as I did so, I grabbed the edge of an old wooden crate for support. I felt the lid shift slightly under my weight. I looked at it a bit closer and couldn't help but notice it didn't seem to have any bolts or locks on it and the lid clearly hadn't been nailed shut. I reached over to try and slide it back into place, but my gloved hand slipped, and as I tried to grip it, I swear I barely touched the thing, but the wooden top slid further off, releasing a dusty cloud of air that sent me into a coughing fit. The air was dry and hot in a way that seemed rather alarming in the frigid shipping container. The inside was dark, the light from the entrance not reaching this far back. I shined my light in and to my surprise, the crate appeared to be completely empty. I didn't remember it listed on the manifest, but if it didn't contain anything there

wasn't necessarily a reason for it to be. I turned back to face Salesa with a shrug.

He no longer looked angry. Instead, his face now had a look of concern. I assumed he was worried I'd found something suspicious, but I shook my head and told him that if he got his documents in order by tomorrow, he could be on his way no problem. Otherwise it was going to get more complicated. The look on his face didn't change. I began to walk out – I had plenty more work to do that day – when he grabbed my arm. His grip was just as strong as I would have guessed and for a second, I was suddenly afraid he was going to kill me. Instead he looked me in the eyes for a long moment before he said, very softly, "Don't go to sleep."

I shook my head, assuming that was meant to be some sort of threat, and gave him a look that tried to tell him I wasn't scared. Of course, I was, but either way he didn't seem to notice. He just looked at me and repeated himself.

I was understandably nervous after that little encounter, but I live in a ground floor flat in a rather rough area, so I have several locks, a sturdy door and bars on the window, all of which I triple checked before turning in that night. Everything seemed to be in order, so I had a few shots of vodka to calm my nerves and, well, I turned in. Looking back on it now, the thing I find hardest to believe is how well I slept. It was a restful night's sleep and I didn't dream.

The pain in my legs was what woke me. The dull cramp dragged me slowly from unconsciousness and I tried to shift them into a more comfortable position under the covers. As I tried, I gradually realised that I couldn't. They were pressed right up against a hard surface. My eyes began to flutter open and I realised that, instead of my pillow, my cheek was pressed against

something coarse and rigid. Something that, when I tried to move, greeted me with the needling sharpness of splinters.

It was dark. Opening my eyes didn't do much to change what I could see. My hands pressed against unvarnished wood and I felt a rising panic in the back of my mind. I think, deep down, I already knew exactly where I was, but I still tried steadily, one at a time, to move every limb and part of my body, hoping desperately that one of them would pass out into open air and reassure me that I wasn't trapped within that small wooden cube. But I could barely move any of them, and it soon became apparent that my prison was indeed a sturdy wooden crate.

I started to shout for help then. The sound was jarring, the echo muted by the close confines of the walls, and my cries seemed incredibly loud to me. I called out again and again, but nobody came. After a few minutes, I suddenly had the horrid thought that maybe I had been buried alive and I might have limited air. That shut me up very quickly and instead I started to listen closely for any sound of movement.

Nothing.

You know, it's strange. It took me a long time to make the connection with the crate I had stumbled across in Salesa's shipping container. I was so disoriented by my awakening that the idea that this was his doing took a surprisingly long time to come. Once it did though, I began to feel rage building. I had the memory of the lid that hadn't been secured and, taking a moment to orientate myself, I began to push up on the wood directly above me. It didn't budge a millimetre. Either it had been nailed down or someone had placed a heavy weight on top of it. Or both. I started to thrash around at that point, desperate

to escape, but this only earned me more splinters. I suppose I was lucky that it was winter and the thick pyjamas I had slept in, that I was apparently still wearing, protected me from a lot of it.

At the thought of winter, I began to notice the heat. It was hot in that tiny cell. A close, humid heat that caused sweat to trickle gently down my neck and my throat gradually turned ragged and raw, and I could do nothing but sit there, cramped and desperate and feel that stifling, oppressive heat thrum around me.

Everything about it was stifling and oppressive. I have never suffered from claustrophobia before, but it didn't take long for it to set in, and for a while I gave in to blind panic, muttering to myself and hyperventilating in shallow, gasping breaths of hot, sticky air. The thing that finally brought me out of it was the realisation that if I'd been breathing so hard and for so long, but was still conscious, that must mean there was air flow and that I wasn't completely buried alive. That sudden moment of relief ended abruptly though, when, I swear, I felt the box get smaller. It was a slight movement, barely a centimetre, but I felt it in a jolt of pain along my leg, like the crate had decided to punish me for my moment of hope.

After a while, the cramps that had been so agonising to begin with began to fade in and out. It's not that it stopped hurting, far from it, but it became such a constant pain that I could ignore it for long periods of time before it washed back over me in a wave of screaming muscles. It was in such a window of normality that I realised I was able to see my arms. There was light! It seemed to be seeping through the small gaps in the wood, barely enough to see by normally, but my eyes had grown very accustomed to the dark. It looked like sunlight. I must have been outside, but I had no idea where I might be. Near

my head, a slightly larger space between the wooden slats let in a thin beam of sunlight near my head. I shifted, my neck protesting the movement, but for a single moment, I felt it on my face. That sunlight, a ... a dream of freedom. Then the box closed the gap with a shudder and squeezed me a bit tighter for daring to do so.

Still, I knew I was outside, and I knew I had air, so I tried once again to scream for help. I pleaded, I shouted, I felt my dry lips crack from the force of my screams. I kept going until my voice was nothing but a hoarse whisper, and then I collapsed back into despair and terror.

At 11.56, I realised I could see my watch. I wasn't in the habit of taking it off for bed and the position I had been forced into left it just about visible in the dim light. It was surprisingly little comfort, as the hours that had passed by in a hazy blur of pain and fear now ticked by with an awful slowness. Even so, it grounded me, kept me focused on something real. The minutes and hours passed, same as they would have outside the box, and this, more than anything, convinced me that I was neither dreaming nor mad.

At 9.45 the light began to disappear, and I was once again in darkness. I slept then, fitfully and in great pain, and when I woke back up to find myself still trapped there, I cried. Even as I did so, in the back of my mind I hated myself for wasting what water I might have left in me.

Four days I was in there, at least, if the darkness and light really was night and day. I used to be religious and I tried to pray several times, but the words felt hollow on my dry, desperate lips. I called out to God, then later to the devil and finally to Salesa himself. None of them answered. I knew that that was where I was going to die, trapped and alone. I wondered if they would ever

find me. Was I somewhere where the stench of my rot might bring some poor soul to investigate? Probably not, if my screams couldn't be heard, but maybe someone would find me. Maybe they would join me, if the box was still hungry.

It was thoughts like these that played endlessly through my mind, round and round like a feverish, thirsty carousel.

Then all at once it was over. I awoke to hear the sounds of wood shifting above me. I barely had time to register what was happening, before frigid, icy air washed over me and the torchlight was shining in my face. I blinked hard as I started to make out two figures above me. One was Salesa, staring at me with an expression of curiosity. The other I didn't know, though I vaguely recognised him as one of the captains that made port here occasionally. Captain Laurell, maybe? Or Luckor? I don't really remember. He looked at me, then over to Salesa, shrugged, then handed him a £20 note, before turning around and walking out of the shipping container, which I saw I was once again inside.

Salesa lifted me gently out of the box, being careful, I noted, not to touch the sides. Moving my legs was like walking on knives, but I managed to stumble out, overjoyed at my freedom. I felt Salesa push some papers into my hands, "An updated manifest", he told me, and sent me on my way.

I spent that day trying to get some life back into my tortured, atrophied muscles and slowly drinking water. I ignored my work completely and ended the day by handing in my notice. Do you know what date was on my letter of resignation? The 19th of January, the day after I had first seen Salesa. My watch no longer matched the clock in the break room.

I don't know why the night was so much longer for me, or why it boiled me with the sun in the middle of winter. I must have been drugged. Salesa must have drugged me. It's the only rational explanation. But I know that he didn't.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Another tale of the elusive Mikaele Salesa, dealing in all sorts of artefacts without any decent safety measures. Unless that's the point, of course. And if I'm not mistaken, it would appear he's at least acquainted with Captain Peter Lukas of The Tundra. Whatever this grand game is, Salesa is definitely involved. I just wish I knew whether he was a player or a pawn. Or something else entirely.

Surprisingly, it seems comprehensive shipping records are harder for Tim to flirt his way into than police reports and Sasha has had her own issues with trying to access the electronic records. If there is official documentation of this particular shipment that might verify Mr Yang's story, we're not able to obtain them.

Martin encountered a different problem tracking down Mr Yang himself. Apparently, he's retired now and living with his children, who were surprisingly cooperative in allowing Martin to see him. He's also in the later stages of early onset Alzheimer's disease. He could provide no new useful information and Martin left after Mr Yang became acutely distressed at the mention of boxes.

All in all, a dead end. If this was the first time Mikaele Salesa had turned up in our files, I would definitely agree with Mr Yang's own assessment. But by now,

there are far too many cases to chalk them all up to drugs. Whatever Salesa deals in is, I suspect, infinitely more dangerous.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental. Gertrude's laptop has been rather... interesting. Unfortunately, nothing along the lines 'My Murderer.avi', and she didn't keep any sort of diary from what I can see. In fact, it doesn't look like she kept many documents at all – a few budget spreadsheets and work forms, but I get the feeling she wasn't much of a notetaker. The thing that is interesting in the budget spreadsheet is the rather large amount she requested for travel. What's even stranger is that it seems the budget was approved.

Her internet history and emails reveal some more pertinent information; it looks like she did do a lot of travel, all over the world, far further than the single basement one would expect an archivist to keep to. And in these cases at least, she kept the receipts and the booking information: Nairobi, Wichita, Budapest, Shanghai... the list goes on. No records as far back as '98, of course, but given the pattern, I don't think a trip to Alexandria is at all out of the question.

There's also the matter of the products she was ordering. There are several online orders of petrol, lighter fluid, pesticides and high-powered torches. They are sporadic, but notable in that she did not drive, smoke or work in pest control. The torches would make sense if it wasn't for the quantities in which she ordered them. She also sent orders for a staggering array of filing tabs,

labels and index markers. All different makes, formats and systems, most of which I have encountered in various forms around the archives.

Given that the doddering old lady image is now dispelled in its entirety, I cannot help but wonder if there is a reason she was keeping the files in disarray. I'm not convinced she would approve of my efforts to organise them. Part of me is tempted to follow her lead and suspend my explorations, but the more I find out about Gertrude, the less I am inclined to trust her, and I am not sure emulating her is the wisest course of action.

Especially given the three more alarming purchases I found in her history. Gertrude Robinson was trying to buy Leitners. Seeing the account name grbookworm1818 gave me a particularly hollow laugh. Obvious when you are looking for it, I suppose. It looks like she managed to get hold of three books: a special printing of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* by John Ruskin, that rather dubious copy of *The Key of Solomon* and a 1910 pamphlet simply entitled *A Disappearance*. I am quite sure none of them are in the archives and they weren't in her flat either. I rather hope she destroyed them, especially as *The Key of Solomon* is something of an almanac on demonology, but my luck isn't that good.

All told, the laptop has given me much cause for concern and little in the way of hard evidence. The more I learn about Gertrude, the more I respect her, and the more I worry about her motives. Perhaps I've been focusing on the wrong question and the most important thing isn't who killed her, but why?

End supplemental.

[Tape clicks off.]

The Magnus Archives – Episode 066 – Held in Customs

The Magnus Archives is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Sharealike 4.0 International licence.

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

It featured: Jonathan Sims as The Archivist.