

MAG – 067 – Burning Desire

Content Warnings

- Spiders
- Burns
- Graphic injury

Discussions of: death, suicide, fire, arguments, gaslighting

Mentions of: food, hospitals, rituals

SFX: low drone, high pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode sixty-seven. Burning Desire.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

[Tape clicks on]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Jack Barnabas regarding a short-lived courtship with Agnes Montague in the autumn of 2006. Original statement given March 18th, 2007. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I knew she wasn't normal. I think that's what originally drew me to her. I thought she was just like me, another weirdo cast off from the world. I mean, there was no way I could have known she wasn't human. At least, I don't see how she can have been human, not the way we think of it. But she was so

beautiful. S-she was tall with long, straight auburn hair and these eyes that ... when they looked at you, it didn't feel like she was seeing you, so much as ... as trapping you. I never understood the phrase 'like a deer in the headlights' until she looked me in the eyes for the first time. I don't know, maybe something in my fight or flight reflexes screwed up, because those weren't the instincts I felt when it happened. I should have run, of course. I don't know if you normally leave people alone in a room when they write their statements, but I can understand you doing so in my case. I'm getting used to people making polite excuses not to look at me.

Dalia tried to warn me off. Dalia Okonjo had worked in The Canyon Cafe ever since it opened in 1991 and, as soon as I headed back into the kitchen after I saw Agnes Montague for the first time, she spotted the look in my eyes and shook her head. She told me she was trouble, that there was something not right about her. I asked for more details and Dalia just shrugged, said that she'd been coming into the cafe ever since it opened and that there was something off. At the time I assumed that she meant Agnes had been coming in ever since she was a child as she looked about my age, but looking back I'm not so sure.

It wasn't as though it would have made any difference, I was drawn to her in a way I can't even explain. I could never bring myself to say anything or even make a sound when her eyes fell on me. I barely had enough wherewithal to confirm her order, even if it was always the same: a large cup of black coffee, with enough room for milk. She never actually put any milk in it. She never even drank it. She'd just take it over and sit there, staring out the window into the street for an hour or so. It wasn't like there was much a view, just a normal

street, and outside, Sheffield city centre. That's not much of a view at all. Still, she'd sit there, staring, alone with her thoughts for about an hour, then stand up and leave. I'd go over to clear away her coffee and it was always scalding hot.

It was such a strange little routine and I would spend time wondering to myself what she could possibly be thinking about. What was her life that every Tuesday at three in the afternoon she came into the same cafe and didn't drink a black coffee? The way she always used to order the coffee, it always sounded like she was enjoying it. The order, I mean. Like the phrase, "One black coffee with room for milk" was a delightfully novel thing for her to say.

In the year and a bit leading up to my finally talking to her, I only ever saw two occasions where she wasn't sitting alone. The first was when another man attempted to chat her up. At least, I assume that's what he was doing. I didn't recognise him, but you can always tell when someone starts a conversation with a motive like that. He walked over and started saying something or other, cocky as anything. Agnes, though I didn't know her name back then, just looked up and met his eyes and I could see him start to falter. Sweat began to roll down his forehead, but he kept talking. Then Agnes went to stand up. It was only a very small movement, but the man started as though a gun had gone off, knocking into the table and spilling coffee all over his hand. It had been sat there almost 40 minutes, but I could see his flesh start to redden with burns where the liquid had touched it. He screamed and suddenly all eyes were on him. His face went almost the same colour as his burned hand, and he shouted something vague at us about suing us over the temperature and ran out the door in pain and embarrassment. Suffice it to say we did not hear from

his lawyers. That was the day I noticed the slight scorch marks on the chair Agnes had been sat on, though at the time I didn't connect the two.

The other time was about near the end of October last year. I remember because Dalia had been ranting at me about how impossible it was to get a decent women's Halloween costume that didn't, as she put it, "show a mile of skin." I was making some weak joke about going as a bedsheet ghost and telling everyone it was sexy because the ghost was technically naked, when I looked over and saw someone else sat at the table with Agnes. She was a short Asian woman with close cropped hair and a thick, muscular frame. I remember being a bit surprised that she seemed to be just wearing a tank top, given how cold it was starting to get, but it did show off a rather intimidating back tattoo of what looked to be a man wreathed in the fires of hell. I still remember how disconcerting I found that screaming face, contorting in the agony of inked on fire.

Weirder than all that though, was the fact that Agnes appeared to be talking to her, actually saying words that weren't an order for coffee or a thank you. Her voice was soft and I couldn't make out any of the words. I mean, I know I shouldn't have been trying to listen – I know it's a creepy thing to do – but you don't understand how momentous an occasion this was, to see this beautiful woman whose name I still didn't know finally talking to another human being. It was incredible. The shorter woman's voice was loud though and she made no attempt at subtlety in her conversation. She was talking about some sort of job and whether Agnes was going to be able to do it.

At first, I thought it was a job interview and then she started talking about Agnes being released from something. Agnes just said something softly and shook her head. She looked sad, an expression I'd never seen on her face before. The other woman sighed, clearly unhappy with the answer, and stood up to leave. Before she went, she took out a brown paper envelope and handed it over, said that she'd give it to her now so she didn't forget later. She called it a 'collection' and it looked like the envelope might have been full of money. Agnes put it in her jacket and returned to staring out the window, as her intimidating companion left with a frustrated expression.

That was the moment I decided to try and talk to Agnes. Seeing her interact with someone else, even in such a weird way, unblocked something in my mind. The following Tuesday, when she came in and ordered her coffee, I asked her name. She looked at me in surprise, and for a second, I felt like I'd made a terrible mistake, but then she told me, very matter-of-factly. And then I asked her out on a date. I don't know how it happened, it just tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop it. There was a moment of absolute silence, like everyone in the place had stopped breathing, though nobody had looked up. Then Agnes' face twisted into something I think was a smile and she said yes.

A wave of giddy joy just washed right over me, and she took her coffee and went to her normal table. I could feel Dalia staring at me from the kitchen and I didn't want to turn around, because I knew exactly the face she'd be making and I was too happy to let her ruin it with her muttered predictions of disaster. It was only after Agnes had left her undrunk coffee and headed out to wherever she went that I realised we'd never made any actual arrangements.

I spent the next day in a funk, kicking myself for having been so stupid. I have Wednesdays off work, so there was plenty of time to mope around the house feeling sorry for myself. About three in the afternoon though, there was a knock on the door. Standing on the other side was Agnes. She was dressed in a dark woolen coat and grey scarf and had that same sort of smile on her face. She asked if I was ready to go. I was very much not. I asked her to wait a minute as I ran back to my room to put on some deodorant and a clean shirt. It was as I was doing this, I noticed kind of an odd smell, like when you turn on an electric heater for the first time in a while and you get a whiff of all the burning dust. I looked up and noticed that in the corner of the room, where there had been a spider's web this morning, there was just a faint wisp of smoke. It was weird, but I had more important things on my mind.

As soon as I was ready, I headed out. I asked her what she wanted to do, and she looked at me like I was stupid. We were going to walk in the park, she said, like it was the only possible thing to do. Of course I agreed. She was the strangest person I had ever met, but something about it just charmed me. So we went down to Bolehill Park, the nearest one to my flat, and we walked. I did most of the talking, as you might have expected. I don't even remember half the things I said now, just a meaningless babble of thoughts, personal details and anecdotes. I worried I was boring her, but every time I looked over, she had that same expression on, which by then I was pretty sure was a smile. I'd catch her eye and that feeling would flood through me. I still don't know quite how to describe it, but whatever it was, it was powerful.

We sat on a bench as the sun went down, watching the sky redden, and Agnes asked me a question. It was the first time she'd said anything more than a few

words since we left my flat. She asked me if I had a destiny. I don't need to tell you the question caught me off guard. I don't know if I've given the impression clearly enough yet, being a single guy in my early 30s still working the till at a Sheffield cafe, but I don't really see myself as having much of a destiny. Hell, I'm not even sure I believe in destiny. I certainly don't believe in God and I feel that's kind of linked. So I told her this. She looked at me with the same sadness I'd seen on her face before. "That must be nice," she said, and went back to staring into the sunset.

We went out several times after that. Each time she'd show up AT my door unannounced and tell me what we were going to do. We went to the park a couple more times, had a meal in an Italian restaurant, where she didn't eat anything, and even went to see a film. I remember it was *The Prestige* and, when I asked her thoughts on it, she just told me she hadn't been watching. God, she was so bizarre.

The last date was November the 23rd, 2006. It was a Thursday and the chill had really hit. It was too cold to spend an evening in the park, to be honest, but Agnes had decided that's what we had to do, so that's what we did. She never seemed to feel the cold. We'd walked in silence for about an hour and it had gotten dark. I was about to suggest we leave, as they usually closed the park after nightfall, when I heard Agnes gasp. I turned to see her gripping her chest as though in sudden pain, and she told me we had to go. I followed her as she staggered out of the park and over to a phone booth, where she made a panicked call. She said something about a tree falling and that *they* had to finish something. Then she hung up. She leaned on my arm as we walked back to her flat. I'd never been there before, but it was clear she couldn't make it

unassisted. The building was old and the wallpaper of the corridor was a faded green lily pattern, occasionally scarred with a vivid hole burnt into it.

As we approached her door, I saw a small group of people gathered around it, waiting. I recognised the woman she had been talking to several weeks before, but the others were strangers to me. They were all dressed in rough work clothes and wore severe expressions. One of them, a big guy with a shaved head, was holding an unlit lantern and speaking to the others in a language that I think was Spanish or Portuguese. Another held a bag that seemed to be full of candles, while a third had a clear plastic container filled with hundreds of tiny spiders. None of them paid me any attention and I was rapidly feeling like I was falling into something that I really didn't want to.

Agnes turned to me and apologised. Told me goodbye and thank you. There was such a sense of finality to it that I felt like my heart stopped. I should have left. I should have turned around and walked back the way I'd come and accepted that I'd never seen her again. Instead, I did the stupidest thing I have ever done. There, caught up in a series of events that I didn't understand, but that terrified me, and drowning in emotions that I still can't explain, I asked if I could kiss her. Without warning, she put her hands either side of my head. I realised it was the first time our skin had ever touched and I could feel the intense, hellish heat that radiated from inside her, but it was too late. She leaned in and kissed me.

There are no words to describe the pain. My face erupted in boiling agony as I felt my skin start to crack and peel and the heat washed over me, erasing all thoughts in blistering white. I felt the fat in my cheeks liquify and bubble as I

tried to scream, but my lips wouldn't work. I fell to the floor, and the last memory I have before waking up in the hospital was a single tear dropping onto my hand, a tiny, sizzling pang of torment that still somehow managed to cut through.

When I awoke three days later in the hospital, Agnes was dead. The police came and took my statement, but they had already decided it was a suicide, and when I tried to tell them what had happened, they looked at me like I was making it all up. At least, when they could stand to look at me at all. The doctors did their best and repeatedly told me that actually I was very lucky, as whatever fire I had put my face in should by rights have blinded me as well. It wasn't exactly a comfort.

I lost almost everything after that. I never had much to begin with, and after I was let go at the cafe, I couldn't afford to keep my home. They didn't even try to pretend it wasn't because my burned face would scare away customers. I've ended up living with my father again, who has been understanding about the situation, though even he can't bring himself to meet my eye most days. The worst part is, looking back, I'm still not sure what I would have done differently, were I to do it all again. Even after everything the police told me about her death and the hand, I don't know if I would have had it in me to resist. I just couldn't avoid being drawn in, like a moth to the flame.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

A rather different perspective on the woman known as Agnes Montague, or Agnes Fielding, depending on who you ask, although hardly a reliable account, steeped as it is in messy obsessions and confusion. Still, if the bald man with the lantern is, as I suspect, Diego Molina, it would indicate a link between his notable obsession with burning and Agnes, who apparently had not inconsiderable abilities in that area. I can't help but wonder if Arthur Nolan, the Hive's landlord, was one of the other members of that little group. I do not know if they have a name as such, but given the evidence of organisation and the indications of worship, I have started to refer to them in my notes as 'The Cult of the Lightless Flame', and I believe they may also be connected to the ritual circle found in Scotland by Jason North. I've been, as yet, unable to find any other details on them with the information I have.

Most of the information here has already been covered following the account of Agnes' time in Hill Top Road, but Martin has been able to make contact with Mr Barnabas by email. He's apparently been doing much better in the years since his statement, having received some reasonably successful plastic surgery. He was unable to provide much more information than the above, but upon Martin's asking if Agnes had mentioned her childhood at all, he did recall her briefly alluding to being adopted.

Tim also got in contact with Dalia Okonjo, who confirmed what we had suspected, that the woman known as Agnes Montague had visited The Canyon Cafe for a decade and a half, apparently without ageing a day. I am now convinced that this is the same Agnes who grew up in Hill Top Road, though exactly what she is or why she seemed to retain her youth remains a mystery.

Like everything else around here. Still, she is dead, as is Diego Molina. I can only hope that prevents them from causing further problems.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ELIAS

John, there's nothing down there.

ARCHIVIST

You know that's not true. I told you what happened.

ELIAS

You told me you wandered around in the dark for hours at a time, shortly after suffering an incredibly traumatic experience.

ARCHIVIST

So, you're saying I imagined it?

ELIAS

It's a possibility. The other possibility is that there's something very dangerous down there. Neither makes me particularly inclined to unlock it.

ARCHIVIST

So what do you plan to do about it? Send someone else?

ELIAS

We really don't have the budget for that.

ARCHIVIST

So nothing. You're just going to leave it.

ELIAS

For now, I think that's for the best.

ARCHIVIST

Please Elias, I need to know.

ELIAS

(Sighs) You really think that this will help?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes, it's getting harder and harder to work down there without being sure of... what's underneath me. So either give me the key or find a new Archivist.

ELIAS

Oh good Lord, don't be so dramatic, John. You know how hard it would be to replace you.

ARCHIVIST

I... I don't, actually. But thank you, I suppose.

ELIAS

I'll have a copy made for you, on one condition. Be careful. No more impetuous subterranean adventures, understand?

ARCHIVIST

Of course, of course. Understood.

ELIAS

And for God's sake, get some sleep.

[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 and Ben Meredith as Elias Bouchard.