MAG – 065 – Binary

Content Warnings:

- Torture

- Transhumanism

- Graphic injury and mutilation

- Imprisonment

- Blood and gore

- Arguments

Discussions of: death, helplessness, gaslighting

Mentions of: alcohol, existential crisis, being followed

SFX: low drone, high pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode sixty-five. Binary.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro *Continued*]

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Are you... quite all right?

TESSA

Yeah, just... your tape recorder. It's old.

ARCHIVIST

I get that a lot.

TESSA

I just mean, I've been thinking. About analogue and digital. What we mean by them.

ARCHIVIST

In terms of information, or...?

TESSA

Yeah. We use the word 'digital' to refer to one specific way of storing information – discrete signal values interpreted at pre-established levels. Analogue is just a fancy way of saying everything else.

ARCHIVIST

I...

TESSA

Almost everything in the world is analogue, but we're obsessed with digital. We try to render everything into it, break the world down and turn it into as much binary as it takes. But it's not the same. I used to work on OCR programs – teaching computers to read, to take the messy physicality of the written word and convert it into something that a computer can understand in a digital format.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not sure what this has to do with my tape recorder.

TESSA

Magnetic tape. Everyone thinks it's analogue, but it's digital. A lower tech version than what we use now, but people forget that it was used to store computerised data for decades. Maybe it reminds people of a film reel, or, or maybe nostalgia turns everything analogue. Well, people always think of digital as not really there, but the thing is, information is always physically present. It doesn't exist as some formless nothing. Even within the tiniest, most advanced storage systems, physical memory cells change and alter themselves to render that information in a language all of their own. But I suppose it isn't language, not really, because, because language, as we use it, is about as far from digital as you can get.

We may call them words, but the units of data that a computer works with are by their nature discrete and definite, while the words we use are clumsy, vague things, always at the whim of interpretation and decay. Well, it's an obvious thing to say that a computer cannot feel, but it's true. No sequence of distinct ones and zeroes can replicate the swirling cocktail of chemicals and, you know, nerves, that is a human being. Or any other animal for that matter. Or nothing about humanity is binary.

ARCHIVIST

Right. So, you work in computers, then?

TESSA

Sorry, I, um... it's been a while since I talked to someone in person. Been spending a lot of time in my own head. You know? Used to just dumping information when I get the chance. I have a blog actually, but I haven't posted

for almost a year. Almost too embarrassed to now. Assuming I'm not losing my mind, of course.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I hear that a lot too.

TESSA

Well, that's what's really terrifying, isn't it? Your mind is all you are. There's no back-up, no reset if it goes. I'm not just talking about madness as it appears, but what it is from inside. The way people talk about it, it's like you have to think you're sane, that our mind is everything we perceive, everything we are. Well, that means you can never know when your grasp might be slipping. I'm not convinced that's it though. Or maybe deep down, somewhere inside, you understand what's happening to you and I, um... I don't know which scares me more.

ARCHIVIST

Look, I don't want to rush you, but–

TESSA

I've got a lot of friends whose retirement plans basically comes down to uploading their minds into a computer and living forever in a virtual world. They're so sure it's just around the corner. Well, I've never had the heart to tell them it's impossible, that the human brain is a wet mess of analogue signal interpretation that is as far removed from the clean logics of digital processing as it's possible to be. We've tricked ourselves into thinking that computers and people have anything in common, but no matter how good we may program

them to be at pretending to think like us, that's all it'll ever be. Crossing the line from meat and chemicals into pure digital systems is impossible, and everything else just sophisticated programming – a... an illusion.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, that's fascinating, Ms Winters, but I must politely ask you to start your statement.

TESSA

What do you think I've been doing?

ARCHIVIST

Ram– Traditionally our concerns are with the particulars of the supernatural incident. Its origins and manifestations.

TESSA

I'm giving you context.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. In that case I still need to make the official notations. Statement of Tessa Winters regarding a strange computer program she downloaded from the deep web three months ago. Is that accurate?

TESSA

(Snorts) Well, first off, I didn't find it on the deep web. God, it's like talking to my grandpa. Well, let me explain something quickly. Any time someone tries to give you a line about the, the deep web, or even better, the dark net, chances

are they wouldn't know a VPN from their own arse. There's not some secret, sinister underbelly of the internet where, with the right passwords and doubletalk, you can hack your way into a black market of assassins, drug lords and secret forums. It's just that some websites want you to be a bit more security minded and need you to use the right, you know, software so you're not monitored. I mean, yes, there's drug stuff on there, but it's mostly just paranoid geeks who don't want to be caught pirating Photoshop.

ARCHIVIST

Noted. Statement recorded direct from subject, 7th January 2017.

Statement begins.

TESSA (STATEMENT)

Have you ever heard of Sergei Yushanka? I'd guess not. He's one of the less well-known online spook stories and you don't look like you're a regular presence in the chatbot or neural net communities. The story goes back to about 1983, during the first home computer boom. There was this programmer by the name of Sergei Yushanka. I don't know if that's his real name. Probably not, since a Yushanka is a type of furry Russian hat, and he probably never actually existed, but he was supposed to have been a real digital guru. Well, according to the story, he... he got sick. In most versions, it's, um... it's brain cancer, but some say early onset Alzheimer's or some sort of undiagnosed brain infection. The point is, it was killing him and it affected his brain. Now Sergei didn't want to die. The idea of death terrified him and whatever was eating his mind gave him the idea to try and save his consciousness. To, um... to upload his brain.

Well, the next bit it, um … it depends on how ghoulish a version of the story you're told. In some, he spends a fortune and every last hour of his last months trying desperately to code his own mind into his system, and he ends up lying dead at the keyboard, decomposing fingers still tapping away the last slivers of himself. Other versions get a bit more grotesque – handwritten code in his own blood feeding into the machine. I even heard one where he took the direct approach – removed the casing of his computer, carved off the top of his skull and used the last ounces of his strength to impossibly shove his own diseased brain right into the circuitry. Whatever version you're told, the story goes that it actually worked and the police found a pile of floppy disks full of impossible code next to the mutilated body of Sergei Yushanka.

I'm sure you can guess the next bit. First on floppy disks, then later on CD and eventually downloaded directly, Sergei Yushanka has been a running prank for people who like to code, text parsers and chatbots. They're not unlike screamer videos, just a lot slower, and ideally, subtler. You create a program which appears to be a chat window with a stranger, who identifies themselves as Sergei. The responses should be as naturalistic as possible to begin with and in the best ones it's hard to tell if you're talking to a bot for the first minute or two. But then the responses start to breakdown, become more sinister and keep referring to how much pain Sergei is in. Eventually, the only response the bot gives you is screaming and pleas to be released.

The idea is that the chatbot is Sergei Yushanka's mind and he doesn't like being in a computer nearly as much as he'd hoped. If it's well-executed it can be genuinely quite unsettling. The only two consistent details across all of them are a particular image of a heavily pixelated screaming face and the phrase, "The angles cut me when I try to think", which marks the start of the bot's

descent into madness. Well, as far as I know, these two things have been consistent right back to the earliest versions of Sergei Yushanka.

Like I say, it's quite a niche legend, but within certain communities everyone's tried their hand at making a Sergei Yushanka at least once. Well, even I looked into it once or twice and I'm only really on the fringes. I've done a few projects with basic neural nets, but I'd never really tried my hand at a chatbot and gave up after a couple of hours. I used to love them. The whole thing really hit my sweet spot between creepy and nerdy and if I found myself up at four in the morning after watching too many YouTube ghost videos, I'd often go on the hunt for a new one.

So when I got a notification from the bot group I'm part of and it was just a link to a file named YushankasDespair.exe, I didn't hesitate. I downloaded it almost immediately. It was a bit disappointing to see it was a tiny file, barely over a megabyte. That didn't bode well for the experience, but I was still keen to give it a go later that night when the ambience was better. I looked back at the post and saw that underneath it was comment after comment telling the OP that they'd posted a broken link. I shrugged it off at the time, but looking back I think I was probably the first person to click it and the only one it worked for. Just unlucky, I guess.

I forgot about it for a while, but I didn't have anything scheduled for the next day, so I spent most of the evening drinking and messing about online. It was about two in the morning when I remembered what I had waiting in my downloads. I looked out at the dark, empty street below and a pleasing shiver ran up my spine. I decided I was in the perfect mood to have a chat with Sergei Yushanka.

Opening up the program brought up a chat window. It wasn't like most of the others I'd seen. It looked closer to an old school text adventure, with just a flashing line to indicate where to type your text, white on black. Aside from that, the window was empty. I wasn't exactly sure what to do, as usually the bot would make the first move, so I decided to go with the generic, "Hello". There was no way that the bot didn't have a response programmed for that. I waited, but there didn't seem to be any response. That was fine. Often these things were programmed with waiting times to give the impression of thinking or composing a response. After about 15 seconds, I'm about to give it up as non-functional and close it, when the answer comes. It's gibberish, just a mess of symbols and letters, like it was using the wrong characters. Well, some of them weren't even ASCII.

I didn't have time to really process it though as they were generating quickly and soon filled the whole screen. They weren't static either, but changing and scrolling and, um... it's going to sound weird, and it was only for a moment, but I could have sworn I saw some of the symbols twitch, like they were in pain.

It was making my eyes hurt to watch and I started to feel dizzy, but I couldn't bring myself to look away. Even then, I thought I was just looking at a very well-done horror set piece, especially when I started to notice a handful of English words popping into the wall of shifting text for a second or two at a time. One of them read ''helphelphelp'', all run together, and another, "it peels my mind like knives". My mouth was dry and my hand was shaking, but even then all I could think was how good this was. I was genuinely impressed by how unsettled it was making me.

It was the laptop's fan that finally got me. I gradually realised that it wasn't making its normal whirring sound anymore. It had changed into something

harsher, less healthy sounding, like it was desperately trying to expel air. It sounded like someone breathing out, diseased lungs pushing and straining and … and never stopping to take anything back in. It was only at that point that the possibility of malaware really occurred to me. I didn't know how it would make my laptop fan sound like that, but my computer wasn't acting right. I tried to exit the program and, predictably enough, it wouldn't close. So I crashed it, planning to have a look through in safe mode. Sure enough, the lights went dark and the groaning sounds of the fan died, but the white text on the screen wasn't going anywhere.

Now that, I knew, was impossible. Well, maybe there might have been some way to keep it frozen on the screen when the computer turned off, but to have it keep changing and morphing when there was clearly no power running through it... well, if it's possible, I don't know how you do it. More words popped in and out of existence: "you wanted to talk" and ''hihihihihi'' over and over again. Then all at once the screen was filled with an image. It was grainy, like a very early webcam. The camera appeared to be lying on a table, looking up at a balding man. He appeared to be in his late 30s, I thought, and was shirtless, with a face frozen in pain or distress. Then he moved and I realised I must be watching a video file. The man was crying. There was no sound, but I could see great, heaving sobs that sent his whole body shuddering. He stared into a computer monitor, the edge of which I could just about see. He seemed to be sat in the dark and his face was solely illuminated by the screen in front of him. I watched with mounting dread as the video continued.

He reached down to what I assumed would have been the keyboard, but he didn't seem to be typing. Instead, there was a sudden jerking motion and he raised his hand to reveal one of the keys that he had apparently torn off. He

brought it to his mouth and began to eat it. I could just about make out the snap of his jaw as the hard plastic shattered between his teeth and, as he reached for the next one, I could see a trickle of blood from his lips.

Well, that was more than enough for me. I slammed the laptop shut and pushed it away. I decided that whatever was happening could wait until daylight. I turned on all the lights in my room and sat in an armchair drinking until I passed out, trying not to think about Sergei Yushanka.

I don't know how long I slept for, but it can't have been more than an hour or two, since it was still fully dark when I was woken by a snapping, crunching noise. I opened my eyes to see my TV screen on. It was showing that same video, the washed out, grainy blue making details almost impossible to distinguish, but there was noise now, coming through my speakers. I heard him crunching and eating the keys as he snapped them off one by one. I tried to figure out how the program could have jumped from my laptop to my TV, which wasn't plugged in or networked to it. The only thing they had in common was the router and … and that didn't make any sense, not unless someone was playing a really elaborate, really horrible prank on me specifically. And I'm not the nicest person, but I've never pissed anyone off that much.

All the time I was trying to figure this out, the video kept playing. The man's breathing was laboured and painful. He was talking, muttering to himself, or maybe to me. There was no way to tell. I couldn't make out much through the mess he'd made of his mouth and what I could hear, I didn't understand. He was talking about how, "It feels like thinking through cheese wire" and, "There's no feeling, but the no feeling hurts" and that "It's cold without blood". He said that a lot: "It's cold and it hurts." He spoke with a Russian

accent. At one point, he stopped pulling at the keyboard and reached out in front of him to where the monitor would be. There was the sound of breaking and he pulled back a shard of glass. I don't need to tell you what he did with it. The worst thing was, even though this meant the screen must have been shattered, somehow it was still illuminating his face.

I unplugged everything: the TV, the router, the speakers, everything. Well, that seemed to stop it, at least... at least for a while. I was in a bad way by this point and I just left and wandered the streets until the sun came up. I didn't take my phone, just... well, just in case.

That video was 17 hours long. I know this, because it followed me until I watched all of it. Well, any time I used a computer, watched TV or looked too long at a screen, there it was. Didn't matter if it was my own or someone else's. After a few minutes, whatever I was looking at would melt away and he'd be back, continuing to slowly, painfully eat his computer. I tried to show it to a friend once, but he just looked at me like I was playing some weird joke. Only I could see it, apparently. I don't want to be mad. I don't think I am, but there's no way really to know, is there?

After a month of this, I finally sat down and watched it through to the end. It was the longest day of my life and by the end I felt so very sick. I almost threw up when he smiled. Finally, he lay down in front of the camera and said, "The maze is sharp on my mind. The angles cut me when I try to think." Then he stopped moving. I could see the top of his head then and the back of it seemed to be missing. The picture stayed like that for about half an hour and then the video ended. I haven't seen it since.

I keep thinking about the idea of uploading your mind into a computer. I said it was impossible. I still think it's impossible, in the way we want it to be. But I can't stop wondering what it must be like to try and have thoughts, messy, human thoughts, trapped in the rigid digital processes of a computer. It must hurt, though not a sort of pain that we can understand.

Is that enough? Do you have what you need?

ARCHIVIST

I think, uh... yes, I think we do.

TESSA

The way you're looking at me, I'm going to assume you don't know anything more about this than I do.

ARCHIVIST

(Sighs) Not really, I'm afraid. I can talk you through some other encounters we've recorded with supposedly haunted computers and I think one of our postgrad students is working on something about supernatural manifestations in technology, but I don't think we have anything else like this.

TESSA

Yeah, I figured. I just saw your post and thought, why not? And it does feel good to talk about it, you know?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I... very much understand. Oh, while I have you...

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental. It looks like my posting on a few of the more tech-savvy boards appealing for statements has worked. While the incident itself seems ultimately inconsequential, I was able to convince Tessa to have a look at Gertrude's laptop, claiming to have locked myself out. I don't know what she did, something about command lines and administrative privileges, but I now have access. I'm almost afraid to...

[Door opens]

TIM

Hey, where did you put the–

[Laptop shuts]

Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to disturb you while you were being suspicious.

ARCHIVIST

It's fine.

TIM

No, no, I'll catch you when you're not scheming.

ARCHIVIST

(Quiet) No need to take that tone.

TIM

What?

ARCHIVIST

Nothing. I'll see you later.

TIM

No. What did you say?

ARCHIVIST

I said there's no need for the attitude. I know things have been difficult but–

TIM

Oh, they have, have they? "Things" have been difficult? You've spent a month staring at that footage, double checking every moment, timing every tea break, looking at me like I've somehow staged it. But no, you're right. "Things" have been difficult.

ARCHIVIST

It just seems a little too convenient.

TIM

Excuse me?

ARCHIVIST

I mean, the CCTV is so corrupted that the police can't just use it immediately, and then they happen to finish restoring it just when I start really digging into the murder? And if it was an option, why not clean it up when she first disappeared? And don't get me started on the lack of cameras in the archives. I

know, I know, Elias' whole spiel about signal degradation and installation issues, but I don't buy it. I mean, he got the CO2 system put in easily enough.

TIM

Shut. Up.

ARCHIVIST

What?

TIM

Shut up! Just stop talking. I'm sick of this! I'm sick of you! We didn't kill Gertrude and no one wants to kill you, you pompous idiot!

[Fist banging on table]

ARCHIVIST

Now listen here, Tim...

TIM

No! No, you listen for once. I was fine in research. Happy. Then you ask me to be transferred here and suddenly it's all monsters and killers and secret passages, oh my! And the worst thing, the actual worst thing, is that no one here has my back. With any of it. Elias doesn't care, Martin just wants a tea party and Sasha... uh, and you, you're treating me like I'm somehow to blame for it all, like I didn't suffer the worst, right alongside you.

ARCHIVIST

Well excuse me if my experiences have made me–

TIM

Your experiences? Fuck you! I got eaten by worms because of you.

ARCHIVIST

Well, what do you want? You want sympathy?

TIM

You know what, yeah! A little bit of basic sympathy would have been nice.

ARCHIVIST

Jane Prentiss was not my fault. I did not bring her to the Archives.

TIM

Oh, but you went off the deep end afterwards, didn't you? Everything went to hell and when you actually needed to be in charge, you just hid down here and played with your tape recorder.

ARCHIVIST

Well, what would you have me do?

TIM

Anything! Anything that wasn't turning into a paranoid lunatic would have been fine, anything that showed you could actually do your job.

ARCHIVIST

Well, Elias clearly thinks that–

TIM

Elias should have fired you weeks ago.

ARCHIVIST

What?

TIM

After everything you've pulled, you should be gone. But no, instead we all get to talk about how you're feeling, because we're worried about our stalker boss. I... I... I can't do this anymore.

ARCHIVIST

Then quit. **(Pause)**

If you hate it so much, leave your post in the Archives. Permanently.

TIM

Are you firing me?

ARCHIVIST

I'm offering you a chance to quit. No notice period. I'll even make sure you get the rest of the month's pay cheque. Just say the words.

TIM

(Sighs) I want to.

ARCHIVIST

So, do it.

[Static rises]

TIM

I... can't.

ARCHIVIST

Why not?

TIM

I... I... I can't. I don't know. Why can't I quit?

ARCHIVIST

I don't know, but I don't think I can fire you either.

TIM

What?

ARCHIVIST

It's this place.

TIM

I don't understand.

ARCHIVIST

Neither do I. I'm trying to figure it out. I, I've got the shape of it, but... I'm sorry, Tim. Truly I am. But I cannot and will not trust you. This place isn't right. You see that now. I don't know how or why, but there is something very wrong with the Archives. And I don't know who here is a victim of it and who is an agent.

(Pause)

TIM

So... what do we do?

ARCHIVIST

For now, I suppose we just... do our jobs.

TIM

I don't want to.

ARCHIVIST

No, no.

TIM

I, uh, suppose I'll see you later.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose so.

[Door closes]

ARCHIVIST

End supplemental.

[Tape clicks off.]

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

It featured: Jonathan Sims as The Archivist, Fran Bushe as Tessa Winters and Mike LeBeau as Tim Stoker.