

MAG – 094 – Dead Woman Walking

Content Warnings

- Altered mental status
- Unded
- Death / existentialism

[The Magnus Archives theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode ninety-four. Dead Woman Walking.

[The Magnus Archives theme – intro – continued.]

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Right.

GEORGIE

Right.

ARCHIVIST

And... you're... sure you're okay with this? And with me recording?

GEORGIE

I mean... no? But... You told all your stuff, so... I mean, it's just fair. I think.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, maybe I know something that can help.

GEORGIE

No, it's not, erm... There are some things it doesn't help to know more about.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

GEORGIE

So how does this work?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, you just... tell your story.

GEORGIE

Right.

ARCHIVIST

Would it help if I... 'asked'?

GEORGIE

Erm... Yeah, yeah. Maybe.

ARCHIVIST

Okay. Statement of Georgina Barker regarding the last words of a possible corpse. Recorded direct from subject, April 29th, 2017.

Statement begins.

So... what happened?

GEORGIE (STATEMENT)

It was my first year of university, before I'd met you. I was still studying English at Balliol back then, and trying to hide how poor my family was from everyone else. None of them *said* anything, of course, but whenever they talked I could count the seconds before I got lost. Before one of them made a reference, or assumed something about my life, and I realised I was out of my depth. I'd learned what a punt was; there couldn't have been that much more, surely?

I'd read so many books, and nobody knew any more about my subject than I did, but the way my classmates all seemed to read Latin, or reference philosophers I'd never heard of... I'd, I'd never been able to travel outside the country, but everyone seemed to assume I went skiing every winter. I felt I'd wandered onstage without a script. I felt boring, like I was being judged on all the experiences I'd never been able to have. And I always remember their faces when I'd get excited, and a hint of Scouse would creep into my voice. Like I was some sort of... curiosity. I was scared all the time, terrified that someone would see through me, see the fraud I felt like I was.

There was only one person I really felt myself around. Her name was Alex Brooke, and she was a medical student at Corpus Christi. She'd grown up in an ex-mining town in the Black Country, though I can't remember which one, and she seemed to feel the same way I did. But where I was anxious and self-conscious, she was angry. I never met anyone who could skewer the pompous dickheads like she could. I think she actually head-butted some rich kid from Christ Church once.

She was a couple of years above me, and we met after we both went to some self-satisfied theatre thing in my second week. We simultaneously decided to

ditch it halfway through when they started talking about the ‘highlights of the last season at the National’. We went for a drink instead, and just like that we were inseparable.

Alex was always so confident, so... utterly unafraid. I always admired her for that, even if I sometimes found it almost as intimidating as the posh boys quoting Latin. I think she made a point of never letting anything shake her. Even when talking about the most morbid subjects, she never lost that smile.

And as a medical student, there were plenty of morbid subjects to talk about. She’d discuss her dissections with me, I think just to watch me squirm a bit, and talk about how hungry she always got at the smell of preserved brain. Apparently, it’s exactly like tinned tuna. She liked to make that observation just before taking a big bite of her sandwich. I don’t think I actually ever saw her eat tuna any other time. Maybe she didn’t even like the stuff, she just wanted to make a point.

I’m sure you remember all the protests back then. I went on a few marches myself, so it didn’t exactly come as a huge surprise to hear that there was a group occupying one of the faculty buildings. What was strange about the whole thing was nobody seemed to exactly know what the group were protesting, or exactly when it had started. They’d taken over part of the Medical Sciences building, though, so I think most people assumed it was some sort of scientific ethics or animal rights thing. The staff were all very quiet about it.

Alex was loudly angry about it, as was her way. I wasn’t sure exactly what it was about, but reckoned I was probably on the protestor’s side, or close to it, but she was having none of it. Apparently classes were being changed all over

the place to avoid that part of the building, and it was playing havoc with her schedule.

One night, when we were both through a few pints in Balliol bar, I mentioned that it was a bit weird there weren't more police around, if they were illegally occupying the place, and she got this little light in her eye. This wrinkle round the edges that I knew meant trouble. I asked her what she was planning, but she just shook her head, and gestured to get another drink.

I didn't see her again until the following afternoon. She called me up out of nowhere and demanded we have lunch. I didn't point out that it was four.

There was something in her voice that made me think she hadn't slept, and not because she'd partied the night away. I pushed a plate of chips and sausage towards her, but she barely looked at it. Finally, she looked up at me, and I saw something new in her face. I saw fear. "They were just... sitting there," she said.

Apparently, Alex had found her way back into the Medical Science building after putting me drunkenly to bed. God knows what she was planning to do; I don't think even she was completely sure. Something about catching the protesters sleeping and bothering them the way she thought they'd been bothering her. She'd found her way to the rooms they'd taken over, and was about to go in, when she'd glanced through the small window on the swinging double doors.

They were lying on the floor, she told me. All of them. Not like they were sleeping, but like they'd just... collapsed, motionless, where they had been standing. There were no placards, no signs, just a couple dozen normal-looking students fallen to the floor.

Their chests moved up and down slowly, so Alex was sure they'd been alive, but... their eyes stared vacantly into the space in front of them, and everything else about them seemed lifeless and empty. Some of them were lying with their heads or legs at odd, uncomfortable-looking angles, but they either didn't notice or didn't care. They all seemed to have fallen away from a single, central point in the room. Kneeling there was the only figure who hadn't collapsed.

She was an older woman, Alex said, and was almost completely naked. Her skin was pale and her head was shaved. Like the others, she was still, with only the movement of her chest showing she was still alive, but unlike those on the floor, her eyes moved. They gently swept from one side of the room to the other, like she was searching for something.

Then those eyes settled on Alex, staring in through the door. The eyes didn't light up, they didn't narrow, or show any sign they'd registered her existence. They just stopped moving and looked at Alex, as though waiting for her next move. And it was at that point Alex had recognised the woman, and run.

Obviously, I wanted to know who the woman was, and I demanded Alex tell me, but she just told me to... Well, she said she didn't want to say, and pushed her now-cold lunch away from her. I wasn't letting her get away that easily, and I pressed the point. Who was this woman with the shaved head? Where had she seen her before?

Finally, Alex admitted she'd seen the woman during classes at the Medical Building. Was she a tutor? What was her name? Alex looked me right in the eyes. "They weren't allowed to tell us their names."

It took a few moments to work out what she meant, and when I did I felt dizzy. Alex had such absolute certainty in her voice, but she had to be wrong. It was

impossible. I had no idea what to say, and all I could manage to do was blurt out, “Tuna?” She stared at me for a few seconds, then shrugged, and looked to the floor.

We sat there in silence for a long time, trying to understand what had just been said. I mean, there was no way that there could be something in a university building causing students to collapse, and nobody was taking any steps to deal with it.

Especially if it involved one of the cadavers, it just wasn’t possible. But the only other explanation I could come up with was that Alex was lying, and I just needed to look at her to know that was even less likely. So I did what I felt was the only thing I could do in that situation. I told her I’d go with her if she wanted to take a second look. She didn’t, but we went anyway.

It was Saturday, and the place was eerily quiet. Even without classes or labs, there were always a few students hovering about, going to and from places, eager to get some work done when everywhere wasn’t so crowded. But all we passed heading into the building was a single police car, sat empty, just slightly mounting the kerb. The door to the Medical Science building stood open; it was a bright day, but the hall stood dark. Alex looked at me, just once, as if asking whether I was sure about doing this. I wasn’t, but... I still nodded.

We stepped inside. The building was cool and quiet, with just the faint drone of the air conditioning in the background. I’d never actually been inside before, but Alex’s steps were confident in their direction, even if she wasn’t confident in her purpose. Finally, she pushed open a pair of doors to one of the teaching rooms, and... I saw the scene she had described.

There were the students, lying on the floor. But not just students. I saw faculty and even a policeman slumped there like the others. What Alex hadn't mentioned was how grey they all seemed. Not in the sense they were sickly, but... like they'd had the colour simply drained away from them. And knelt in the middle was the woman. Her skin seemed grey as well, but in her it was clearly the colour of death. It didn't matter that her ribs rose and fell like she was breathing, even if Alex hadn't told me before there would have been no doubt in my mind what she was.

Her eyes settled on us with that same disinterested stare. No-one moved. Not us, not the corpse, and not the bodies on the floor. There was nothing but the sound of breathing, and maybe the faintest whimpering cry from somewhere among the fallen. Then, very slowly, without any sense of urgency, the dead woman began to stand up. I remember what it was like only vaguely, like trying to describe a dream long after you've woken up from it.

As the woman got closer, I could see something in Alex tighten, wind so taut that it finally snapped. She lunged forward, grabbed the corpse by its shoulders, and began to scream into its face. What did it want? What had it done? Demanding answers. The dead woman with the shaved head ignored her grip, leaned close to her neck and opened her mouth.

For a moment I had visions of teeth sinking into Alex's flesh, of arterial spray coating the clean, white laminate, but all that passed between them was a whisper. Something soft spoken into Alex's ear. Her arms dropped to her sides, and she turned to look at me.

Her eyes were different. They were still hers, and I could tell they still knew me, but something in them was gone. As my gaze met hers, Alex gave a simple,

small shrug, so slowly, it was as if every ounce of will she had went into that one small gesture. Her head drooped, staring at the floor, and she gently lowered herself down to lie there.

And just like that, I was on my own. It feels strange to think that even then I couldn't find the strength to run. If I'm feeling generous to myself, I try to believe it's because I was unwilling to abandon Alex, or maybe the thing had some power to keep me there, but honestly, it was fight, flight or freeze. And I froze.

I saw the dead woman approaching me. Smelt the chemicals that kept her from rotting, saw her lean towards me, saw her lips begin to form words. In desperation I slammed my hands over my ears and shut my eyes, willing myself not to hear, not to understand. As far as defences go, it was basically nothing, but I still think it saved me, at least a bit. I still heard the words.

“The moment that you die will feel exactly the same as this one.”

And in an instant I understood. There's no... difference between the present and the future, no other me that will suffer the indignity of death while I live on. It's all a single moment, and there's... there's no difference between that *last* moment that ushers us out into oblivion and the one we experience now. The promise of a cold and lonely eternity in the grave would have been a mercy; at least it would be eternal. But everything ends, even the universe, even time. And... that means it has always already ended.

I felt every feeling within me boil up: anger, despair, joy, hope, fear. Especially fear. They overwhelmed me, and burned up with the monumental realisation of the scale we existed on. Not the meaningless vastness of the universe, but the... the smallness of it.

And I realised I was in my bed. According to my phone, I had been for several days. I numbly got myself some water, and ignored my weeping mother. She tried to hug me, but her arms just slid off my limp shoulders.

And that was my life for several months. Eventually, the memory began to fade, and I started to feel again. I took the year out of university under the umbrella of ‘medical reasons’, and by the time I met you I was, well, I don’t think I’ll ever be the same person I was before, but I had started being able to actually live again.

I never learned for sure what happened to the people in the Medical Science building, or the dead woman. Someone said a police van and ambulance had turned up in the night, and taken them all away, but I couldn’t find anything more on it. None of them came back to the university, and I never saw Alex again.

There was one thing that never returned to me afterwards, though. Since that day, I’ve never been able to feel afraid. My fear’s just... gone. I’m not foolhardy. I can still recognise danger, and I understand the likelihood of harm, but actual fear? Simply not something I experience anymore. And I’ve never been able to figure out if it was cauterised, or... if it was stolen.

GEORGIE

So that’s it.

ARCHIVIST

I see. That, um... I mean, that –

GEORGIE

Explains some things?

ARCHIVIST

A bit. I can't believe you never told me.

GEORGIE

Well, I can't believe you didn't tell me you were on the run from the police over two murders, so...

ARCHIVIST

No, you – you're right, I...

GEORGIE

Are you alright? You look like you're about to keel over.

ARCHIVIST

Uh, no, I – I just... Ther-there's been a lot of statements, in not a lot of time. I'm... I'm exhausted. I kind of wish I knew, uh, knew even *one* person who genuinely wasn't involved.

GEORGIE

Maybe that's why you thought of me?

ARCHIVIST

Hm?

GEORGIE

I mean, it's been years, and there must be other old friends you lost touch with. Maybe you did know?

ARCHIVIST

Yeah, maybe. I, uh...

GEORGIE

(Sighs) It's alright, John, you sleep. I'll tidy up here.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, I, uh... Yeah.

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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