

MAG – 122 – Zombie

Content Warnings

- Body horror
- Mortality
- Undead
- Stalking
- Existential horror
- Imposter

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and twenty-two. Zombie.

[Tape clicks on. Sound of clock ticking. Voices are slightly muffled]

BASIRA

Well?

GEORGIE

It was just there.

BASIRA

Could he have come back, moved it?

GEORGIE

I guess.

BASIRA

And you're sure you didn't recognise him?

GEORGIE

No. No, he was, um... I'd never seen him before.

BASIRA

But?

GEORGIE

He, uh, he felt like Death.

BASIRA

What, capital 'D' Death?

GEORGIE

Yeah, you know, one of your dark gods.

BASIRA

They're not—

Look, I'm trying to help. You came to me.

GEORGIE

I came to Melanie.

BASIRA

Well, sorry. right now, I'm it.

...

So, John told you then?

GEORGIE

Some of it. Not everything.

BASIRA

Right. So how exactly is it that you're able to identify an avatar of The End on sight?

GEORGIE

Honestly, Basira, it's not your business.

Sorry.

BASIRA

(Sigh) Alright. And you don't know why this guy would have left a tape recorder?

GEORGIE

You're the detective.

BASIRA

And you're sure it was him who left it?

GEORGIE

I mean, the nurses said there were no other visitors, so unless it appeared by magic? What, seriously?

BASIRA

I don't know. The whole tape thing is... I don't know.

GEORGIE

Right. Well, I showed you like you asked, so...

BASIRA

Shh.

[Fabric moves; voices become clearer]

Down here!

[Tape recorder is picked up and put on table]

GEORGIE

I told you.

BASIRA

This is the one?

GEORGIE

Sure.

BASIRA

You don't sound very sure.

GEORGIE

I mean, I don't know, it might be a different model, maybe? I thought it was plastic, but, yeah. So, what does it mean?

ARCHIVIST

(Weakly) That's a very good question.

GEORGIE

John!

BASIRA

Oh Jesus!

ARCHIVIST

(Hoarsely) Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you.

GEORGIE

I'll get a nurse.

BASIRA

Wait.

GEORGIE

Basira.

BASIRA

John, is it still... you?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, y-yes. Yes, I-I think so? I, uh, I don't know how you'd prove it though.

GEORGIE

Enough, just stay still. I'll get a nurse.

ARCHIVIST

Uh, no, I, uh, I'm alright.

[Bedclothes rustle]

GEORGIE

Stop it.

ARCHIVIST

I'm okay.

GEORGIE

John, you are not okay. You have been in a coma.

ARCHIVIST

Wait, wait. How long?

BASIRA

Six months. Give or take.

ARCHIVIST

Six... Uh, the others? T-Tim, is he...?

...

Oh.

BASIRA

Daisy too.

ARCHIVIST

I'm sorry.

BASIRA

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

GEORGIE

John.

ARCHIVIST

It's alright.

GEORGIE

Just stay still, please. How are you feeling?

ARCHIVIST

Honestly, I, I think I'm alright.

(Georgie sighs deeply)

ARCHIVIST

I mean, that's... good, right? I—

GEORGIE

After a six-month coma? No, it's not. This isn't how it's supposed to go, John.

ARCHIVIST

I— What? Y-You'd prefer I was... brain damaged? D-Dead?

BASIRA

John...

ARCHIVIST

What?

BASIRA

Georgie, could you give us a minute? There are some things we should probably discuss?

GEORGIE

(Irritated) Fine.

ARCHIVIST

Georgie, I—

GEORGIE

John, if this really is a second chance, please try to take it. But I don't think that it is.

ARCHIVIST

Georgie, I don't—!

GEORGIE

Take care of yourself.

(The Archivist sighs and attempts to speak)

[Door opens and closes as Georgie leaves]

ARCHIVIST

What about you? Disappointed to see me alive?

Basira?

BASIRA

We can deal with it later.

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, okay.

BASIRA

Do you want me to grab you some water, or...?

ARCHIVIST

No, the, uh, uh, the statement. In your, in your bag.

BASIRA

Oh. Yeah, I, uh...

[Zip opens]

BASIRA

I just grabbed one on the way out. I thought maybe you'd need it for—

ARCHIVIST

You, you were right. I, I think it would do me some good. Do you have a tape re— Oh.

BASIRA

How did you know I brought one?

...

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you, Basira.

BASIRA

Hmm.

[Door opens and closes]

ARCHIVIST

(The Archivist takes a deep breath) Statement of, uh... uh... Lorell St John, regarding, uh... **(small chuckle)** zombies. Original statement given 1st February 2015. Recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

People always used to tell me I was solipsistic. They said that I never really engaged with other people, never acted like they really existed or mattered, at least not in the same way that I did. And I suppose in many ways they were right. It's hard to explain without sounding stupid. Obviously other people are real, obviously the, the way a building is real or my watch is real. They exist. If people weren't real, I'm, I'm sure I would find them much less of a chore. So no, I don't "not believe in other people".

I just find it very difficult to feel for others. I can't understand them and they've always seemed... Well, there's no tactful way to say it, they've always just seemed a little bit pointless. I know what my pain feels like, and I know what my joy feels like, but when I see those same things on the faces of my friends or my enemies, I feel...

Well, that's it, isn't it? I don't really feel anything. Their emotions and suffering feel as distant to me as a character on a movie screen. More distant, really. In many ways, I find those crude caricatures that wander through ridiculous plot after ridiculous plot more relatable than the people watching next to me. That

said, Danielle did tell me once that films tend to depict characters like that so it's easier to project yourself onto them, so maybe it isn't quite as surprising as all that.

I like animals, too. They don't pretend to be important.

So, assuming you can understand anything, I would hope that you could understand why the philosophical concept of 'zombies' might worm its way into my mind. Danielle studies philosophy. Well, she studied philosophy, and she was one of those people who loved to talk to others about it, try to explain it, as a way of internalising the information. So, come exam season, her favourite revision method was to try and explain a year's worth of dusty old white men thinking about existence to me. She said it really helped and, well, sometimes I didn't have anything better to do.

It never stuck, of course. It's all kind of rubbish, really, people trying to think the universe into making sense, coming up with all sorts of nonsense and trying to claim that because they can imagine it, it must be true. I-I'm grossly oversimplifying, of course, but I don't care. I don't think Danielle did very well in her exams.

I remember the night she told me about zombies. It was dark outside and must have been late. It was high summer, and the days were long and sweltering. Our building really kept the heat and had very few opening windows, so even in the evening that humid warmth seemed to stick around. One of our housemates, Liam, was sat at the other end of the living room, playing some obnoxious videogame. He had the lights at that end of the room turned off, and the screen lit up his blank, gormless face as he stared at some space monster or other that he had to kill.

Danielle explained that a philosophical zombie is someone who outwardly displays all the signs of life and consciousness – they talk, they laugh, they scream, they even appear to think – but they have no inner life at all, no actual subjective experience. It's all a ruse, a conjuring trick. If you cut them, they'd bleed, they might even cry out, but they wouldn't actually feel any pain, because they can't actually *feel* anything. It's all just an act.

I said to Danielle, "Like Liam?" and she laughed at what she assumed was a funny joke, and tried to explain it again. Told me they weren't real, that it was all a thought experiment, and the fact that you could imagine them was supposed to counter some other philosopher who sounded equally meaningless. But like I said, I don't think she got a very good grade, and, looking at Liam, blankly staring into that glowing square on the wall, I knew that she was wrong. They were real. His eyes were so dark and dull, empty windows to a soul that he didn't really have.

I started to do some experiments on him – not many, just a few little ones here and there – to see. I suppose you might have called them cruel, if Liam was capable of suffering. He certainly pretended to cry out in pain when I 'accidentally' cut his hand while chopping onions, and he did a good impression of grief when his fish died. But his eyes were always the same – cold and empty.

I didn't *do* anything about it, obviously. What would have been the point? There was no real harm in him going out into the world, pretending to live his life. It was no skin off my nose, certainly. It wasn't just him, though; there were so many more of them out there. At one point, I did legitimately entertain the

notion that they might all be zombies. Everyone. That it was just me, that I was the only real person that existed. But no, that wasn't right. It was just certain people. I'd watch them, and see their reactions, the emotions they didn't quite get right, and I knew they were a façade.

It became like a game to me, watching out for those soulless husks. Whether on the bus, the street or even meeting a client for work, I would look into their eyes for just a second and see the emptiness inside. I tried to make it a game, at least. Truth was they scared me very deeply. What were they? How did it happen? Were they *born* hollow, or did something scoop them out and leave them like that? And the question that kept me up, staring into the darkness late at night: why did it seem like I was the only one able to see them?

I saw so many people, real people, chatting with these 'zombies', talking to them as if they were able to understand what was being said to them, rather than simply pretending. How was it that they couldn't see the quiet void that lurked behind each of their smiles? And there seemed to be more and more of them every day. Sometimes I found myself utterly alone, facing down a room full of nothing eyes, willing myself to take action. I never did, though, not even when one of them started following me.

I first saw him in the street. It wasn't difficult to guess what he was, half the people around him were just as hollow and soulless, but there was something else to him. He was tall, but not so tall as to stick out; thin, but not unhealthily so. He wore a blue T-shirt, despite the falling temperature, and his short, dark hair and pale skin surrounded a smile so fake it practically glowed. He stared at me as I walked past, not making a move to follow or stop me, nor did his eyes seem to actually move. It was like one of those paintings that watch you. It just

seemed that whatever place I looked at him from, he just happened to be focused on me, in as much as there was any focus in them at all. Vacant.

The next day he was there again, this time in the hallway outside my office, standing in the centre so that I had to hug the wall to avoid touching his motionless form. He was identical, except that his T-shirt was now a dull orange. I asked my colleague Norma what she thought of him, why he was there and if she noticed anything strange about him. She looked out into the corridor, then looked back at me and shook her head. She told me he ‘seemed normal enough’, but her eyes were like blank pits, and I knew she was lying about all of it. Had he done this? Had he taken Norma’s self, her, her soul? Or had she always been a zombie, cramped into her little open plan desk, patiently listening to client complaints, and I just hadn’t noticed? I looked around my office, a low dread starting to build, as he waited outside, a numbing cavity wrapped in skin.

I tried to talk to him when he stood next to me on the bus. I played it as casual as I could, trying not to seem afraid as I asked him how his day was going. “Just fine, thank you for asking,” came the flat, uninterested response. Then I-I asked him his name. “Just fine, thank you for asking,” he said. I have never wanted anything as much as I wanted in that moment to cut him and see if he pretended to scream in pain.

By the time he appeared outside my house, this time wearing a rotten green T-shirt, I could feel a numbness in myself even as I looked at him. Was I finally becoming like them, my internal world melting away into nothing but a pantomime? I remember I ran at him, all my rage burning inside my chest as though desperate to remind myself that I could still feel something. I think I

might have been screaming, but the memory is fuzzy. I remember I punched him in the face, though.

When my fist connected, it was like punching a canvas: taut, dry and yielding ever so slightly, until all at once it broke with a tearing pop and all that resistance was gone, my fist falling into the empty space behind it. Inside his head.

I-I pulled my hand back in sudden disgust, and he looked at me through the torn and bloodless hole in his head. I could see one blank eye hanging down off his face, still following me, as his split mouth moved to try and form the words that I could hear clear as day: “Just fine, thank you for asking.”

They’re all like that now. You’re all like that, I suppose. I have no reason to believe anyone will read this who would be any different, no reason to believe you’ll be able to read this, that you won’t simply stare blankly at this page before performing your response, your artificial opinion. There is every chance that I am the only one left, and the whole world has fallen to a soulless horde, devoid of life and feeling. Even so, thank you for pretending to care.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

(The Archivist exhales; his voice is sounding stronger) Well, that certainly helped, I think. No notes or follow-up in the statement and obviously no research done into it by myself or, uh... my team. I think we can safely say that Ms. St John is not the only real person left in the world, though, whatever she might be doing now. And whatever might be with her.

It can be hard, though, sometimes, other, other people. Feelings. I-I'm trying to focus, trying to make sure I'm the same me as before, but how can anyone really remember that? How do you know you're the same person that went to sleep? **(The Archivist sighs)**

[Knocking on door]

Yes, I'm... I'm done.

[Door opens]

ARCHIVIST

(Sighs) Georgie, is she, uh...?

BASIRA

She's gone. Didn't see where.

ARCHIVIST

No, I, I wouldn't've, uh... Probably for the best.

BASIRA

Yeah.

...

Better?

ARCHIVIST

Yes. Yes, thank you.

BASIRA

Right. Then I've got questions.

ARCHIVIST

So do I.

BASIRA

Me first. What are you?

ARCHIVIST

Honestly, I don't know. I don't feel... inhuman, or... I want to say I'm the same, but I don't really know if that's true. I know I'm different. I feel... more real, somehow.

BASIRA

So, what does that actually mean?

ARCHIVIST

Probably nothing good.

My turn. What... what happened to me?

BASIRA

How much do remember?

ARCHIVIST

I don't...

Music. Everything was wrong. Gertrude was there and then... dancing? I think?
Then... pain, and I was somewhere else. Dreaming.

BASIRA

Dreaming?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

You're sure about Tim?

BASIRA

Yeah, they, um... they found his remains a few days later.

ARCHIVIST

And Daisy?

BASIRA

They still haven't found her body. Probably never will. I thought for a while she might, um... But it's been months. She's gone.

ARCHIVIST

Just you and me. And Melanie and Martin, I-I guess. Honestly, I'm surprised Martin isn't...

(Basira sighs)

What? Oh, go— The, the plan. Did— Martin, is, is he okay?

What did Elias do?

BASIRA

No, nothing. Elias isn't the problem.

ARCHIVIST

So— What?

BASIRA

Elias is locked up.

ARCHIVIST

Wait, Martin's plan worked?

BASIRA

Yeah, a bunch of sectioned officers took him in. He made some sort of deal, I think, but he's not getting out any time soon.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Wow, okay. Great. So, what's the problem?

BASIRA

He appointed an interim director. Guy named Peter Lukas.

ARCHIVIST

Oh.

BASIRA

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Read about him.

BASIRA

Yeah, I hunted down some of those old statements and... yeah.

ARCHIVIST

(Darkly) What did he do to Martin?

BASIRA

I... don't know. We don't see him around the Archives much these days. Best I can figure, he's working on something with Lukas.

ARCHIVIST

No. No that, that... No. There must be something else.

BASIRA

Maybe. I don't know.

ARCHIVIST

And Melanie?

BASIRA

A lot's happened, while you've been gone.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

Well, I guess we should probably let one of the nurses know I'm awake. I'm sure they have all sorts of tests to do, make sure I'm not a zombie or a...

...

I don't suppose you brought in any clothes?

BASIRA

No, I just, you know, grabbed that statement on my way out.

ARCHIVIST

Right, well uh, I kept some in the Archives, uh, in my office.

BASIRA

Yeah, those got, um... We had to throw those out.

ARCHIVIST

What?

BASIRA

Like I said, a lot's happened.

ARCHIVIST

S-Since I've been... Fine.

BASIRA

I'll get you some new ones. Better ones.

Anything else?

ARCHIVIST

Water, please.

BASIRA

Sure thing.

[Door opens]

(Calling) Oh, or a cup of—

[Door closes]

(Softly) Okay.

End recording, I suppose.

[Click]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

The Magnus Archives is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Sharealike 4.0 International licence.

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

It featured: Jonathan Sims as the Archivist, Sasha Sienna as Georgie Barker, and Frank Voss as Basira Hussain.