

MAG – 152 – A Gravedigger’s Envy

Content Warnings:

- Burial alive
- Possible suicide ideation

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and fifty-two. A Gravedigger’s Envy.

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Hezekiah Wakely, regarding his career as a gravedigger. Compiled from a series of letters to Nathaniel Beale between 1837 and 1839. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

August, 1837

I’ll thank you again for your endeavors on my behalf, Nathaniel. I’m sure you can always rely on having a true friend in me. I’ve been installed here some weeks now, and I’m finding myself well-contented, my sexton duties keeping my time

employed such as I scarce have a chance to allow myself those dark thoughts that so concerned you when last we visited.

It's a fine little church, and the Reverend is a good sort, though I'll confess to finding his gospel readings tending towards the dull of a Sunday service. Not his fault, of course. The Lord gave him that voice for a purpose, no doubt – but sometimes that purpose does feel like it might be providing me a few minutes of unearned slumber. Still, his conduct towards me has never been less than compassion itself. Why, he told me not yesterday that he'd never seen the church shine like it had since I've taken over its maintenance.

“Shine?” I says. “Sir, that's a rare compliment when it comes to cleaning sandstone.” And he laughed heartily, though the joke was of no great consequence. So you may rest easy knowing I am happy enough.

My troubled sleep, on the other hand, has not, of yet, resolved itself in any way to my satisfaction. I work myself to exhaustion, cleaning, polishing and looking after the church proper, and I tell you, when I lie abed I can scarce rise again for the weakness I leave myself in. And yet, sleep still eludes me. And when it does not, I wake as though my heart were trying to leap from my chest, and my throat were full of dust and ashes.

You need not despair, Nathaniel, I know the bottle will no longer help, and my other labors keep the nights from bothering me as once they did, but I do find myself longing for a true and proper sleep.

(Pause) I tell a lie. There *are* some nights I find myself easily slipping to dreamless respite, though you'll think me a morbid soul for it. Those days I spent digging

graves in the churchyard – on *those* nights I sleep, if you'll forgive the joke, the sleep of the dead.

I've never quite known a rest like it. Perhaps it is the harder, more physical aspect of the task, or perhaps the quiet rhythm of it. There's no echo as there is in the church, just the sound of pick and shovel hitting dirt. And when it's deep enough, when you stand at the bottom, the noise of the world just... fades away to nothing. It is the sort of quiet that makes you feel as though the commotion and hubbub of life were but a terrible dream, and in sleeping you were waking up to peace.

You'll laugh, Nathaniel, but I almost wrote that I hope I have a chance to dig *more* graves. What a thought. No, I'd not wish that, for to dig graves one must have something to fill them, and the good Lord takes that at His own pace. You may satisfy yourself I am content with the position you have found for me, and spare no concern for my well-being or the receipt of your charity.

Your humble servant,

Hezekiah Wakely

February, 1838

Nathaniel, something has happened to me. And I felt it only right to send a letter and let you know of it, being as your last letter expressed such a kind curiosity towards my sleeplessness, and – what I mentioned to you in my earlier letters.

My nights have indeed been easier of late, something I may partially ascribe to the recent outbreak of fever in the town – taking more of my time for the grim

business of grave digging – and the rest to my gradual settling into my position as sexton.

There is such peace in the churchyard, you see: to walk atop the soil knowing that, deep below my feet, those blessed souls wait happy and silent in the cool, damp earth, counting the days until the Resurrection. It gives me such warmth to think of that I have taken to spending much of my unoccupied time wandering the graves, and, where the mood allows me, taking my sleep there.

I hope such talk does not upset you, and you may rest assured I am no suicide. It is simply the serenity of the dead I envy, not their lifelessness. I seek no escape from the hardships of life, for since you gave me this position I can call little of my life any true hardship, and I am as free of suffering as I have ever been.

But I do long for that rest. I tell myself I wake each day renewed, but I am never as truly satisfied as when I'm in my slumber, and insensible to the world. Perhaps that's what I hoped to find in my drinking, that gentle oblivion, but it seems like a world ago. I know what it truly is now, walking the churchyard – though you may rest assured I shall wait my turn like a dutiful servant until our Lord sees fit to call me.

I do find, however, that when I dig my graves, I have been going deeper. And at times, I worry I might dig so far as I can no longer get out with my meager ladder. Now, those moments – you must not cast judgment on me for this, Nathaniel, for it is simply a passing fancy – but I will often lie myself down on that soft earth, and I will sleep. And I swear to you that the sleep I find there is more blissful than any I have ever found.

It was there, not a week ago, that it happened. I was digging a grave for the squire's father – a cruel and venal man, who I rather doubt has easy found himself in the kingdom of Heaven, but a pure soul is not what buys you a well-appointed cemetery plot, and he had plenty of money to do exactly that. I saw his body, you know, as it was being prepared, and I tell you truly that for all the wickedness that man had done, his body knew gentle repose. Though not as gentle, perhaps, as it might be with six feet of earth atop it.

So that was my task, and sure enough, I went about it with my usual fervent duty, such that the work of the day was done by the time the sun were at its height. It was cold that day, and bitter windy, and cracking the ground had been as hard as ice. At least until a few feet down. But by the end of it... oh, I tell you there was warmth in that grave. Whether by my own body or the heat of the soil, I couldn't say, but it was as comfortable as the fireplace of a public house, and the wind could not reach me in the hole that I had made.

So, as is my late habit, I lay down. And I had no sooner done this than a powerful sleep overtook me.

I had a dream, then. I dreamt a rain had come. A terrible bitter rain that chilled my bones and turned the soil around me dark and sodden. The walls grew damp and slippery, their firm shape lost as they began to slip and crumble. And then all at once they collapsed, the grave filling in a moment with a wave of mud and wet dirt. In a single terrible moment of utter terror, it was atop and around me, covering my face and filling my lungs with its awful choking sod.

And the strangest thing was that it was wonderful. I had never felt such safety as within the crushing weight of earth all around me, the pressing embrace of the buried. In that instant I knew what it was to be dead, and I ached with envy for them.

When I awoke I was above ground again, amid the graves. The rain had been no dream, and I was cold and soaked through, wracked with a chill you may well discern from the quality of my hand. It was true, also, that the rain had caused the grave to collapse, though I must have left it shortly before that happened. I was in no state to address the issue, however, and in fact the Reverend had to ask the sexton from St. Mark's to do so, as I am still laid up in bed with this cough. (*heh*) Perhaps I shall be joining the churchyard sooner than I dared hope.

Write me back soon, for I have precious little to do in this invalid's bed, and sleep is far from me once again.

Your humble servant,

Hezekiah

June, 1838

I must first thank you for your visit, Nathaniel, although my recovery were well completed, it is always most heartening to see an old friend. I hope that the business that drew your way so abruptly were well completed, and that I may anticipate your company again after not too long.

I must tell you I've been in some distress these last few weeks, due in no small part of the agitation of the Reverend, who has, of late, succumbed to a very specific, though understandable, mania.

The circumstances and causes are easy enough to explain. It was the funeral of young Nellie Cooper that did it, which was a most upsetting affair. I'll say I have much sympathy with his plight, as I had a chance to view the body myself, and if you'd asked me if I concurred with Doctor Grant's judgments of death by drowning, I would have agreed without hesitation. She had that peace to her that I've spoken of to you before, and I knew how happy she must be to soon be returning to the earth.

But that day, as they carried the slim coffin down towards the hole that I had dug, and so recently enjoyed my own calm repose, there was a commotion among the pallbearers. Little Nellie's coffin began shaking and rocking back and forth, such as they were unable to keep their footing and dropped it. The crash of the wooden casket hitting the earth is a sound I'll not forget in a hurry, nor the shriek that came from inside the splintered wood as it burst open.

As you may well have surmised, Nellie was not, after all, dead, and had shaken off the stupor mere minutes before she was due to be placed below ground. She's unharmed, at least in body, though I can scarce imagine the maddening strain must have put on her to see her own tombstone carved and waiting above the dark silence of her open grave.

To be honest, I suspect the worst effect is upon the Reverend. To be so near responsible for burying a person alive has shaken him deep, and he stopped all funeral services for a time.

To my mind there are far worse fates. But he has in his head an idea to begin fitting the graves I dig with these new “safety bells” that he has heard of, so that any as might be alive below ground might signal us above for rescue.

I dread the idea. If it had been me in that coffin, destined for the peace below ground, I can think of little that I would hate more than the jarring, clanging of a bell pulling me from my rest.

My dreams have been strange, of late.

Yours,

Hezekiah

December, 1838

I’ve been thinking, Nathaniel, of funerals and bodies. Souls that escape leaving this common clay to become one again with a truer clay. Were we not created from mud? And it seems more fitting to me that we should return forever to that mud, not pulled from it by some would-be Redeemer, or lifted to sing hosannas in his holy court.

I’ve worked so long, so hard. Do I not deserve a rest in the mud from which I came? Commit my body to the earth and let it *stay* there. I’d do the same for you. For worship of the Most High - though it may be earned, *perhaps*, by He that

made the heavens and the earth - well, to my mind, all that prayer still sounds a lot like *work*.

Do you know what the Reverend said in his sermon the other day? He said that in the Kingdom to come there will be no need of sleep - that we shall never need to miss a moment of that bliss. But sleeping in the cool, soft dirt is all the bliss I could ever ask for.

I suppose the Lord would have no call to think such things a blessing. He was never buried, was he? Not *truly*. Laying in a cave for three days, a rock pushed across the entrance before being taken up bodily – no, He was never *buried*.

And *He* always had more work to do – harrowing hell and redeeming the sins of mankind. No, He had no rest, and never asked for it, save a moment of doubt at Gethsemane. But He is the son of God and we are merely sons of the dirt. We are not as strong as He is, and we deserve rest. We deserve to *sleep*.

I've been trying to sleep, but that bell kept ringing, the one over Jacob the baker's grave. That nonsense safety valve the Reverend insisted on putting there, ringing and ringing, and disturbing the sleep of everyone in the churchyard. I've no doubt it disturbed Jacob as well, who worked so hard all his life and never thought to complain of his lot.

He deserved to rest. So I cut the cord. And now he is quiet.

I can't get my clothes clean anymore. And my shovel is never far from my hand.

Yours,

Hezekiah

January, 1839

I am disappointed, Nathaniel, I'll not deny it. More than that, I am hurt. My letters to you have always been a comfort to my soul, a place where I may lay my heart bare and tell the truths of what I think and feel without fear of judgment or reproach. That you chose to share what last I wrote you with the magistrates has wounded me sore.

They came and asked their questions, as I'm sure you hoped they would, but could of course prove nothing. Jacob is long dead, and I was very careful how I stopped the bell.

But such suspicions eat away at peace, and of course the Reverend dismissed me. I've lost my churchyard, Nathaniel, and I wonder if I shall ever sleep again.

It was my own fault, of course – I should never have told you these things assuming you would understand. But how could you? You've never felt the close embrace of peaceful soil. You've never truly slept in the bosom of the earth. These things are not such as can be shared in words, and it was my foolishness to think that they could.

But worry not, Nathaniel. The love I bear you will not let me leave you ignorant. As I did with the Reverend, I will come and I will *show* you, once and forever, the true and glorious peace of the Buried.

Your most humble servant,

Hezekiah Wakeley

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Nathaniel Beale is buried on the grounds of St. Peter’s Church in his hometown of Dunstable. And I am only the third person to know that in almost 200 years, after Nathaniel Beale himself, and Mr. Wakeley, the person who buried him.

I cannot tell how much of the change that comes over someone when they are taken by one of the Fears is a direct product of their influence, and how much is their own mind, desperately contorting itself to accept and justify the awful things they find themselves drawn to doing.

I have read many statements now by those who are changing, who are becoming – something else, and few if any of them seem... entirely rational. Entirely the people that they were before.

But how can I tell, I suppose. My job is to view people at their lowest, their most fearful and unstable moments. Perhaps there is less change there than I imagine. Certainly, I don’t feel different. I have no desire for pseudo-religious philosophizing, or delighting in the suffering of those I harm.

Then again, I suppose I’m hardly in the best position to judge. Perhaps to anyone listening to these tapes I sound remarkably similar to Hezekiah. Or to Manuela. Or to Jane.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on. There is a dripping sound. A door creaks open.

We hear the static associated with The Distortion.]

HELEN

Hello, John. Been a while since you've been down here.

ARCHIVIST

(Impatient noise) I didn't come here to see *you*.

HELEN

Oh, come now! I'm sure I'm more interesting company than the late Jane Prentiss.

ARCHIVIST

It's all that's left of her now – apart from a jar of ashes in my desk. Just a circle of rotten stone on an otherwise-unremarkable wall.

HELEN

More of a legacy than some people get.

ARCHIVIST

There was going to be a gate, I think. A hole that she rotted into the Corruption itself. Maybe the start of a ritual?

HELEN

Hmm. Not exactly *impressive*, is it?

ARCHIVIST

Less complex, certainly... But I think that's the thing about – what did Elias call it? – Filth. I don't think it really plans much. It just starts to grow wherever it can get a foothold, and, if no one stamps it out in time... game over.

HELEN

How... clumsy. Though, I suppose it has a certain charm.

ARCHIVIST

I've been wondering what they were doing down here. The worms must have been down here for – weeks, months maybe, spreading... growing. They could have spread all the way through these tunnels, but they didn't. They didn't find Leitner down here, didn't find Getrude's body, didn't find... whatever else is here.

HELEN

It is a maze. One of the reasons I like it.

ARCHIVIST

Hmm.

I can't see things properly here. I thought it was just me, something interfering with my connection to the Eye, but... I'm wondering: maybe it affects everything else? Like this place is some kind of – universal blind spot.

Everyone gets lost down here.

HELEN

What a fascinating idea. Although – some of us *are* always lost, in a sense.

ARCHIVIST

Wait, are you saying you can navigate it?

HELEN

Not exactly, but my door has been part of these tunnels for some time now.

ARCHIVIST

Wh – (**frustrated sputtering**) – what's it hiding, wh-what's in the middle?

HELEN

(**Suppressed laughter**) A delightful surprise...!

(The Archivist signs. Helen laughs the strange, echoing laugh of The Distortion.)

HELEN (Cont.)

Ah... But that's not why you're here, is it?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

I've been thinking a lot about Jane. She was the first, you know. The first I actually encountered like... like us.

She seemed so... inhuman. Like everything she used to be was stripped away.

HELEN

And now...?

ARCHIVIST

I wonder how much of her was still in there. How much did she choose to be what she was? I read her statement, she was... **(inhale, exhale)** she was scared.

I assumed she’d been possessed completely against her will, but now I’m not even sure that’s possible.

HELEN

It is astounding the sort of thing you’re willing to choose – given an unpleasant-enough alternative – isn’t it?

ARCHIVIST

How much of willpower is just – safety? “Comfort” by another name. The option to choose and be fine.

HELEN

Hungry, are we?

ARCHIVIST

(Angrily) That’s not –

– I haven’t *done* anything –

HELEN

– yet.

ARCHIVIST

(Roughly) I feel like if I don't... I might die. Fade away into nothing.

HELEN

...

Do you... Know that?

ARCHIVIST

No. But I... **(frustrated noise)** I can't die. They need me.

HELEN

Come on, Jon, no excuses.

(The Archivist sighs.)

HELEN (Cont.)

They don't need your protection.

ARCHIVIST

What, are you going to look after them?

HELEN

And how would I do that?

ARCHIVIST

You eat things as well.

HELEN

They have to open the door, Archivist. I can’t just push them in.

ARCHIVIST

Oh, you’ve got hands.

HELEN

Sharp enough to pull out worms, kill a few old men – maybe stab an overeager Archivist –

(The Archivist sighs.)

HELEN

– but my physicality is as much an illusion as everything else about me. Think of me as... a bear trap. Not a sword.

But we’re not talking about me, are we?

ARCHIVIST

When does it stop?

HELEN

(Impatient) What?

ARCHIVIST

The guilt. The misery. All the others I've met, they've been – cold, cruel. They've enjoyed what they do. When does the Eye (**inhale**) make me monstrous?

(Helen laughs.)

HELEN

What – why would it ever do that?

ARCHIVIST

I don't...

HELEN

When has your guilt, or your sadness, or your handwringing ever actually stopped you from doing what it wants?

ARCHIVIST

(Stammering) I-I – I have not been taking statements –

HELEN

You've sworn off other people's trauma for now because you're caught. Because continuing would endanger you. But other than that, when has your discomfort ever actually stopped you walking the path of the Beholding?

ARCHIVIST

I... I don't know...

HELEN

Even if it were capable of doing so, what possible reason would the Eye have to change how you feel, when it makes no difference to your actions?

Helen was like you, at first. She felt such guilt over taking people. Until one day she realized she wasn’t going to stop doing it. So she chose to stop feeling guilty.

ARCHIVIST

Fine. I get it. My feelings mean nothing to it.

HELEN

Mh, not true! They carry a certain flavor, a... seasoning.

ARCHIVIST

(Sigh, bitter laugh) I see.

HELEN

(Chuckling) I am enjoying our time together.

Well, you know my advice already. Cheerio, Jon. Enjoy your brooding.

[Door closes.]

(The Archivist makes a frustrated noise.)

[Tape clicks off.]

[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: Jonathan Sims as The Archivist and Imogen Harris as Helen Richardson.