

MAG – 085 – Upon the Stair

Content warnings:

- Haunting
- Altered reality
- Parental death
- Body horror
- Compulsions (supernatural)

Discussions of: paranormal encounter, anxiety & panic, loss of identity, murder

Mentions of: gunshot, blood, death, being followed

SFX: low drone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode eighty-five. Upon the Stair.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro – continued]

[Tape clicks on]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of an unknown figure, regarding an encounter that... may or may not have happened in their home. Date of original statement unclear, though paper quality likely puts it at between twenty and thirty years ago. Recording by Jonathan Sims... in his personal investigative capacity.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to put my words to you, and apologies for any problems that... may arise from this conversation. I will try to restrain it.

Are you familiar with the work of the poet William Hughes Mearns? I assume not. Few people are, even now I'm not completely sure that's how you pronounce his name, having only ever seen it written down. There is one poem, however, I think you will be familiar with. It goes thus:

As I was going up the stair

I met a man who wasn't there!

He wasn't there again today,

Oh how I wish he'd go away!

When I came home last night at three,

The man was waiting there for me

But when I looked around the hall,

I couldn't see him there at all!

Go away, go away, don't you come back any more!

Go away, go away, and please don't slam the door...

Last night I saw upon the stair,

A little man who wasn't there,

He wasn't there again today

Oh, how I wish he'd go away...

It's called Antigonish, named after a town in Nova Scotia, home to the ghost of an old man who supposedly haunted the staircases of one of the grander homes. For the longest time I misread the title, and was convinced the poem was called 'Antagonish'. I thought it was a rather clever play on the word 'antagonist', owing to the ambiguous nature of the subject.

I was disappointed, then, to discover it was simply a reference to a haunting. By tying it to a real place and a known story, the strange, disconcerting nonsense at the heart of it was lost. Because nonsense is what it is. It is playfully impossible. He cannot *be* not there. But he is. He was. And so am I.

I didn't meet him on the staircase as well. The carpet didn't bend under the weight of his soft, round body, and I distinctly recall the absence of a creak as his foot pressed on the loose board of the empty fifth step. He laughed, but there was no humour in it, because... then it would have had to break the silence. In the poem, I had always imagined a translucent figure, absent in life and body, but visible. But I couldn't see this man. Obviously, I couldn't. I couldn't see him or hear him or speak to him. Because... there was nobody there. The staircase was empty, as he stretched his arm to gesture me closer.

My memory is not what it was. Some days it seems that damn poem is all I can remember. I know I had a family. I know I had a house. Was it in Antigonish? No, that's absurd. The man I didn't meet had nothing to do with the poem, just a, a coincidence. But I'm not sure... what else I know now; I'm not sure where else I know now. And I'm unsure where I've ever been. I had a home. A house. I know it had at least two floors, because there were stairs. The stairs were real. He wasn't there, but the stairs were. At least to begin with.

It was dark when I didn't see him, and I was about to walk up to bed. I remember being cold, damp. Had it been raining? No, the water was still. I wanted to be dry, to be warm in my bed. And I couldn't, because in spite of his own absence, this man blocked the stairs. I think I would have asked others to tell me what or who they might or might not have seen, if that had been an option, and I didn't, so I must have lived alone. I don't know why the lights were off, but the moon was bright and cast stark shadows upon the empty floor where this figure stood.

For obvious reasons I can't describe him. I can barely describe his absence. I could try to say that his... hypothesis was tall and wide. Conceptually, he could have had arms that stretched away from a soft-looking torso, with stubby fingers that did not grip the banisters tight enough to splinter. If he had had a face, it would have been unremarkable, with a small, plump mouth that failed to quite turn into a smile.

He didn't speak, so I couldn't hear his offer to join him on the staircase. But I accepted. I don't know if I was just desperate to try and get up and into my bed, or if I was... generally curious as to what this man had to offer me, when he didn't even have enough wherewithal to exist. So, I placed my foot on the first step and I began to walk. If he'd been there it might have been hard to get past his bulk, but as it was I continued up without any problems.

The staircase in my house was not long, and it wasn't steep, and it went straight up to the landing with only a single right-angle turn. It was not a spiral staircase, so after walking down that corkscrew for almost a half hour, I knew it couldn't be mine. The man hadn't come with me, of course, so I wasn't able to ask how it was he could always stay three steps in front of me without once moving his legs.

I walked and I walked. And then I didn't walk, and that got me moving much faster. The walls didn't look like my house, because there weren't any, so it was hard to tell what they did look like. Eventually I must have reached the end, because I woke up the next morning in my bed, and my bed was at the end of the staircase that was there, so I assume it was also at the end of the one that wasn't.

The next few days are hard for me to remember, because they happened, and genuine recollections slip through my mind like rippling glass. But the man didn't come back. He didn't come back every night. He didn't come back until I made... a horrid mistake. I called to him. I stood on the landing and shouted at him to go away. I asked him if he was there. I demanded he show himself. All utterly impossible, of course. I was shouting at nobody but myself, and so it was into my own mind that my curses and pleas burrowed and nested. As he wasn't there, I have no way of telling how many teeth were on show when he smiled at me.

After that, it became hard to tell where he failed to begin, and easier to tell where I ended. People would forget me, but that was alright, because only real people care about who remembers them. And I was no longer among their number. I would have whole days where I failed to exist, a feeling so entirely alien that I am glad I had no stomach from which to throw up. And as I existed less and less, the man ceased to exist less and less... until... I remember the first time he was really in my house, and I wished for nothing more than that I had hands with which to strangle him.

My parents were the worst. They came for dinner once, shortly after I had called to him. They looked so confused when I served them their meal, and the conversations would die after only a few words. My mother's eyes were

bloodshot, and I could see them unfocus when they tried to look at me. She dabbed a napkin at her mouth and asked me where her son was. I asked her what his name had been. She didn't know. She dabbed her mouth again and the napkin came away bloody.

My father said nothing, as I had taken him up the stairs an hour before, and he now lay dead in his chair, his heart unsuited for the expedition. He had sworn at me as he tried to climb them to the top, telling me I was no son of his, and I was trying to agree with him, but if I could have done so, then he would have been wrong. Eventually, after almost an hour descending the spiral, he keeled over in his seat and lay lifeless. My mother got abruptly to her feet and told my father that they were leaving. My father got to his feet, and silently followed her out. I never saw either of them again.

Eventually, the man who had never set foot upon my staircase became real enough to have done this to me. He existed so thoroughly that he was finally able to laugh at the joy of being. He looked around for me, but of course I wasn't there, and in my absence I watched the realisation on his face that, in reality, whoever he was, he had died decades before. And he was now in reality. He tried to scream, but his throat decomposed around the noise, cutting it short with a slough of rotten flesh and collapsing, brittle bone. And as I stared from the empty spiral staircase, I wanted to laugh right back at him. But I couldn't, because I just wasn't there.

I haven't been here for a long time now. Time is difficult. I try to take people up the staircase. Sometimes they make it, sometimes they do not. None of them have called out to me, though. Not like I once called out to an empty house. Most staircases are easy for me to not be on, but this one here took effort. I tried to be just real enough to talk to you. I wanted to share. I, I don't want to

take you up the spiral staircase, so you should try to leave. I don't want to, but it's my nature now, and you can't fight what you are. Or even what you aren't.

As I was going up the stair,

I was a man who wasn't there.

I wasn't there again today.

Oh, how I wish I'd go away.

Statement ends.

ARCHIVIST

There are many aspects of this statement that I desperately want more information on, but I have no real way to do so. There are some short pieces of correspondence in the file, addressed to Gertrude, from someone called Eric Delano, confirming that while he typed out this statement, he has no memory of doing so, and requesting some sick leave to address persistent migraines he has developed. There's no supplementary research because... what do you research? A nonsense poem from 1922?

No, I am more interested, as before, with who is sending me these statements, and why this one, especially as the message, if indeed there is one, seems to contradict the last one. If the... 'moral', shall we say, of Ms. Ashburt's statement was that ignoring the horrors stalking you just makes them more dangerous, then surely the message of this one is that confronting them directly is even more so. I suppose that leaves skulking around the periphery. Which is what I was already doing!

There is, of course, a different reading, which is that this is a targeted warning about trusting Michael, given the obvious parallels: swap out stairways for

corridors and spirals for fractals, and there you go. The Nowhere Man thing is new, though. What was it Leitner said about the Spiral? It deals with fooling your senses, drawing your mind into difficult paths, making you doubt the reality you live in.

Well, if this is a warning about Michael, then it is, as before, somewhat superfluous. If I never see him – if I never see it again, it's too soon.

Maybe that's it. It. Maybe whoever sent this wants me to consider how many of these creatures used to be people. How many seem to have taken the mantle from the ones that came before them, and how none of them have been able to overcome their new natures. How most of them don't even seem to think like people anymore. Given that there is every possibility I've taken one of these mantles myself, this is not an interpretation I'm keen on.

Or it could be someone in the Archives randomly sending me statements, with no curation, rhyme or reason. Assuming they come from the Archives. They're marked as Institute statements, but I have no idea who's sending them. I feel like I've been seeing a lot of police cars about, maybe... no, that's absurd.

Maybe Leitner stole a lot of statements and had a, a sort of dead man's switch to... **(Sighs)** Occam's Razor. For now, it makes sense to assume they're coming from the Institute, and they're only coming one at a time, so I will work on the belief that they are some way curated. So the current questions are who and why.

I feel bad staying put, like... like I might be placing Georgie in danger, but I don't have anywhere else to go at the moment, and if the increased police presence isn't just in my head, then I don't –

[The door opens.]

GEORGIE

Right, I'm out tonight, ok? There should be some stuff in the freezer if you...
Oh.

ARCHIVIST

I was just, uh...

GEORGIE

You didn't say we got another one.

ARCHIVIST

I didn't want to worry you.

GEORGIE

I knew it was something. You've been weird all day.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry, I... I don't know.

GEORGIE

Yeah. Well, we can talk about it later. I need to head out.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah. Yeah, y... you look great. What's the occasion?

GEORGIE

I have a date.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Oh! Do you need me to get out of the house for the night?

GEORGIE

(Laughs) Oh, no. Trust me, nothing's happening tonight.

ARCHIVIST

Oh... How are you so sure?

GEORGIE

Check out his profile.

ARCHIVIST

Good lord.

GEORGIE

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, he does know what a book is, right?

GEORGIE

Unclear. He climbs mountains, though.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, I got that. "Face to face with your own mortality on the frozen peaks, staring death in the face and saying 'Not today, dude.'" The man's a poet. And... why are you going out with him again?

GEORGIE

He, uh... he likes Hungarian food. And there's place just opened.

ARCHIVIST

You're serious? You're going on a date with... the Dullard of Skull Mountain, just so you have an excuse to eat a shopska salad?

GEORGIE

I need my sheep's cheese, John. No one else will go with me. You hate Hungarian food. Jeff says it tastes too "Soviet", apparently, whatever that means. Melanie says it's too salty. Everyone I know has bad taste in food.

ARCHIVIST

I don't hate Hungari– Hold on. Melanie's back?

GEORGIE

You didn't hear?

ARCHIVIST

Hear what?

GEORGIE

Yeah, she... had a bad time in India. She got shot.

ARCHIVIST

She... what?

GEORGIE

Yeah, I know.

ARCHIVIST

Is she – I, I mean, she survived?

GEORGIE

I hope so. I'm going for a drink with her on Thursday. Be a bit awkward if not.

ARCHIVIST

Right...

GEORGIE

I'd take you along but, y'know, she thinks you're a dick.

ARCHIVIST

Another startling insight from the piercing investigative mind of Georgie Barker. Is she alright?

GEORGIE

Well, she's had a hell of a time. Figured the least I could do was get her drunk and listen to her bitch about the new job.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, she found something, then?

GEORGIE

Yeah. Didn't say what. I think she was a bit embarrassed, says her co-workers are super weird.

ARCHIVIST

Really? Really. Well, er, speaking of weirdos, I think you have a Hungarian mountain man to be courting.

GEORGIE

Yes I do. I'll see you later. Don't forget the freezer.

ARCHIVIST

I won't. Have fun.

GEORGIE

Eh, we'll see.

[Georgie leaves and the door closes.]

ARCHIVIST

Hmm? Oh.

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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