

MAG – 144 - Decrypted

Content Warnings:

- Parental death
- Family conflict
- Paranoia
- Compulsive behaviour
- Illness
- **Discussions of:** mass death, grief and loss, nuclear attack, apocalypse and extinction
- **Mentions of:** heart attacks, smoking
- **SFX:** continuous low-pitched tone, static

[The Magnus Archives Theme -Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and forty-four. Decrypted.

[Tape clicks on.]

MARTIN

Martin Blackwood, Assistant to Peter Lukas, Head of the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 0090310, statement of Gary Boylan, given October 3rd 2009.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

It was grey – I remember that so clearly – and hot, but no sun. No sun at all. The sky had that thick layer of cloud that catches the heat and it choked me on in. Fields and fields of yellow grass that went on forever, with rusted pylons looming over all of it. It was that appalling sort of summer you only get in the middle of England, with all the joy of the season stripped away, leaving endless fields of dry soil and emptiness. There was nothing to be done, nowhere to go; just watch and wait and think about the decay of it all. Walking among the detritus of the countryside is the surest way I know to find yourself close to the transience of humanity, seeing the little hints, the preview of what is to come for all of us when the world no longer cares enough to keep us alive.

Have you ever been driving along a motorway, passing through the middle of some rural nothing place, when you spot, in the distance, on some tiny road you have no idea how to reach, a row of three or four terraced suburban houses? Just sitting there, no town or village for miles, just a weird, unattached little street – that's where I live. It was where I grew up, where I left forever, and then where I returned to after my mother died and my business collapsed. The two events were unrelated, but both happened close enough together that I ended up moving back in with my dad. I told myself it was to take care of him, but I'd been there five years before I knew it, and in a lot of ways the old man seemed more capable of dealing with the world than me.

Not that he was supportive. He'd been a vet for most of his life and spent a lot of that time working with livestock. I think all those years hanging around farmers must have rubbed off on him. He hated doctors, for instance, something I always pointed out was absurd given his own job. I'd say he was a vet, and he'd say, yeah, he was, and start talking about how many animals he'd put down in his career. I never had any interest in continuing the conversation

after that. He'd always been blunt, but after mum died, God, it was like his whole personality became callous.

I should have left him to himself, but there was something about that dismal little house, all alone except for old Mrs Whitshaw on one side and the empty house that no-one could sell on the other. Something kept me rooted there, sleeping in a bedroom that hadn't changed since I was fifteen and caring for a man who I'd rather just shut up. We were both trapped there, I think, bound together in a sort of wordless misery. I would look at him and see a grim sort of destiny for myself, trapped here until I became him, any future I might have had sacrificed to his.

I always used to go for long walks through the fields to try and escape for a bit. I usually managed to walk for about an hour and a half, before my paranoia kicked in and I started to worry he'd had a fall or something and I had to head back. An hour and a half was plenty, though, for all the places I could go. We were a long way from any real trails, and the most scenic things to see were rusted tractors, piles of discarded tyres, or the huge metal skeleton of an old disconnected power pylon. It was a bleak and empty rural wasteland, and when the summer heat hit, without shade or shelter, it was almost as relentlessly oppressive as that old man. But I still took my walks.

It was this last August that it happened. I was about an hour into my walk, having had a row with him about his failing eyesight, a subject that made him even more defensive than usual, and was passing by an old sheet metal barn when I heard it. I'd been listening to music as I walked, when my iPod abruptly cut out. I stopped where I was and took it out of my pocket, assuming I'd knocked it or somehow turned it off, but the screen was on, apparently playing music, though I didn't immediately recognise the song. I've got a pretty sizable

music collection, but I feel like I do know it pretty well. This one had no artist, no album, just the track name: “Numbers”.

As I stared at it, I began to hear something from my headphones. It was a faint and tinny tone, like it was far off or produced by a low-tech synthesiser or something. The tone began to shift, and I realised that it was playing a tune. It seemed to be a crude rendering of the opening lines of “The Skye Boat Song”. It only got through about a line and a half of the old folk melody before it abruptly cut off. There was a moment of silence before it was replaced by a voice, a man, but his voice was so distorted and pitch-shifted that it could have been anyone. It barely even sounded human as it spoke in its strange monotone.

“Five. Nine. Three. Seven. Five. Six.”

Now, I’m not an idiot. I’ve heard about numbers stations, and I know all about the Lincolnshire Poacher and the Russian Man. I know they’ve all got perfectly logical explanations and real world uses for espionage and that. What that didn’t explain, is how a numbers station found its way onto my iPod. I checked, and its radio wasn’t even on. It seemed to be coming from my music player, though I had a look through my library and couldn’t find anything that matched it. The sky was still grey, though sweat dripped off me as I sat against a rotting fence post, and the numbers just kept coming.

“Three. Zero. Five. Eight. Three. Nine. Two. Eight. Four. Six.”

Eventually I staggered to my feet and began to make my way home. My footsteps were heavy, and my hands shook slightly as I tried to steady myself. Do you know that one of the symptoms of a heart attack is literally “a sense of impending doom”? Well, I wasn’t having a heart attack, but I think I know what

they mean. What settled over me wasn't dread, there wasn't enough uncertainty for that. No, it was doom. I was certain that some sort of disaster was on the horizon. I'd walked less than a hundred yards when the numbers stopped coming, and 'London Calling' started playing again.

That summer seemed to drag on forever. The boredom and irritation of trying to care for my dad was only heightened by the weather, and we were both feeling it. I just didn't have anything to do. I don't really want to go into my living situation here, but it's enough to say I wasn't working a regular job, and while I could theoretically contact my old mates, they'd all gotten on with their lives without me. The world had moved on, and I was left behind.

I did do a bit of research into numbers stations, but I didn't find anything new. I did find a couple of clips online, though, which were enough to convince me that what I'd been hearing had been a numbers station, or at least a passable imitation, although the voices on the proper recordings sounded neutral, almost mechanical – very different to the grating distorted mess I had heard. I couldn't get it out of my mind, though. What did it mean? What did any of it mean?

It took about a week of searching to find it again. To be honest, at the time I didn't even realise I was looking for it. I just found myself going further and further afield, retracing old routes for the sake of it, always with my music cranked up so loud I couldn't hear the insects buzzing everywhere. I couldn't have told you why, not really, at least, not until I heard it again, that same tinny rendition of "The Skye Boat Song". Then:

"Four. Seven. Four. Nine."

I stood there frozen for a moment, that strange feeling of doom returning in an instant. I checked my iPod and, sure enough, the radio was off, and it said it was playing a track called, ‘Numbers’. It was fainter than it had been before, though, harder to pick out the exact numbers in the distortion and the quiet. So, I began to walk again, this time paying close attention to the volume and clarity of the sound.

“One. Six.” Fainter to the North. “Two. Eight.” Unchanged going South. “Three. Zero.” Southeast was stronger. “One. Six.” But began to weaken again after a mile or so. “Five. Zero.” Much stronger around the eastern hill. “Four. Nine.” There, the pylon, that was it.

Except obviously that wasn’t it. It wasn’t a broadcast tower and there was nothing in or around it that could possibly have been sending out any signal. It was just a collection of old and twisted metal bars rising up into the half-collapsed power tower. It must have been decades since it had been anything other than a decaying steel obelisk. Even if that hadn’t been the case, this wasn’t a broadcast, this was ... This was *inside* my iPod. It would have to be something else, something cutting edge and new, but for miles around me was nothing but droning insects and dismal English summer. Nonetheless, when I stood in the centre of the hollow beneath that pylon’s rusted corpse, the numbers came through crystal clear.

“Five. Six. Four. Eight. Four. Six. Four. Seven. Four. Eight. Two. Seven.”

With each new number, my blood pounded and my heart raced, though I didn’t have the faintest idea what they might have meant. I had actually brought a notebook and pen, I now realised, just to write down the numbers.

And so, I did. Four hours I spent, patiently jotting down the numbers. ‘The Skye Boat Song’ repeated every hour and a half, but I went through the sequence a few times just to assure myself it didn’t change and I hadn’t missed any.

When I finally took out my headphones, the sudden rush of summer evening sounds hit me like a wave, leaving me reeling and dizzy. It took me a moment to realize how late it was, and how sunburned I had gotten in the process.

Everything ached and my heart pounded as I limped home. I’d been out easily twice as long as any time before, but my dad didn’t say a word about it, just sat in front of the TV, laughing at some crappy panel show, smoking that pipe that left the wallpaper yellow and peeling. I remember thinking he wasn’t content to just destroy himself; he seemed to have to take everything out around him.

I didn’t return to the pylon for a long time, except to confirm that the numbers weren’t changing between days. I had them, though, and the numbers were all that mattered. I didn’t know why. I’m sure there wasn’t a reason, not really, but I knew it was in there. Realistically, it would be impossible to decode it without whatever key the cypher might have been using, and honestly, for the longest time, it seemed to be. I did as much reading as I could on cryptography and codebreaking, and all of it seemed to point me towards one simple conclusion: breaking this code by myself was simply impossible. But I still tried. I spent weeks in my room, desperately applying every method I had available. Nothing worked, but I didn’t stop. The alternative was looking after my dad, whose recent breathing issues had left him more ratty than ever.

So, I worked myself into exhaustion instead, staring at those meaningless strings of numbers until I almost collapsed and my eyes couldn’t focus on anything. And that was when I realised, it wasn’t the numbers. It wasn’t the code. It’s what was behind the numbers, shifting and waiting and coming

towards me like a tidal wave. And I knew what the message was, the urgent and terrible message about the destruction that was coming on the heels of mankind, about the cold and cruel warmongers who play their games of code and conspiracy, hidden behind the endless streams of numbers. And within those numbers are all of our dooms, if you know how to read them. And I read them. I read them all and saw the doom of everyone who lives and breathes and hopes for life and happiness.

I fled the house. I ran, as fast as I could, to the pylon, the ruined place that knew all of the numbers, and I fell to my knees and wept. I begged it to spare us, to spare me, as I stared at the flesh I knew would redden and bubble and blister away to the bone beneath. I didn't need headphones to hear the numbers now. They were pouring from the air around me and threaded through my mind, and no matter how I begged, they would not stop.

When I returned, the house was in ruins, the windows shattered and broken, glass strewn across the floor. There was nothing left of my dad, save a charred shadow on the wall, scorched through the plaster and into the now exposed brick. All that was left of Mrs Whitshaw was powdered bone.

There are terrible things coming, things that if we knew of them would leave us weak and trembling with shuddering terror at the knowledge that they are coming for all of us. We all made them, and their course is already plotted. You can see them in the numbers, if you only learn how to read them.

Statement ends.

(Martin clears his throat and takes a deep breath)

MARTIN

Right. Another statement, another side to Peter's "Extinction", I think. I, uh, I couldn't follow some of his reasoning, but I think it was about nuclear weapons, or maybe- doomsday weapons? In keeping with the theme, I suppose. (**Articulating clearly, in case Peter's there**) I just wish Peter would spend less time trying to convince me his new power is real and more time telling me what he plans to do about it. [Normal again] And where I fit in. I mean, fine, I guess I believe—

[Knock at the door. Another knock.]

Come in.

[Door opens]

DAISY

Mind if I join you?

...

They're back. Thought you might want to know.

...

Seems like it went smooth. Too smooth for Basira, it sounds like. Keeps looking at John like she can't believe he made it back.

...

I, uh, I mentioned our conversation to him. He asked me to check on—

MARTIN

(Quietly) Just leave.

DAISY

Sorry?

MARTIN

Get out.

DAISY

Oh. Right. Sorry, I didn't...

MARTIN

(Snapping) It's not difficult. Just get out.

DAISY

(Hurt) Fine.

(Angry) Fine. Just thought—

MARTIN

No, no you didn't. We're not friends, Daisy. None of us are. We're all just trapped together here and kidding ourselves that we don't hate it. Christ, there are more important things than feelings right now, so just leave me alone. For good.

DAISY

Right. You got it.

[Door closes]

(Martin sighs.)

MARTIN

Well?

[Static rises]

PETER

I'm impressed. And grateful.

MARTIN

I didn't do it for you.

PETER

Even better.

MARTIN

Easier this way. I'm sure you'd have had no problem sending her away.

PETER

I hadn't really thought about it, and now, thanks to you, I don't need to.

MARTIN

Yeah, well. It seems to be your 'go-to' move for dealing with anyone.

PETER

I'm just not big on confrontation. You understand, I'm sure.

MARTIN

We are not the same.

PETER

Of course.

MARTIN

So, what now?

PETER

Did you read it?

MARTIN

Yeah.

PETER

And?

MARTIN

I believe you.

PETER

You don't still think I'm trying to trick you into a grand ritual?

MARTIN

I mean, I'm not about to start chanting stuff for you, but... the details you've given me all seem to check out. So far.

PETER

Good.

MARTIN

So, what's our next step?

PETER

For you, keep researching. I'm sure we haven't found all the statements in here that deal with The Extinction yet. One of the downsides of not serving the Ceaseless Watcher is that we have to actually look things up, not to mention the fact that Gertrude was distressingly good at obfuscation. The more you know about our enemy, the better.

MARTIN

And you?

PETER

I have my own explorations I need to attend to. And a, um, meeting to arrange. For you.

MARTIN

For me?

PETER

I'm absolutely delighted with your progress, and I feel you've earned some straight answers.

MARTIN

But not from you?

PETER

Oh no, that sort of conversation makes me very uncomfortable. No, I'm owed a favour by a friend of mine. I've asked him to stop by when he's back in the country.

MARTIN

You're not just going to tell me, maybe?

PETER

When have I ever?

(Martin sighs in irritation.)

PETER (Cont.)

Oh, come now. What would life be without the occasional twist? Oh, speaking of which, I've had a report of a workplace dispute in the Library, and I would value your input. I'm trying to get out of the habit of, what did you call it, "sending them away?"

MARTIN

(Sighs) Fine.

[Tape clicks off.]

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

It featured: Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood, Fay Roberts as Daisy Tonner, and Alasdair Stuart as Peter Lukas.