

## MAG – 106 – A Matter of Perspective

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

**JONATHAN SIMS**

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode One Hundred And Six A  
Matter Of Perspective

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

(Click)

**MELANIE**

Jan Kilbride’s account of his time spent aboard the space station *Daedalus*.  
Statement date: February 10th 2008. Melanie King recording.

Start.

(Melanie claps)

**MELANIE (STATEMENT)**

The hardest thing to imagine, to really get your head around, is, is the scale at which the universe operates. You can drill down so small that you reach particles and building blocks that your brain simply can’t connect to the physical reality that you inhabit. The fact that the vast majority of your own body is empty vacuum, space filled only with the weak forces that are binding your disparate atoms to one another ... that can only really be understood at an intellectual level. To really internalise that thought, to believe it, would be too much for most people. And at the other end, the sheer size at which the

universe operates literally cannot be fully conceptualised by the human mind. We have to reduce it to factors, or long strings of comparative zeros. Most people can't even properly appreciate the size of our own planet, seeing it only in crudely rendered diagrams or maps. But compared to us, the planet is immense, more than large enough for the swell of humanity to grow and ultimately extinguish itself. Yet compared to the wider universe, it isn't even a noticeable speck.

The human mind would reflexively want to place us at the midway point, a perfect centre, balanced between the incredible size of the universe and the unthinkable smallness of the subatomic. But this is nothing but ego, a manifestation of our obsession with considering ourselves some sort of normative benchmark against which all else is measured. In truth, we are so much closer to the tiny, mindless atoms that make up our bodies than we are to a universe so enormous that fully imagining it is simply impossible.

Even with all I've seen, I still can't communicate it. I can't make people actually understand how horribly, nauseatingly boundless this universe is, and when I think of it too deeply I feel like I'm going to throw up, like a sort of existential vertigo.

It never used to scare me like this. I used to take a sort of comfort in it, in the thought that we were so small, such a minor blip in the life of the universe. Where others saw insignificance and pointlessness, I found freedom. A sort of optimistic nihilism, I suppose? I know now it was all just denial, of course. It's not easy to be scared of something that you can't even think about. I miss those days, smoking out the window of a tower block, looking over the lights of

the city blinking up in defiance of the void, and thinking how daft it was, like an ant shaking its fist at a god. I think that’s really why I wanted to go to space: to put it all in perspective, that for one moment I could look down and see it all. Every human that ever existed, the living and the dead, hanging below me on a tidy ball of carbon.

And do you know what? It was worth it. At least I thought so at the time. That moment, that first look at the Earth falling away below us ... it was everything I dreamed it would be. And how often is that true? The Daedalus was in low enough orbit that I never got the whole planet view as I had hoped, but it didn’t matter, the first time looking down and taking in the sheer scale of it remains the most magnificent sensation I have ever experienced.

I don’t know how they picked me for the mission. A representative of some private consortium approached me about a year beforehand. I’d put in my application a few times, but I never really expected anything. I had all the skills, but I knew I wasn’t anyone’s first choice of astronaut. I simply wasn’t exceptional enough, or so I thought. Mr Fairchild didn’t mention exactly why I was chosen, though he did reference my psychiatric profile a few times in the interview, and I didn’t want to press him too hard on the reason in case I somehow lost the opportunity. Idiot.

There were technically three of us up there, although I only really spent any time with Manuela. The other one who came up with us – Chilcott, I think his name was – he was apparently doing some sort of separate isolation study. Can’t say I envied him. The door to his section of the station was daunting, to say the least. I mean, I’m an engineer and honestly it looked like it was sturdier

than the actual hull. Manuela and I were instructed not to attempt any communication with him, and to be honest that was fine by me. On those occasions we had to call into his little chamber through the intercom, usually as part of maintenance or a systems’ check, he always sounded so distant. This flat, tinny monotone that set my teeth on edge like a subtle vibration. So, we left him to it.

We had plenty of our own work to do, anyway. Manuela Dominguez was quite a big name in certain areas of the physics community. Or at least, she had been. I hadn’t heard of any work she’d done for a good few years, but as I say, I’m more on the engineering side of things, so it wasn’t something I kept up with in detail. While she was happy to talk, Manuela apparently didn’t like to discuss her professional life on Earth, or the specifics of the research she was doing on the Daedalus. Like Chilcott, her research was kept entirely separate from mine and, while we spent plenty of time together, I never did figure out exactly what it was. Something to do with lasers, I think.

As for my job, to be honest it felt disappointingly like busy work: stress testing, zero gravity effects, material evaluations. For every test I was told to do, I could have listed a half-dozen studies citing similar research from the ISS, most of which had had pretty conclusive results. If you had told me I was just being instructed to do the same things they did over there, but two years later, I’d have been hard pressed to argue.

But there was something else. A different sort of worry that was building up inside me. It was like a gradual increase of air pressure. You never notice it happening until your ears pop. I didn’t realise how intense the sensation had

gotten until all at once I knew what it was, what I was feeling. It was the sense of a presence, of there being something out there. Something that wasn’t the Earth. And it was getting closer.

When it started, I tried to talk to Manuela about it, but she seemed to think I was talking about aliens and quickly changed the subject. I suppose in a way I was, but nothing like she was imagining. Alien might be the best word for that presence, but not because we sat on the edge of outer space, but because what it made me feel was beyond anything I had words for. And still it grew closer.

When this thing, this being, finally called out, I didn’t just hear it. I felt it, vibrating through me with such a shuddering intensity that I was sure my bones would break into powder inside my skin. The whole station shook violently, rattling and pitching. My first instinct was to check that the Earth was still below us, and not the victim of some dreadful cosmic disaster, but when I reached the window it still hung there serenely below us. As I looked, I saw drops of red floating through the air in front of me. I reached up to my ears and my hand came away wet. Don’t try to tell me sound can’t travel in a vacuum. I know.

I pushed off towards my quarters and the medical kit, but as I began to move through the station, I stopped. I didn’t grab or hit anything; I did nothing to slow my momentum. I just stopped, floating there, motionless, feeling like the whole of existence was frozen in place. Then slowly, carefully, I went to grab one of the handles, to pull myself out of this zero-gravity limbo, but I couldn’t reach. The station was cramped, so cramped that I could only fully stretch out

in the section used to exercise, but now, somehow, in this tiny corridor, I couldn’t reach the walls. I flailed and I grabbed and I shouted, but somehow it was all just too far away. And I knew all at once that I would float there, motionless, until I died. And I saw the pointless illusion of the station, of the planet below, all hiding me from the uncaring expanse of the universe in which I was now eternally trapped. The station, a hollow pretence of shell that did nothing to separate me from the void. And that cry came again, so loud and long and deep that it couldn’t not be the sound of a living thing, so vast and so ancient that thinking about it made me weep. And I screamed in turn.

My hand touched the rail at the exact moment that Manuela came to check on me. I was moving again, and she asked if I was alright, though she clearly had no interest in the answer. She said she’d felt the station shake, but when I pressed, she claimed she hadn’t heard anything. Her eyes were red and I noticed for the first time that the tips of her fingers were burned. I don’t know why I asked her really. I knew then that she hadn’t heard it, that she would never hear it. And I felt completely alone. I remember I almost envied Chilcott, because at least he had known what he was signing up for.

The next month passed more normally, I think. Though beyond a certain point, at the edge of everything you’ve ever known, the word ‘normal’ loses its meaning. Manuela became more and more withdrawn – more focused on her own research, whatever it might have been – while I more or less stopped doing mine entirely. I got no new instructions. I would find myself staring out into space for a few minutes, and then, when I checked the time, hours would have passed. I don’t remember if I slept.

I honestly can’t remember if going out to work on the solar panels was repair work, or if I’d finally been given a new task that required going outside. I just remember sealing the bulky EVA suit and stepping into the airlock, pushing myself out into the nothing. The tether coiled out behind me, spooling metre after metre after metre. But I wasn’t going towards the solar panels. Why? Where was I going? I floated slowly off into the empty unending space, and the tether line just kept on going. The station drifted further and further away. I could feel myself falling up, falling out, falling off of everything that could be called the world. The station was gone, as was the planet of my birth, of everything that gave me my existence. It shrank as I watched until it became less than the smallest dot. I couldn’t have been that far away. It’s impossible. But I was. I was so far from all existence, surrounded by the vacuum of everything, I could feel my soul trying to expand to fill the never-ending absence, and it hurt.

I don’t know how long I was floating for. I know it was less than a billion years, which is barely a heartbeat in the life of the universe, so how can it really be said to matter? The stars began to wink out, one by one, and I thought, perhaps for a second, or perhaps for a hundred years, that I had reached the end of time, and I was watching the gradual fading of the universe. And then I realised the obvious. I could not see the stars because something was blocking them. It moved and flowed across my vision, and every motion seemed to snuff out more light. There was no shape to see, no outline that can be drawn of this thing so dark and enormous I could feel my stomach trying to vomit, my mind trying to expand, to take in the size of what moves between the stars, filling my entire vision and more. I knew that if it chose to cry out it would have

destroyed me utterly, and I know that there was no possibility it could ever notice that I existed.

I don't believe in God. I can't believe that a being of such limitless power and knowledge would still notice humanity, would understand or care about its existence. But I keep thinking back to an old professor of mine, back when I briefly studied neuroscience, talking about consciousness, about how we still don't honestly know what it is, where it comes from, what aspect of the brain makes it possible. And I wonder if there might not be consciousnesses out there, so far beyond our comprehension that we could not properly recognise them as such. Minds so strange and colossal that we would never know they were minds at all. Perhaps, out there in the endless vast, they would not notice or recognise us in return. And I wish that I could convince myself that ignorance was the same thing as safety, but then, how many weeds have you unthinkingly stepped on in your lifetime?

Statement ends.

**MELANIE**

Oh. That, um, well that seems... That seems to be ...

**(Paper gets shuffled)**

That's all of it. Hm, well, Jan Kilbride definitely returned to Earth with his colleagues, and he certainly seems to have given this statement in person, so... I mean, he did come back somehow. Assuming he ever left. It might have been a hallucination of some sort. Isolation and stress can do odd things to you, of

course, not to mention the evident insomnia. And if it is true, if what Jan Kilbride saw was real... I mean, to be honest it sounds a bit beyond my pay grade. Whatever my pay grade is. And I have enough insomnia of my own to deal with.

I did do some checking on the Daedalus. I mean, you've got to do something, haven't you? Mr Kilbride seems to have the right of it in terms of his job; there have been exactly zero peer-reviewed pieces of research that have in any way referenced or cited studies or tests conducted on the Daedalus. From the point of view of the scientific community, the project might as well have never happened.

Also, I, um, I can't find Jan Kilbride. He definitely returned. I've found more than one photograph of the trio's arrival back on Earth – Carter Chilcott being attended to by medical personnel, and the other two looking tired, but alive. There are also a couple of short newspaper stories mentioning their safe return. But it seems as though Kilbride made his way over to the Institute a few weeks after touchdown, made his statement and then... nothing. I can't find any sign of him, and neither can Basira or Martin. Not on Earth, at least. I really don't want to say he vanished into thin air, but he's vanished into something.

Beyond that, there's only a few things worth noti—

**BASIRA**

Hey, you ready for that drink?

**MELANIE**

Oh, yes, yes. Just give me a second; finishing off a statement.

**BASIRA**

Oh, sorry, I thought, you know, ‘cause the door was open...

**MELANIE**

No, I just needed a bit of air flow.

**BASIRA**

Yeah, it is not cool down here.

**MELANIE**

Summer in the basement, I suppose.

**BASIRA**

Yeah. Speaking of not cool, didn’t Martin say he was coming today?

**MELANIE**

Wow. Ouch.

**BASIRA**

Oh, what, you’re gonna judge me? I literally don’t know anyone here you haven’t made cry.

**MELANIE**

You only know Tim and Martin.

**BASIRA**

And Elias.

**MELANIE**

I made Elias cry?

**BASIRA**

I don’t know. Probably. You can be very mean.

**MELANIE**

Right, well, the jury’s still out on Elias. And anyway, Martin’s always been lovely to you.

**BASIRA**

Mmm. You should have seen him when I turned up last year. I think he thought I was trying to steal his precious archivist.

**MELANIE**

Ah... I got the exact same when John was hiding out and came to me with his “source on the inside” stuff. Martin was... not impressed.

**BASIRA**

Oof. That boy needs to relax.

**MELANIE**

Or at least find someone else to fuss over.

**BASIRA**

Yeah, he's got it bad.

Do you know if he and John ever...

**MELANIE**

No clue, and not interested. Although according to Georgie, John doesn't. Like, at all.

**BASIRA**

Oh. Yeah, that does explain some stuff. Wait, hang on, do I know Georgie?

**MELANIE**

I don't think so. Georgie Barker? She does *What the Ghost?*

**BASIRA**

No way, I used to love that show! I mean, the first couple of seasons, at least. Took a weird turn in Season 3, when they introduced—

**MELANIE**

Well, she and John, they dated.

**BASIRA**

Yeah?

**MELANIE**

I mean, it was years ago, but—

**BASIRA**

Huh. I always used to put on podcasts when I was driving around. You know, when I wasn’t on duty, and when Daisy didn’t need the radio.

**MELANIE**

I literally cannot picture Daisy listening to the radio.

**BASIRA**

*The Archers.*

**MELANIE**

No.

**BASIRA**

Hand to God.

**MELANIE**

I, I actually do not believe you.

**BASIRA**

She never missed an episode.

**(Melanie exhales in astonishment)**

Oh, sorry, did you need to finish up?

**MELANIE**

No, I, I actually have no idea what I was going to say. I did have more notes on, um, on... space, I guess? But uh, forget it, let's go.

**BASIRA**

I should probably go check in with Martin, you know, see if he's in for drinks.

**MELANIE**

So you can double-check your gossip?

**BASIRA**

I don't gossip. I have the mind of an investigator.

**MELANIE**

Right, okay. Anyway, I'll go find him.

**(Melanie gets up)**

I could really do with the walk. Do you want to go ahead, grab the booth?

**BASIRA**

Yeah, sure, I can wait. I've got a book.

**MELANIE**

Of course you do.

**(Click)**

**(Click)**

**(Papers are shuffled, followed by a door knock)**

**ELIAS**

Come in, Melanie.

**(Door opens)**

**MELANIE**

**(Guardedly)** Martin said you wanted to see me?

**ELIAS**

Yes, please come in. I thought it was about time for your first performance review.

**MELANIE**

**(Laughing)** I, um, I didn’t even know that was, uh... Well, there wasn’t anything scheduled.

**ELIAS**

No, well, given the recent, um, tensions in the office, I thought it probably best if you weren’t aware of it in advance.

**MELANIE**

Right...

**ELIAS**

Less time to prepare, you understand.

**MELANIE**

Right.

**ELIAS**

So, have a seat.

You've been with us a few months now, I believe.

**MELANIE**

Yeah.

**ELIAS**

And how are you finding it?

**MELANIE**

Is that a joke?

**ELIAS**

Aside from the obvious, I mean.

**MELANIE**

Oh, well, I suppose it's been... unstructured. Without John around and with you being sat up here lurking, there's not been a lot of useful direction.

**ELIAS**

**(Making notes)** I see.

**MELANIE**

I mean, you pick out a statement occasionally, and John might phone in to ask after some scrap of information, but to be honest, no-one's even really told me what an “archival assistant” is actually supposed to do.

**ELIAS**

So how have you been occupying your time?

**MELANIE**

Reading, mostly. Doing some of my own research.

**ELIAS**

Into what?

**MELANIE**

**(Defensive)** My own projects.

**ELIAS**

Of course. And ‘plotting my demise’?

**MELANIE**

When I get a chance, yes.

**ELIAS**

Hm.

**MELANIE**

I suppose that doesn’t look very good on my review?

**ELIAS**

Quite frankly, no.

**MELANIE**

Well, if you need to fire me, I won’t make a scene.

**ELIAS**

No, no, I’m afraid not.

**MELANIE**

Sure.

**ELIAS**

**(Sighing)** I wish I knew the words that would make you believe me.

**MELANIE**

What? That you’re a literal dead man’s switch.

**ELIAS**

No. If that was the only issue, I could have simply placed the knowledge in your mind.

**MELANIE**

What?

**ELIAS**

You already have doubts, though. You’ve been talking with Tim, and have convinced yourself that, even if I’m telling the truth, I’m too dangerous to live. Whatever I’m planning needs to be stopped, even if it costs a few lives, including your own.

**MELANIE**

Well, that’s not even—

**ELIAS**

A rationalisation, of course. A lie about your own selfishness, that you would rather be dead than trapped without that self-determination you prize so highly. I wish I knew the words to convince you it’s for the best.

**MELANIE**

Are we done?

**ELIAS**

It’s too deep. I can see almost anything I care to, read knowledge from someone’s mind or place it there, but I just cannot change the nature of a person. And I am struggling to think of what could rid you of this misguided rage.

**MELANIE**

So let me go. Or kill me.

**ELIAS**

[Sighing] You know, that is the second such ultimatum I have heard in as many weeks. But no, there are always other options. And I am not above threats.

**MELANIE**

Threaten, then. I’ve got nothing.

**ELIAS**

That’s almost true. Your life is indeed shockingly absent of any meaningful connections. That’s actually one of the reasons I chose you for this job. Your father was your last real anchor, wasn’t he?

**MELANIE**

That’s none of your business.

**ELIAS**

Perhaps. Five years is plenty of time to grieve. It’s a real tragedy, isn’t it? Dementia? Especially so early. But he always remembered you, didn’t he, “Little Moth”?

**MELANIE**

Shut. Up.

**ELIAS**

At least you got him into a decent care home. Hard to afford on an irregular income like yours, but your mother’s life insurance helped plenty, and Ivy Meadows wasn’t as expensive as some of them. It’s a shame about the fire, but I’d have thought it would offer something of a relief.

**MELANIE**

W-what are you talking about?

**ELIAS**

Oh, of course. They told you he died in his sleep, didn’t they. Smoke inhalation. A real tragedy, but at least he didn’t suffer.

**MELANIE**

I—

**ELIAS**

**(Heavy static)** Do you want to know what really killed him?

**(Melanie gasps & shakes)**

Awful, isn’t it? He *really* suffered. Not really your fault, just bad luck, but that doesn’t comfort you, does it?

**MELANIE**

**(Distraught)** T-take it back! T-take it back!

**ELIAS**

I’m afraid that’s not really something I can do. I can promise not to make it worse, though.

**MELANIE**

Wha—? No.

**ELIAS**

You know how your father really died, and I am sure that is unimaginably painful for you. But be aware: if I choose to, I can make you see it.

**MELANIE**

No!

**ELIAS**

If you try to interfere with me again, in any way, I will drive that image so deep into your psyche, that even if you are right, even if you live, it will be there every time you close your eyes.

**MELANIE**

**(Moaning)** I, I...

**ELIAS**

That’s alright; take your time. Tell you what, why don’t you take the rest of the day off. I’m sure you have a lot to process.

**(Sobbing)**

Anyway, aside from all that, I’d say your performance has been... satisfactory.

**(Click)**

**[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]**

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

It featured: Lydia Nicholas as Melanie King, Frank Voss as Basira Hussain and Ben Meredith as Elias Bouchard.