

MAG – 059 - Recluse

Content Warnings:

- Compulsions (supernatural)
- Spiders
- Human remains
- Infestation

Discussions of: burns, graphic injury

Mentions of: alcoholism, smoking, death, drugs, food, fire, child abuse

SFX: low drone, high pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode fifty-nine. Recluse.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro *Continued*]

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Ronald Sinclair regarding his years spent in a teenage halfway house on Hill Top Road, Oxford. Original statement given November 29th,

2005. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I should have come in to tell you people about this before really. I heard about your institute back in the '80s and I thought, "Should I tell them"? But I didn't. Thought you'd be all about old castles and ancient cairns, not have any time for weird goings-on in a suburban house in Oxford. And you're academics as well, so probably have more rigorous standards than one crackpot's horror story. Still, I saw last week that they were planning to build on that land again, another house where the old Fielding place used to be. I don't know, it's not like you'd have any power to stop the construction, but I just... I needed to tell someone about it, and you were less likely to throw me out on my ear than the planning department of Oxford City Council. You see, I lived with Raymond Fielding for almost three years, and believe me when I say that there is nothing good that can come from disturbing that dreadful place.

I was a bad kid. I've cleaned up my act in the 40-odd years since, but back then I was a little thug. Wasn't entirely my fault; I came from a bad family. My father left before I was born, and I'm not sure how much you know about

single motherhood in the late '40s, but it was clearly hard enough that my mother ended up with a serious alcohol problem. I won't go into the gory details of my childhood, but let's just say it's no surprise I was out of school and in the system before my 13th birthday.

They tried a few places to set me straight. Back then, these sorts of places weren't quite as enlightened and the only life lesson I learned worth a damn was how to take a beating. Finally, when I was 15, after the justice system was finished with me for the third time, I was given the chance to re-enter society and offered a place at a halfway house on Hill Top Road. It's weird, I've tried to get information on it so many times in the years since, but there's nothing there. It's like it never existed. I mean, this was a long way pre-digital and files got lost plenty, but it still bothers me. The most traumatic thing that ever happened to me and, as far as any official record is concerned, I couldn't have even been there.

Raymond Fielding was younger than I expected. Every other place the people in charge had been old, leathery moralists with scowls on their faces and callouses on their knuckles. A lot of ex-military types who would lecture for hours on how their wasted life had been saved by the discipline of the army and did their best to impose it on us. Ray, as he insisted we call him, was different. He couldn't have been much older than 30 and he let his brown hair

grow long. Not by today's standards, I suppose, but it would have sent any of the crewcut authoritarians into a red-faced rage.

He was friendly and approachable, but didn't seem like he was trying to be our friend. He was easy-going and smiled a lot, but there was something in his eyes that made me wary of trying to take advantage of him. I didn't like him from the start. The other adults I'd met on my journey through delinquency had been awful and they'd run the spectrum from drippy, patronising do-gooders to abusive thugs, but I'd always known. I would know what they were and where I stood with them. Ray was a mystery and that unsettled me.

Still, he wasn't too strict with our comings and goings and the other kids staying there seemed all right. The one thing that surprised me was how rare it was to see anyone come back. Most other halfway houses I'd stayed in, you always had some of the older residents, those who had fallen into even worse criminal company, coming back occasionally, usually to sell drugs or do some recruiting. Amphetamines were the thing back in the early '60s, so I was surprised when I moved into Hill Top Road and there wasn't a purple heart or a black bomber to be found. It didn't seem like any alumni of Ray's little family came back for a visit. At the time, I just assumed it was a pretty nice neighbourhood, so probably wasn't the sort of place my kind (as I thought of it then) made a habit of visiting.

I wasn't wrong. The local residents hated us. We never really got into any proper trouble, but the sort of glares we got just for smoking on the street made me want to break a window sometimes. I never did though. I'm not quite sure why I didn't, to be honest. Before I met Ray, I would have. There were plenty of broken windows in my past. There was something about living there though that dulled the urge. My memories of a lot of my time there are, well, not exactly foggy, but feel almost like I'm watching someone else's memories.

I remember that it sometimes felt like I'd do things without actually deciding to do them, like it was just muscle memory moving me, or a string gently guiding me. It was never bad or dangerous stuff, just things I wouldn't normally have done, like brushing my teeth. I'm glad for it now I've passed 60 and teeth have stopped being something I take for granted, but at 15 the thought never even crossed my mind. But when I lived on Hill Top Road, I cleaned them every night. Up and down and side to side, my arm moving like I didn't even need to think about it.

The other kids living there were the same, at least I think they were. I remember them being kind of dull. Not that they were boring, exactly. We'd spend time together and smoke and play games and the like, but there was something about them, as though there were some things that they said and did without anything behind them. Occasionally there'd be flashes of

something, like the time me and Dick Barradale snuck out after dark and set Mr Hainsley's bins on fire, but mostly they were quiet, almost placid. I'm sure they'd have said the same things about me and at the time nothing seemed amiss. I did what I did because it was what I was supposed to do, and it never struck me to question it. I'm not sure I really recognise who I became while living at that house.

I did take up reading though. There was a shop down in Cowley that kept a bucket of old pulp magazines, marked down to sixpence because they weren't the latest issue. I used to spend whatever money I had down there and then I'd sit under the tree in the back garden and read them cover to cover, over and over again. They were daft really, but I loved them. In the summer, with the leaves giving you just enough shade to keep cool, I'd say I was happier than I'd ever been before then.

For the most part, Ray seemed content to stay out of our hair and leave us to our own devices. He had his own study in the basement, where he spent almost all his time, and usually trusted one of us to go to the grocers for food and sundries. Aside from church, which he made us attend with him every Sunday, he rarely went out at all. Occasionally, one of the other residents of the neighbourhood would overcome their distaste for us long enough to ask how Ray was keeping and whether he was well. I gradually got the sense that,

with the exception of the teenagers staying at his house, Raymond Fielding was something of a recluse. A well-liked recluse, certainly, but to see him leave the house on any day other than a Sunday was quite a remarkable thing.

Aside from church, there was one other regular activity that he always insisted we take part in. We generally ate our meals in the dining room, which was a bit cramped sometimes as, when full, there were eight of us in the house aside from Ray, and the table was barely big enough. On Sunday evenings, however, we'd all gather for the evening meal and before we sat down to eat, he would remove the bright white tablecloth that covered it and we'd gather around the dark wood.

I remember it was carved in all sorts of strange swirling designs and patterns. It felt like if you picked a line, any line, you could follow it through to the centre to some deep truth, if only your eye could keep track of the strand that had caught it. The centre of the table looked at first like it was simply part of the wooden top, but if you looked closely, as I did so often, you could see an outline marking the very middle as a small, square box, carved with patterns just like the ones that laced their way over the rest of the table. I don't remember how long we sat around the table those evenings, nor do I have any memory of what we might have eaten.

So, I passed a couple of years in relative peace. I actually studied, stayed mostly out of trouble and, as my 18th birthday approached, it looked like I might be able to find someone to teach me a decent trade. At that point, I was the oldest there by a few months, the others having left the house as they each turned 18 in turn. A suited man would come around, though rarely the same one twice. Ray would sign some papers and my former house sibling would head out the door and into the wide world. I didn't see them after that, but at the time I didn't really think anything of it. I assumed they were too busy trying to survive in a world that I had always considered deeply hostile.

Agnes came to the house two months before my birthday, in the middle of winter. Ray had never mentioned her, never held one of his little meetings to introduce her; she was just suddenly in the house one day and no one really thought to question it. She was younger than the other kids, maybe 10 or 11 years old, and didn't talk much. She had a small, sharp face and long brown hair always braided into two tight pigtails, which she would twirl around her fingers whenever you tried to talk to her. I'll admit she was a bit spooky, looking back on it, but to be honest, at the time, I never really questioned it, the same way I never really questioned any of it. She never came to church though, never sat around the dinner table when it was uncovered. Whenever Ray came in the room and she was in there, he would often just turn around

and leave, and once I could have sworn that he looked at her with something in his eyes that, even in my dulled state, I recognised as fear.

I was so focused on my upcoming emancipation that I didn't pay much attention to these developments, and I can't tell you much more about Agnes or what she did with her time in the house. All I know is that when the man from the Children's Committee came with the papers for Ray to sign, she was standing at the bottom of the stairs, watching me with an expression that looked almost playful.

Ray signed the documents to remand me fully back to state custody. The age of majority back then was 21, but from 18 I was expected to be finding work and accommodation on my own. It was all a bit surreal, watching pens sign my life into its different stages without holding any of them myself. As the man in the suit told me to follow him in a clipped BBC accent, Agnes walked over and gestured for me to lean down and listen to her. I did so, but instead of a conspiratorial whisper, she just gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, then ran off down the hall. I stood there for a moment, confused, before my temporary guardian once again instructed me to follow him.

I did so, and the cold air of the outside hit me like a slap across the face. We walked for a few minutes to the end of the road and I felt as though my

meagre suitcase was almost frozen to my hand. He told me to wait there while he brought his car around, then disappeared down a side street. I stood there as the bitter wind cut through my thin coat. The sun was out, but it didn't do much to soften the sharpness of the February air as I waited.

Then, without warning, I wasn't waiting anymore. I had turned around, put down my suitcase and started walking back towards Raymond Fielding's house. I didn't want to go back. I had no reason to go back, but I had apparently decided to anyway, because I knew that's where I was going. After two and a half years, I was rather used to this feeling, but there was something else there this time, something in the back of my mind, a frantic, scuttling terror. It didn't do any good though; I was returning to Hill Top Road, no matter what I might feel about it. Choice didn't even come into it.

The door was unlocked when I returned, and the house was quiet. My eyes darted around, looking for anyone who might be able to tell me what was going on, why the fine threads that pulled me through my life had dragged me back here, but I was alone. I walked over to the door that led down into the basement into Ray's study, and I was suddenly struck by the realisation that nobody other than him had ever gone inside. At least not to my knowledge. Nonetheless, I reached up and turned the handle. It twisted silently and the door swung open, revealing a set of stairs leading down.

Light bulbs in spherical lampshades lit the way and the thought struck me that, given how much time Ray spent down here, it was surprising how many cobwebs there were. They covered every corner, and lightly coated part of the walls. As I headed down the stairs, closing the door behind me, I saw even more and came to the unsettling realisation that what covered the bare bulbs were not, in fact, lampshades, but were instead thick clumps of cobweb.

The sight that greeted me when I finally reached the bottom of the stairs was about as far from what I had expected as it could possibly have been. Rather than a study filled with books, papers, desks or the like, the room was large and almost empty. The walls and ceiling were bare earth and it looked more like a burrow than anything else. In the centre of the room stood that strange hypnotic table, though how he had gotten the heavy wooden thing down here was beyond me. The whole place was covered with a thick gossamer of spider's web, and in the thick clumps around the edges of the chamber, I saw shapes I recognised. Doris Hardy, Dick Barradale, Greg Montgomery – the older ones, who had left the house before I had. They lay still now, wrapped in their sticky cocoons. Their bodies seemed warped and bloated in a way I didn't recognise, but that's only because, at that point in my life, I had never before seen a spider egg sac.

In the chair sat Raymond Fielding. He looked the same as ever, that placid unreadable smile still on his face. His brown leather coat seemed to shift around his body, the texture in the dim light seemed more like coarse fur. He didn't say anything, just watched as I continued to make my way towards the table. For all the terror strangling my heart at that moment at the discovery of the grotesque fate of my friends, I could still feel the bland, uncaring expression on my face, and found myself stood in front of the table as though nothing whatsoever was wrong.

I reached over and pulled the wooden square from the centre of the table. On its own, it appeared to be a small wooden box, and the lid opened smoothly as my hands moved in a practised motion. Inside was an apple, green and fresh and still wet with morning dew. I knew I was going to eat it. I could feel tears desperately trying to push themselves out of my eyes, but I instead decided not to cry. I placed the box down on the table, reached over and picked up the apple.

All at once, my cheek erupted in pain. It was like someone had pressed a hot branding iron into my face, and I could swear that I heard the flesh sizzle as I let out a scream and fell to my knees. I raised my hands to my face and realised in that moment two very important things. The first is that my face seemed to be untouched and I could feel no injury or burn. The second was that raising

my hand had been a truly voluntary act. I had willed it myself and whatever power had been gripping me, tugging me into its web, I was free of it. I looked at Raymond Fielding, whose face finally had a real expression on it: one of confusion and anger. As he stood up, I saw small, twitching shapes tumbling out of his jacket, and I ran. I ran up those stairs, out the door and away into the night. I didn't look back and, to this day, I pray every night that the others down in the basement were already dead.

That's it, really. Within two hours, I was out of Oxford on the first train I could jump onto. I jumped off at Birmingham to avoid a ticket inspector, and that's where I spent the next several years. Given my start in life, I've done very well for myself and I now have comfort, education and money. I try to think that I've left my past behind, but that sort of denial doesn't help me sleep. I only had my first truly restful night since that day after reading about the fire that burned the house to the ground, but now they're building there. They're breaking ground that should be left burned and empty and I've started to dream again.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Mr Sinclair was not exaggerating when he described the difficulties of tracking down information on any youth halfway house in Hill Top Road, or Raymond Fielding more generally. While I am naturally inclined to suspect conspiracy, Martin informs me that the nature of the gaps looks like lost or damaged files. There are whole swathes of records missing from that period, not only related to Fielding, but many other similar institutions in the area. There's no attempt to cover up or redirect it either; it just looks like whichever cabinet housed those records got lost or damaged in the years since.

I have done my best to prevent Martin reading this statement in too much detail. I have no interest in having another argument about spiders. In fact, after reading this statement, I have no interest in thinking about spiders any more than is professionally required. It raises further questions about the relationship between Raymond Fielding and this 'Agnes', and I can only hope some answers lie elsewhere in the archives. I wouldn't be surprised. Between Ronald Sinclair, Ivo Lensik and Father Burroughs, it appears there's still much to learn about Hill Top Road.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

Supplemental.

Everyone's avoiding me. They've taken to working farther away from me than normal, and when I call them for any reason, they're always keen to leave as soon as possible. They share furtive glances when they think I'm not looking. I don't like it. I feel like they're planning something.

End supplemental.

[Tape clicks off.]

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

It featured: Jonathan Sims as The Archivist.