

MAG – 090 – Body Builder

Content warnings:

- Body dysmorphia
- Body horror

Discussions of: drug use, body modification

Mentions of: animal death, animal mutilation, needles

SFX: low drone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Introduction]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode ninety. Body Builder.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro – Continued]

[Tape clicks on.]

ELIAS

Tim?

TIM

Hey, boss. What brings you down to the dungeons? Your office just too full of joy?

ELIAS

Not quite. I heard you'd had some absences. Some unauthorised leave. I just wanted to talk it through with you.

TIM

Right.

ELIAS

Were you sick? If you're sick you really need to call in.

TIM

Nope. Wasn't sick. Try again.

ELIAS

Well, you hadn't booked any leave.

TIM

No, I had not.

ELIAS

So, what happened?

TIM

I hopped a flight to Malaysia. Found myself a hotel.

ELIAS

I see. You were trying to leave us?

TIM

Yeah.

ELIAS

But you've returned?

TIM

I... I got sick. The longer I was gone... I felt weak, like, like I was losing myself.
You gonna fire me boss?

ELIAS

No. I don't think that'll be necessary.

TIM

Of course not.

ELIAS

But let's be sure it doesn't happen again, hm?

TIM

You do know, right? I mean, you must know.

ELIAS

Know what?

TIM

About this place. About what it does to us.

ELIAS

(Sigh) Tim, this place is very old. It has all sorts of... idiosyncrasies and not all of them are good for the people who work here.

TIM

I think I'd prefer asbestos.

ELIAS

I've always found the best way to deal with it is to lose yourself in work.
Personally, the comfortable rigour of bureaucracy has always helped me.
Perhaps doing a bit of mindless filing will help distract you.

TIM

Yeah. I mean... maybe you're right.

ELIAS

I'm sure I am. And no more unauthorised absence, okay?

[The door opens. Martin enters.]

MARTIN

Oh, er, is everything okay in here?

ELIAS

Yes, Martin, very much so.

[Elias leaves]

MARTIN

Right. Um, I was actually gonna to record a statement, if, if that's alright Tim?

TIM

Yeah. It's already running.

MARTIN

Oh. Oh, so it is. Why, why did you tur-

[Tim leaves, closing the door]

Right. Right.

Martin Blackwood, Archival Assistant at the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 0130807, statement of Ross Davenport, given August 7th 2013.

Statement begins.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

So I had to find a new gym. It was a shame, really. I loved my old place, and the guys there were some of my best mates, but... it wasn't entirely my own decision. See, I recently decided to start taking anabolic steroids to supplement my bodybuilding, and the place I used to go had a very strict policy about them. Matt, the guy who ran the place, his partner had gotten deep into them, and when he had a heart attack, Matt blamed the steroids. Since then, you get seen with a needle or pill bottle that's not a recognised supplement, and you're outta there.

Still, I didn't leave because I got caught or anything like that. I hadn't even started when I left. I just felt guilty. Like it was an admission of failure. Eleven years I'd been going, all natural, and, physically, I was at the top of my game. I did well in competitions, I felt healthy, I was pretty much the ideal weight for my height, but when I looked in the mirror I still didn't see what I wanted to. My muscles were smooth and rounded, not like the, the veined, bulging forms I idolised. Even when I spent weeks dieting before a competition, without an ounce of body fat, I, I just couldn't get there. I'd reached my natural peak, and it wasn't enough for me.

So, I did my research, and ordered a cycle of steroids online. I didn't want to be unsafe, so I made sure I got a full check-up from my doctor before I started, though obviously I didn't mention why. Everything came back fine, so all that was left was to find a new gym where nobody would mind me taking them.

This was harder than it should have been, mostly because of my own standards. Plenty of places had an 'official' policy banning drugs onsite and just didn't enforce it. To me, though, the whole point of moving gyms was that I didn't want to have to hide like a criminal, or pretend to think what I was doing was wrong. I wanted somewhere I could be honest about who I was and what I wanted to be.

Eventually I found it, weirdly enough, in the Yellow Pages. Online searches hadn't shown anywhere promising near my home on the outskirts of Aberdeen, so I thought I might as well try the phone book. As you'd expect, most of the listings just pointed me towards their websites, but I spotted a small, square ad box in the lower left corner. It was text only, and read, "Your perfect body is here. Become all you can be." Followed by a landline number and an address about five minutes walk from me. So I gave them a call.

The voice that answered was rough and spoke in the sort of English accent that usually gets my hackles up, but when I asked him what the gym's policy on steroids was, he just laughed, and said that if it helped me "perfect myself" then it was more than welcome. I arranged to swing by the following day and check the place out.

From the outside the gym wasn't much to look at. Just the faded outline of a dumbbell on a grimy window, and the words "Weights and Cardio" just about

readable over the door. I realised that I actually passed this place pretty regularly, I'd just always assumed it was out of business.

The door was open, though, so I went inside. It was a hot day, but the air in the reception was cool, tinged with that familiar scent of sweat, and something else I couldn't quite identify. There wasn't anyone behind the desk, and the computer didn't look like it had been turned on all day. I was about to call out, see if I could get somebody's attention, when I heard the door to the changing rooms open, and someone stepped out.

The man who stood there was, without a doubt, the biggest guy I had ever seen, and bear in mind I spend my time hanging out with bodybuilders. He had to hunch down to fit through the doorway, and was almost twice as wide as I was. Most of his body was covered in a loose tracksuit, and I could see clear stitch marks where it had been enlarged for him. Embroidered onto the chest was the letter 'J'.

Despite his enormous size, his face seemed pretty normal, even handsome, with the sort of cheekbones and jawline I'd kill for. He smiled when I stammered out a hello, and asked if I was Ross from the phone. Sure, I said, and he immediately launched into all sorts of questions about my workout, what I was looking for, what safety measures I had for my steroids, that sort of thing. None of it was unexpected, and he clearly knew his stuff.

But then he started asking me some slightly more personal questions: why I'd become a bodybuilder, how it made me feel, what parts of myself I hated. It felt a bit... invasive, but I answered honestly, and he seemed satisfied, turning around and gesturing for me to follow as he headed in to show me around.

The gym itself was good, but nothing special. It actually didn't have much in the way of cardio machines, but that had never really been my priority, so it wasn't a problem. There was also quite a lot of old-fashioned gymnastics equipment: parallel beams, vaulting horses, high bars, all that sort of thing. It was a huge room, and to be honest, part of me just assumed that they were there to use up some of the space. It certainly had everything I needed, although I did wonder why we were the only ones in there.

It was the changing room that really struck me as odd, though. There was just the one: apparently unisex, though I doubted any women were members. It was decent size, and had plenty of showers, good water pressure, everything you needed. It all seemed perfectly normal, except for one thing.

The lockers were absolutely enormous. They came right up to the ceiling, which was easily twelve foot from the floor, and must have been a good two or three feet wide. Each had what looked to be a unique lock, and only a few of them had keys in.

My guide explained that every member of the gym had their own locker, and kept it as long as they were a member. I asked what happened when all the lockers were taken and he just shrugged. "No new members," he said. When he shrugged, the fabric of his hoodie moved in such an odd way. It was fascinating, and I made a mental note to keep an eye out for him in the gym, so I could get a proper look at him.

I walked over to one of the lockers with the key still in it, number 31, and pulled it out. I looked back at him, and he nodded. The locker was just as big inside as I'd thought, and went back about five feet into the wall. Forget a workout bag, I could have stored my entire wardrobe in that thing.

After that, I headed back into the reception, and the guy took down my details, I signed a few forms and, just like that, I was a member. He told me to keep the key, and explained that he preferred to have membership fees paid in cash. That didn't surprise me. I got the feeling that there were a few things about the place that wouldn't pass any sort of official audit.

Still, it suited me perfectly, so I had no interest in causing them any sort of trouble. I gave him a big thumbs up, and he nodded, turned and headed out the doors, off down the street. It was a bit abrupt, but to be honest, I wasn't sure he was all there, if you know what I mean, so I didn't think too much of it. I did kick myself, though, as I realised I hadn't actually got his name, so 'J' would have to do.

With J gone, it seemed like I was the only one there, so I got changed, and got on with my workout. It was a little bit eerie, being all alone in that huge room. I'm used to having the presence of others to motivate me, to push me further than I'd otherwise go, just to show off a bit. On my own, I found myself working out at a much more leisurely pace; I was more careful than I normally would have been, if only because I didn't have a spotter.

The whole day I kept expecting someone else to come in. We'd get chatting, I thought, and I could maybe ask them to spot me, but the day slowly passed, and I was still alone. Occasionally I heard a noise from the changing rooms that I would have sworn was someone coming in, but there was no-one. Eventually, I showered, changed back, and headed home for a less-than-exciting dinner of chicken and beans.

The next day was the same, and the one after that. No matter when I went, the place was always empty, with no sign of J or anybody else. I wondered if

somehow I'd been tricked into paying to use an abandoned gym or something, but it was well maintained and really clean, so someone was looking after it. In fact, thinking about it, I'd say it might have been the cleanest gym I'd ever used, although at the time I thought that was because I was the only one using it.

About five days into my time there, I finally met someone else. Her name was Marie Balandin, and she seemed just as surprised to see me as I was to see her. Apparently she had been using the gym for about two months and had, like me, thought she was the only one. She'd been off to see her sister down in Glasgow for a week, and was a bit shocked I'd turned up in her absence. We got to talking, though, and got on pretty well, so sure enough after a few minutes she offered to spot me.

Truth be told, I was a bit dubious she'd be able to keep up, but a few sets shut me right up. Whatever she was taking, she was a lot further along than me, and by the end I was struggling when spotting her. Still, there was a camaraderie that came from being the only two people in that weird place, and it didn't take long for us to become good friends, swapping diet tips and theories about what the deal was with J, whose real name, she claimed, was Jared.

There was one other advantage to knowing Marie was around – it helped me ignore the sounds from the locker room. The occasional thumps and creaks. I could just write it off as her being a bit clumsy. Even when I hadn't seen her come in.

Marie was apparently quite a big deal in some of the international women's bodybuilding competitions. I'd never followed them, but she showed me a few

of her trophies once. The way she trained, though, it was intense, driven. More driven than I'd expect from someone with so many wins under her belt. She'd push herself way past the point of exhaustion every day, and for all the awards her body had gotten her, it sometimes seemed to me like she wanted to destroy it. Often I'd find her staring at the mirror in the changing room, her gaze locked on her shoulders, moving them slowly up and down with a look of disgust on her face.

I didn't really think about it too much, though, as my own steroid course was starting to show results, and I was spending plenty of time in front of the mirror myself. It wasn't enough, though. I knew it wasn't enough. I knew I was going to have to go on another course as soon as my body had recovered from this one. Maybe even sooner.

I don't know how it would have ended if I hadn't lost my phone. I don't have much of a social life, so I didn't notice it was gone until I was getting ready for bed. It must have fallen out of my jacket pocket when I'd hung it up at the gym. I wouldn't have minded waiting until the next day, but it had my training diary on it, and I always spent ten minutes filling it in before bed. It was a small ritual, but an important one, and given it was just down the road, I figured I might as well go and see if the gym was still open. Since no-one ever seemed to be around, I figured, maybe no-one locked it overnight.

So at about half past eleven last Wednesday night, I found myself gently pushing open the door to my gym. It wasn't locked, just as I guessed, and everything inside seemed quiet. I headed through into the changing room, and there was my phone, where it had fallen in my locker. I grabbed it, and was just about to leave, when I heard movement coming from the gym itself, and nearly jumped out of my skin.

I should have left. I should have turned right around and marched out of that place, but instead I felt a... rage building inside me. Whoever was in there, it was almost midnight, how dare they come in sneaking around like that, trying to give me a heart attack! I set my face hard, and walked through, preparing to give Marie, or whoever it was, a piece of my mind.

The lights in the gym were off, but I could see movement over near the gymnastics equipment, someone swinging back and forth on the parallel bars. It was a smooth, rhythmic motion, down and around and up and over, around and over, up and down. Sometimes the movement flew up, releasing the bars for a moment, before deftly catching them on the way down. There was no sound as I got closer, apart from the faint slap of hands gripping and releasing the wood of the beams. If it was Marie, I'd never seen her doing anything like this before. I walked over, and turned on the overhead lights.

It was not Marie, swinging round and about on the bars. Marie only had two arms. Marie had legs. And Marie had a head. The thing that swung and flipped and twirled around the bars was nothing like Marie, though its flesh looked human enough. It did have a smile, though, stitched... right in the centre of its torso.

I screamed so hard I tore something in my throat. I don't know if it heard me. I don't know if it even had ears. But it wasn't alone, and the other things in that place did hear me, because as I ran back and out through the changing rooms, all the lockers were opening. What came climbing out of them had once been people, I'm sure of that, and they called to me, offering to help 'perfect' me. To help me achieve my ideal body.

J was there, standing his full height. A distended, jagged body bared in all its twisted grandeur, and he shook his head in frustration. He said something, I think, but I couldn't make it out. It might have been "too soon".

I try to remember some of them in detail, the confusion of limbs and joints and muscles, but all I can remember is the happy, joyful way they called to me.

Told me that the pain was worth it. It makes me sick that a small, sharp part of me wishes I'd stayed to listen.

I never went back. I called Marie and told her what happened, but she didn't believe me. At least, I hope she didn't. Because if she did, then some of the questions she asked make very worried for her indeed.

Statement ends.

MARTIN

The, um... the supplemental materials that should go with this statement, providing more details on addresses, names, and stuff, seems to be missing, so we don't have any way of tracking down the gym, or finding out the name the business might be operating under. Not without a 2013 copy of the Aberdeen Yellow Pages. A bit of relief, in some ways. I tried to contact Mr. Davenport about it, and did get through, but he told me to... um, he... he... wishes no further contact with the Institute.

Melanie looked into Marie Balandin, though. In 2011 and 2012, she did really well in several IFBB competitions, but it looks like she disappeared around the time of this statement. No missing persons report was ever filed, but there's no record of her anywhere after that.

The last official mention seems to be a police report filed on August 23rd, 2013, which lists her as a ‘person of interest’ in a series of animal mutilations on a farm about five miles west of Aberdeen. A bunch of sheep were found dead, with their femurs removed. Look, I, I know we’re not meant to speculate in these bits, but... well, I just... I wonder what she was planning to do with them.

There. Well, that’s, er... That’s it.

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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