

MAG – 004 – Page Turner

Content Warnings

- Heights & falling
- Body horror
- **Discussions of:** Murder, animal remains, fire, lightning strike & injury, painkillers & overdose, ableism, claustrophobic space
- **Mentions of:** Food, razors, police
- **SFX:** Brief static, high pitched tones

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode Four Page Turner

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement of Dominic Swain, regarding a book briefly in his possession in the winter of 2012. Original statement given June 28th 2013. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

JONATHAN SIMS

(Read a loud from the archived witness statement of Nathan Watts)

I work as a theatre technician in various venues around the West End; I mainly deal with lights, but a lot of the smaller venues can't afford large crews for

their productions so you end up doing a little bit of everything. I guess that's not directly relevant to my experience but I just want you to know that I'm not some crazy person wandering in off the street. I work, I do practical things with my hands and I am not prone to crazed flights of fancy.

That day, I was going to see a matinee performance of *The Trojan Women* at The Gate Theatre, up in Notting Hill. A friend of mine, Katherine Mendes, was in it and had been trying to get me to come to see it for a while. We'd worked together on a production of *The Seagull* a couple of years before and had had a bit of a thing going back then. At this point I had just become single, so was keen to meet up and see if any of the old spark remained. I ended up going along on the afternoon of Saturday the 10th of November – I remember the date exactly, as there had been a lot of back-and-forth about it, since we were both involved in separate shows at the time, making evenings difficult.

So, on Saturday afternoon I found myself in Notting Hill Gate, killing an hour or two before the show was due to start. Now, Notting Hill is not somewhere I go often, as it tends towards the pricey, even for London, and I'm not sure how much you know about theatre techs, but we're not generally an overpaid profession. Still, I had some vague memories of their being an Oxfam charity shop somewhere nearby, as I'd previously bought quite a nice old military tunic there which remains one of my favourite jackets. I found it without any problems and spent ten minutes or so looking over the clothes and knickknacks, but was a bit disappointed. It was smaller than I remembered and just seemed to contain the same tedious curios as every other charity shop. I still had some time to kill, though, so I decided to have a look through their books, something I rarely bother doing usually.

I found the book on the Science Fiction and Fantasy shelf. At first I assumed it was some sort of faux-leather special edition and I was sure whoever put it out for sale must have done the same, because the price on it was only four pounds. There was something about it that made me take another look, though, and picking it up I felt the binding and realised it might well have been bound in real leather, probably calf, given how soft it was. I'm not an expert on books, by any means, but it seemed old, and I thought it might have been hand-bound as the pages were slightly uneven. There was no dust wrapper on it and the front had no title, but embossed on the spine in faded gold letters were the words Ex Altiora. I did some Latin in school when I was a child, but I haven't had much cause to use it since, so you'll have to forgive me if my translations don't make much sense, but I believe it meant "From Higher" or "Out of the Heights".

I was astounded to say the least – the book was clearly worth far more than it was being sold for. If the shop clerk who put it out had been paying any attention it would have been in the glass case where they kept those things people donated that were actually valuable. I had a flick through but it seemed to be entirely written in Latin, so I didn't have much luck discerning what it was about. The only English seemed to be a bookplate at the front that read "From the library of Jurgen Leitner" although no author was listed. There were also several black and white illustrations - woodcuts I think - each showing a mountain or a cliff or in one picture what appeared to be an empty night sky. I felt an odd sensation when I looked at that image as though, simple as it was, I was about to fall into it, and my stomach gave an odd jolt, almost causing me to drop the book in the middle of Oxfam.

I made up my mind to buy it. Even if I never figured out how to read the thing, it was clearly worth a lot more than they were selling it for. I felt like bit of an arse for not letting them know how valuable it was, almost like I was stealing money from the charity, but in the end I realised that it wasn't my job to set the prices in this shop and besides, this book absolutely fascinated me. The woman working the till didn't even raise an eyebrow when I brought it over and paid my four pounds. I headed out, hoping to find a café where I could sit and have another look through, but it was then that I noticed the time. I had somehow managed to spend an hour in that shop, and now I was very nearly late for Katherine's play. I made it in time, luckily, though I had to run a bit.

The show was fine. I've never been a particular fan of Greek plays, and this interpretation was not the one to win me round to them. Katherine was excellent, of course, but the rest of the show was quite frankly a bit pedestrian. Still, I'm not a theatre critic, and I wasn't exactly paying it my full attention, as I was convinced there was a problem with the stage lights. Throughout the show I kept getting the faintest smell of ozone and was worried. The only other time I'd smelled that in the theatre was when one of my stage hands had accidentally ordered the wrong sort of light and we'd ended up installing a projector with a xenon-mercury lamp – the sort used to sterilise medical equipment with UV. I spotted the issue before anything happened, but I still remember that intense ozone smell. Still, no-one else seemed to notice it and I couldn't see anything in their light set-up that would have caused the odour, so I tried my best to ignore it.

After the performance was finished, Katherine and I grabbed a quick dinner before heading to our respective evening shows. I was disappointed to discover that whatever attraction there had been between us seemed to have

vanished completely, and while we spent a pleasant enough couple of hours together it was obvious that neither of us wanted to take it any further. I did show her the book, though. She knew even less Latin than I did, but was impressed. She said it looked valuable and that I should take it somewhere to be appraised, although she didn't look through it in any detail, as the pictures triggered her vertigo for some reason.

Nothing of note occurred after I left. I did my show, a production of Much Ado About Nothing down at the Courtyard Theatre, with no problems. I returned home late, having gone for a drink with the stage manager and a couple of the actors, and felt far too awake to just go to bed, so I poured myself a small gin and tonic and decided to look through this book in more detail. Oddly enough, I somehow hadn't learned any more Latin since I bought it twelve hours before, so reading it was still out of the question, but I went through and had a closer look at those woodcuts. There were about a dozen that I found, mostly mountains and cliffs but one appeared to be a tower, looming over the surrounding countryside at an odd angle, with tiny birds just visible circling the summit. And then there was that picture of an empty sky. I've never had any fear of heights, but staring at that picture I felt... I don't know, really. I just couldn't look at it for too long. It seemed to open forever, nothing to do but fall into it. It was even stranger as there wasn't much to the picture itself except for black ink and a few stylised stars, but something in the proportions just had that effect on me.

I decided that maybe Katherine had been right, and it might be valuable as an antique, so I did some research to try and find out more about it. Latin fell out of favour as a language for academic texts in the 18th Century and I really

doubted the thing was that old. Since then it was only really used for religious texts but the book certainly didn't look like it was full of prayers.

Searching Ex Altiora online didn't do much good – the phrase was used in a few old prayers, there was a company called Altiora and something in Italian about football, but nothing that looked even remotely like it related to my book.

Searching for Jurgen Leitner wasn't much better.

It brought up an entry for an Austrian musician and a few Facebook pages, although they all seemed to have umlauts in their names, unlike the one in the book, and none of them looked like the sorts to have a library full of strange Latin texts. The only thing I found that looked even remotely relevant was a listing on eBay from 2007. The auction was titled "Key of Solomon 1863 owned by MacGregor Mathers and Jurgen Leitner" and had been won for just over £1200 by a deactivated user – grbookworm1818. There was no picture or description – just the title and the winning bid. I decided to call it a night and go to bed. I think I had a nightmare but I don't remember the details.

I slept in very late the next day and by the time I awoke there wasn't much daylight left, but I spent the hours until my show contacting book dealers that I'd looked up online. All of them put the book's age between 100 and 150 years, and said it looked like it had been custom-bound.

Most offered to buy it off me for a few hundred pounds, but at this point I was more interested in information about it. Unfortunately, none of them had heard of it before, or seemed at all familiar with its contents. The last seller I went to did recognise the name Jurgen Leitner, though.

She told me Leitner had been a big name in the literary scene during the 1990s; some rich Scandinavian recluse paying absurd amounts of money for whatever books took his fancy. It was said he'd often have books custom-bound after providing a manuscript, or even commission authors to produce works to his brief - although she didn't actually know any writers who had worked with Leitner. He dropped from public view sometime around '95, but she recalled he used to have extensive dealings with Pinhole Books down in Morden, and gave me the details for Mary Keay, who owned it.

I went and I did my show after that, the last night of the run, in point of fact, but though I didn't miss a single lighting cue, all through it I just couldn't take my mind off the book. I felt as though there was something I was missing, just beyond my grasp. And all throughout I could detect that same faint smell of ozone. Or was it ozone? There was something else there, something I knew but could not remember. Every time I felt I was close, I was overcome with a dizziness and nausea that threatened to topple me over.

I skipped the cast party afterwards, instead going for a long walk to "clear my head" in the cold November air. I don't know how long I walked for. It must have been hours, but it felt right, like

it was all I could do. Walking felt as natural as falling. It was only when a man shouted at me for

almost walking into him that I stopped and took stock of my surroundings. I had no idea where I was. I took out my phone to find the nearest station and saw that I was only a street away from Morden. I felt dizzy all of a sudden, and when I looked at the building I was stood in front of, I was not in the least bit

surprised to see a brass plaque reading “Pinhole Books – By Appointment Only” next to an unmarked door of dark-stained wood. I rang the doorbell and waited. The woman who opened the door wasn’t at all what I was expecting. She was very old and painfully thin but her head was completely clean shaven and every square inch of skin I could see was tattooed over with closely-written words in a script I didn’t recognise. She stood at the bottom of a flight of stairs, and from the top I could hear the sound of death metal blaring out of some powerful speakers. I wondered for a moment if she got complaints from the neighbours, playing it so loudly at two o’clock in the morning, and realised with a start that it was actually two o’clock in the morning. I apologised for disturbing her so late and asked if she was Mary Keay. She just snorted and asked in a decidedly unfriendly manner if I had an appointment.

I reached into my bag and pulled out Ex Altiora, opening it to show Leitner’s name on the bookplate. At this her eyes seemed to light up, and she turned around to walk up the stairs. She didn’t shut the door behind her, so I took this as an invitation and followed her up.

We entered a cramped set of rooms, with books piled high in every conceivable corner, almost to a point where I had to be careful following her through the labyrinth, so as not to take a wrong turn. She was talking, I realised, and didn’t seem to care if I heard her over the music or not. She said it had been a long time since she’d found a Leitner, although “her Gerard” kept an eye out. She gave no elaboration as to who her Gerard might have been. This strange old woman didn’t seem interested in actually reading or looking at my book in depth, but asked instead if I wanted to see hers. I just nodded. I was out of my depth here, but I had no idea what in. I just knew that I hadn’t smelled ozone since I arrived.

I followed Mary Keay into a dingy study. It was small to begin with, but every wall was completely covered with packed bookshelves, crowding even further into the space. Immediately my host began to scan them intently, muttering to herself about where “he” would have put it. I stood there awkwardly, not wanting to stare at the old woman, but also hesitant to do anything else. Aside from the bookshelves, there was little in the room other than a worn desk with a very old-looking chair behind it. The desk was covered with papers, as well as fishing wire and a safety razor. I think it says something about my state of mind at this point that I didn’t even give those items a second thought at the time. Instead, my attention was fixed on a picture attached to the one small area of wall not covered by bookshelves. It was a painting of an eye. Very detailed, and at first I almost would have said almost photorealistic, but the more I looked at it, the more I saw the patterns and symmetries that formed into a single image, until I was so focused on them that I started to have difficulty seeing the eye itself. Written below it were three lines, in fine green calligraphy: “Grant us the sight that we may not know. Grant us the scent that we may not catch. Grant us the sound that we may not call.”

At this point Mary Keay returned with two cups of tea. I hadn’t even noticed her leave nor had I requested the cup of black tea she pressed into my hand. She asked if I liked the painting and told me that her Gerard had done it. Said he was a very talented artist. I mumbled something approving, I don’t remember exactly what, and looked at the cup of tea in my hand. She hadn’t offered me any milk, and was now busily searching the shelves again, her own cup forgotten on the desk. I tried to drink the stuff out of politeness, but it

tasted foul, like dust and smoke. I think it might have once been lapsang souchong, but if so it must have been years old.

Finally, Mary seemed to find the book she was looking for and took it from the shelf. She handed me a book that, at first glance, appeared to be almost identical to my copy of *Ex Altiora*,

except that the leather was in slightly better condition. There was no title on this one, but opening it I could see that it was written in letters I didn't recognise. There were no illustrations in this book, and the only English words I could find were on the bookplate: "From the library of Jurgen Leitner". Just like mine. Mary told me that the writing was in Sanskrit, but when I asked her if she could read it she just started laughing.

She took the book back and walked over to the desk where the room's single unshaded light bulb cast stark shadows across the floor. She very deliberately held the book in those shadows for a few seconds and then handed it back to me. I noticed for the first time that the heavy metal music was no longer playing, and the room was utterly silent. I opened the book, and for a few seconds was confused to see that nothing seemed to have changed. The writing was still unintelligible to me and it felt no different. I lifted it to have a closer look, and as I did I heard something clatter lightly onto the floor. I looked down to see bones. Small animal bones, from what I can tell, but each one was slightly bent and warped into shapes that bones should not form. As I stared at them, Mary Keay took the book back from me and passed it through the shadows once again. More bones fell. She did this several times, until there was a small pile formed at my feet.

I didn't know what to say. By this point my head was pounding and the feel of this cramped, dark place with its old tea and ancient books was starting to

overwhelm me. All I could think to ask was whether my book did that as well. Mary Keay laughed and told me to look for myself. I began to look through those pages. I hadn't passed it through any shadows, but I knew something had changed. The woodcuts were starker, somehow, and in the background of each there were new lines, thick and dark, stretching down from the sky. And then I came to the picture of that empty night, but now it had a stark, branching pattern carving through it. A pattern I recognised. My stomach dropped, as though the floor was gone and I was falling.

Struggling to stay standing, I muttered some excuse and went to leave. The ozone smell was back now, stronger than ever, and I had to get out. I fell down the stairs as I fled, badly bruising my hip and twisting my ankle painfully, but I didn't care. I limped from that place as quickly as I could and hailed a taxi to take me home, fingers still locked in a death-grip on my book.

The branching pattern I had seen in that picture is known as the Lichtenberg figure. It shows the diverging paths of electricity on an insulating material, such as glass or resin. I knew it from the pattern of scars on the back of my childhood friend, who had been struck by lightning because of me. His name was Michael Crew, and we'd been 8 years old at the time, playing in a field near my grandmother's house. When the storm hit, Michael had said that we should go inside, but I wanted to keep playing in the rain. I said that to him, and he just sighed and told me alright. It was as he said these words that he was struck. The sound when it happened was so loud that it drowned out his screams completely, but it was the smell that really stayed with me: that powerful ozone smell, cut through with the scent of cooking meat. Michael survived, in the end, but the scar, that branching Lichtenberg scar, stayed with him for the rest of his life.

When I got home it took all of my concentration to get up the stairs, and when I finally made it onto my sofa I couldn't shake that feeling as though I was falling. The smell was so strong I could hardly breathe. I didn't look at the book, I just lay there. I felt as though I was waiting for something, but I had no idea what.

By the time the knock on the door finally came, I was almost feeling composed enough to answer. Almost. It still took me almost five minutes to work up the nerve to open it. The knock did not come again, but I was positive that whatever was on the other side had not gone away. I reached over, grasped the handle and pulled the door open. Stood just over the threshold was a man in a long, dark leather coat. His hair was dyed an artificial black, and he had the unshaven look of someone who hadn't slept in a couple of days. I asked him if he was Gerard Keay. He said that he was, and told me he'd like to see my book. I nodded silently and he followed me inside, closing the door behind him.

I took out the book and placed it on the table. Gerard studied it for some time, but did not touch it. Finally, he nodded and offered to buy it from me for five thousand pounds. I almost laughed when he said that. I would have sold it for a fraction of the amount. I might even have given it away, if it wasn't for the feeling that that... wouldn't count somehow. It's hard to explain. I didn't care what he planned to do with it, I just wanted to get rid of it, and so I agreed.

Gerard didn't seem exactly happy at the news. He just nodded gravely and headed towards the door, saying he'd need to get the money and return. I didn't try to stop him. He left, closing the door behind him and I was alone once again. The whole encounter lasted barely more than a minute.

I sat there, waiting in silence for him to return. It was awful, and I needed to find some way to distract myself from the creeping smell, so I decided to get out my computer and see what I

could find out about Gerard and Mary Keay. Typing in their names I don't know what sort of thing it was that I expected to find, but it certainly wasn't a news article from 2008 about Mary Keay's murder. Police had broken in late September, after neighbours complained about the

smell, and found her lying dead in the study. Cause of death was apparently determined to be an overdose of painkillers, but it was judged a murder due to "extensive post-mortem mutilation of the body". Large pieces of her skin had been peeled away, and hung up to dry on fishing wire, all around the room. The article had a picture of Mary Keay, and there was no question that it was the same old woman that I had met in Morden, although in the photograph she seemed to have a full head of hair and lacked any visible tattoos.

I frantically started searching for any other information I could find. Other news stories covered Gerard's trial for his mother's murder. Apparently he had been acquitted after a significant piece of evidence was deemed inadmissible, although none of the reports seemed to know what exactly that evidence was. It was at this moment the knocking came again. Gerard had returned.

I opened the door. I thought briefly about not letting him in, but I knew he'd wait there as long as he needed to, and I couldn't think for the reek of ozone that penetrated every one of my senses. I could not hide the terror on my face as he entered, but if he noticed the change in my demeanour then he didn't react to it. He simply handed me an envelope filled with cash. I didn't even bother to count it before handing him the book. He looked at the title, then

flicked through it very quickly, before laughing, just once and nodding, apparently to himself, as though he'd just come to some sort of decision.

I had expected Gerard to leave immediately, but instead he walked over to my metal waste paper basket and placed the book inside. He reached into his jacket pocket, and pulled out a bottle of lighter fluid and a box of matches. Within a few seconds the book was ablaze, and the smell vanished almost immediately. Even as my head began to clear, I felt like I had to ask him why, but he just shook his head.

"My mother doesn't always know what's best for our family." That was all he said before picking up the waste paper bin, now full of gently smouldering ashes. I warned him it would be too hot to hold, but he shrugged and said he'd had worse. Then Gerard Keay left, and I never saw him or the book again.

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement ends.

If I never hear the name Jurgen Leitner again it will be too soon. I suppose it was too much to hope that we'd finally dealt with all that remained of his library after the incident in 1994, but it would have been useful if Gertrude had at least thought to add this statement to the current project file. Who knows how many other statements are in here that might deal with his books or other currently active Institute projects? If my luck thus far is anything to go by, then I'd say it is unlikely this was an isolated example. The more I discover about this archive, the more it seems Gertrude simply took the written statements and threw them into these files without even reading them. Given that she was

Head Archivist for over fifty years, then that is... This might be a bigger job than I originally thought.

Regardless, most of the verifiable details in Mr Swain's account seem to match up with our own researches. Martin couldn't find any records of Ex Altiora as a title in existent catalogues of esoteric or similar literature, so I assigned Sasha to double-check. Still nothing. Is it possible Mr Swain got the title wrong? It seems unlikely, given the simplicity of it, and the... occurrences he describes certainly sound like they could have been due to the proximity of a true Leitner tome.

Still, all the other books from his library have been custom editions of known texts on daemonology or the arcane. If there are Leitners out there that we haven't even heard of, I fear that may be cause for some small alarm.

Useful details for follow-up are few and far between, however. Donation records at the Oxfam charity shop in Notting Hill Gate only have anonymous donations listed for books in October/November 2012, and obviously none of the staff recall the book. We've also been unable to locate Gerard Keay at all. Aside from this encounter, he seems to have almost entirely disappeared following the end of his trial. The description Mr Swain gives does appear to match file photos of Gerard and Mary Keay, and from his description it sounds like he did find his way to what used to be Pinhole Books in Morden, although it has been closed since 2008 for obvious reasons, and no new tenants moved in until 2014. There was one interesting thing Tim found out, though, in the official police report on Mary Keay's death – apparently, the drying sheets of skin had been written over in permanent marker. There was no transcription or translation of it in the report but the language was identified to be Sanskrit.

So it doesn't appear that we have any concrete leads to go on. Still, I will be bringing this up with Elias and recommending that the search for any other missed books from the Leitner library be made this Institute's highest priority. Jurgen Leitner has done the world enough harm and we must pursue all available avenues to ensure that he does no more.

Recording ends.

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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