

MAG – 150 – Cul-de-Sac

Content Warnings:

- Isolation
- Self-harm
- Human remains

[The Magnus Archives theme – intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and fifty. Cul-de-Sac.

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Herman Gorgoli, regarding his period trapped alone in a suburban area of Cheadle. Original statement written 9th November 2014. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Life is hard. I don't want to bum you out or anything, but yeah. You're all alone, trying to connect with people, trying to find your place in the world, but in the end the only person you really know is yourself, and even then, not all that well. There's plenty of things I've done I couldn't explain to you. I mean, I'm constantly, constantly looking back at my past self and thinking, "What an

idiot! How the hell could he have done such an obviously stupid thing? How was I surprised it went so badly? What a relief I'm now so much older and wiser." Except that last part never really turns out to be true, does it? The line of when you were your dumb younger self seems to keep moving forward with you, until each more mature and reasonable version of you eventually falls foul of it and becomes a young idiot.

And when you add in another person, you reach a whole other level. You can love them, marry them, dedicate your life to them, but that's not the same as actually understanding them. I was with Alberto for fifteen years, and I tell you what, I could always anticipate him. He always used to get annoyed at how predictable I found his mood sometimes, but damn if I ever really knew why. Of course, it doesn't help that when you're that close to someone everything starts to reflect on each other, one bad mood feeds into another and stress just bounces back and forth between you. It can get real bad if you're not careful. And we weren't careful.

The thing is, when we both found ourselves in positions to be working from home, we actually thought it was going to be really good for our relationship. The two of us, spending all our time together; we reckoned it was going to be real romantic. We were real stupid back then. And when Alberto's parents offered to sell us their second home in Cheadle, we thought it was a great investment: nice and quiet, good neighbourhood, just a real nice home for the two of us, and so much bigger than anything we could afford in the city. And before you think Cheadle the suburb of Manchester, that's not the one I'm talking about. I'm talking about Cheadle, the suburb of Stoke-on-Trent. Hell, technically it's not even a suburb. It's just a village that looks so much like a suburb that you could pull it up drop it on the edge of any dull town in England

and it would look the same. Just street after street of identical, blandly pleasant houses, all winding around each other in dead ends and cul-de-sacs and one-way streets, making sure every house has plenty of inoffensive garden. I've never seen people happily living in a place so obviously dead.

Two years we lived there : two years imprisoned in that beige, comfortable house with the man I loved, watching our relationship turn to sniping and snapping and bitter passive aggression. I'd say that cheating on him was a foolish act of past me, but honestly, it's one of the few decisions I've ever made that I completely understand. I didn't even try to hide it, not really, and when he found out and it all ended, I kind of hated myself for just how relieved I was that I'd finally be able to leave that place, to get in my car and drive away from that gentle suburban nightmare. I mean, I'd lived there for two years and I still got lost trying to leave. I thought that was the worst that place would ever make me feel. Wish I'd been right.

I got a cheap apartment in Liverpool and tried to tell myself I was happier. The single life, footloose and ... sitting at home binging bad TV. I tried to get back into the club scene, but honestly, I think I'm just too old now. The music was too loud, the drinks were too expensive and the sort of thing I used to take to be dancing all night now hit me with a comedown so hard that I had to write off almost the entire week. It didn't help that, over the course of a ten-year relationship, "my friends" had become "our friends" and there weren't any of them siding with me in this situation. Some would drop platitudes about maybe reconnecting after the fallout was done with, but I know when I'm being handled by people who "don't want to create any more drama". It was miserable, but every time I thought about going back, I felt nauseous. The idea of returning to those eggshell walls that we never got around to repainting,

and the living room that expected me to sit there and watch *Midsomer Murders* until I passed away peacefully in my sleep ... It made me want to throw up.

I'd probably have stayed away forever if it hadn't been for the moose. There was a carved wooden moose, you see, something Alberto's grandfather had carved, apparently, and a real family heirloom. It was an ugly old thing, with this weird angular face that always made my skin crawl a bit. I'd never let him display it in our house, so it had lived in one of the suitcases under the stairs, the suitcases I pulled out and filled in a tearful rage when I was leaving. So yeah, I'd kind of accidentally stolen the moose. When he finally realised and texted me, demanding it back, I should probably just have sent it by post, but no, for some reason I decided I was going to drive all the way down there and give it back in person. Maybe I was hoping for a fight, or just to see him again. I don't know. I was younger, then. Foolish.

It was late when I got to what I thought was his street, driving through the one-way signs and well-maintained gardens that bordered that snaking road. The sun had disappeared, but the sky was still fairly light, that late-summer twilight that seems to just drag on forever. There weren't any other cars on the road, and I was already getting frustrated. My satnav had decided to start sending me around in a circle and I was apparently no closer to finding our— Alberto's house. The roads weren't like I remembered them. Or rather, they were exactly like I remembered them: bland, interchangeable and impossible to navigate.

I must have driven around for almost half an hour before I finally decided that, if the internet and GPS couldn't help me, I'd have a proper look at the actual paper map that I kept in the boot. I spent a few minutes scanning the Cheadle

area until I found the road I was looking for: Ash Tree Hill. Then I drove on until I found a street sign at the next turning, hoping to compare it to what was on the map. And then I stopped, because the sign said: “Road” – no name, just “Road”. And it wasn’t as though the actual name of the street had been defaced or removed. The sign was complete; it just didn’t say anything else. So, I drove on until I found the next one. “Street.” I tried to compare it to the map – maybe this place just had some really bland road names and somehow I’d never noticed in the two years I’d lived there – but no, the places on the map all had the names I remembered: Chapel Street, Meadow Drive, Station Road. Bland, sure, generic ... but not literally placeholder. I pressed on, looking for more. “Avenue,” “Close,” “Way,” “Lane.” Only ever the suffix, never with a name attached.

By this point, I was starting to feel a little bit freaked out, and I decided to just get out of there. I could come back later, when my satnav was working properly, in proper daylight. The sky was getting darker by this point, and I had to put my headlights on. I still hadn’t seen any other cars on the road or, as I thought more about it, people on the streets. But as you might imagine, getting out of there proved even more difficult than finding the house I was looking for. Every time I thought I’d found a main road that led out of this weird looping suburbia, a one-way sign seemed to spring up, directing me back into the sprawl. I did U-turn after U-turn as I was channelled into one dead-end cul-de-sac after another, until eventually I decided to simply disregard the one-way signs completely. I cruised past the one that seemed to be blocking my most likely exit, and almost breathed a sigh of relief, as I found myself leaving the suburban maze I’d been trapped in. Until it led me into an entirely different maze of unremarkable residential neighbourhoods.

Even then, I still didn't accept that I was trapped. It didn't make any sense. And it wasn't like I'd seen anything blatantly supernatural. It wasn't that there was anything abnormal about the whole situation. It was just that the normal seemed to go on forever. At some point, I got out of the car and started hammering on random doors. I mean, I tried the doorbells at first, but they were silent, so I started knocking and knocking until my hand hurt. There was no answer at any of them. There were no lights on behind the drawn curtains, and all the house numbers were zero.

I got back into my car and started driving again, going on and on until finally I ran out of petrol, and it rolled to a sputtering stop at the end of one of the indistinguishable dead ends. It had been full dark for hours by this point, and my dashboard claimed it was 3am. My phone had died about an hour ago, and once the last of the power went in the car, I was left with no way to tell the time at all. I wished I hadn't thrown away the wristwatch Alberto had given me, but it was too late for those regrets. I stepped outside, looking down the street. There were no lights on in any of the houses, but the identical lampposts bathed the place in a sickly orange as far as I could see. I decided that the roads must be the problem – they were what was keeping me trapped in this place, constantly turning and bending and confusing me. If I just picked a direction and kept to it, eventually I had to get to the edge of what, by now, I had decided was a newly built neighbourhood that apparently no-one had moved into yet. As an explanation, it didn't make any sense, but it didn't need to, not at that moment.

So, I started walking, going around houses and through gardens, trying at all times to keep my direction straight and consistent. I may be too old for clubbing, but I still keep pretty active, so getting over the fences wasn't too

much of a problem for me, as I passed from identical road to identical garden over and over again. I don't know how long I went on like this, but it felt like hours. At the start, I was counting how many houses I passed, but when I got to a hundred, I stopped. It was beginning to eat away at my careful rationalisations, and I couldn't allow that.

Eventually my legs started to go, and I decided I needed some rest. I was about to sit on the street, when a thought occurred. I marched up to a nearby front door, prepared to kick in the flimsy-looking wood, but trying the handle revealed it was unlocked. I don't know why I picked that house. It was exactly identical to all the others, and I've often wondered if there was anything that drew me to it. Perhaps I was just unlucky, or perhaps there only ever was one house.

The lights worked, which was a relief, and the inside looked exactly how I expected it to. And I mean, *exactly* how I expected it to: from the blank IKEA furniture, to the subtly-patterned cream wallpaper, to the picture frames lining the wall containing what were clearly stock photos, each of a different family pantomiming a scene of domestic bliss. I headed into the living room and sat down on one of the almost-comfortable armchairs. My body was aching, and my eyes were heavy, and I had the thought that maybe I should head up to the bedroom. In the back of my mind, though, I knew that was a trap. I had somehow become convinced that if I went to sleep here, then I would never leave.

My hand drifted down and brushed a plastic remote control. Almost on instinct, I picked it up and turned the TV on; a cooking show, a woman I almost recognised fussing over a turkey. She was talking, or at least, it sounded like she was. The cadence and the sounds were so much like English that it took me

almost a full minute to realise that she wasn't actually saying words. She never looked at the camera, and there seemed to be something wrong with her eyes, though I couldn't say what. Her hands moved over the pale skin of the turkey, poking it and prodding it as though preparing it, though she wasn't actually doing anything to it. Eventually, she gripped a part of it between finger and thumb and tore off a long strip of dry-looking meat, before tossing it over her shoulder and returning to her strange mimicry of cooking.

I hit the remote again. A shopping channel. The host was a tall, clean-shaven man with close-cropped hair. He was holding a brick and talking about it in that same flow of non-words, that still had a familiar salesman's patter. The screen scrolled the message "buy now!", though there was neither price nor contact details, as this man, who wouldn't look at the camera, earnestly pretended to sell me a brick. It was almost hypnotic. I leaned back in the chair, trying to think clearly about what was happening, and my eyes found themselves focusing on the ceiling, on a small spot of red that seemed to have seeped through from above.

As I climbed those stairs, I desperately tried to tell myself I didn't know what was going to be up there. And to be fair, I was surprised by some of the details. But as soon as I saw the spot, I just knew that someone else was up there and that they were dead. The only questions were how and who. I think I'd given up on why.

I didn't know them, as it turned out. A young woman, conservatively dressed – her face was bloody, but I was sure I didn't recognise her. She had a bag with her, and her ID read 'Yetunde Uthman' – not a name I'd ever encountered before. Just another victim of this place. It looked as though she had forced her head through the mirror on the dressing table, the shards cutting her face and

neck to ribbons, a particularly large piece piercing her jugular, spilling blood all down the unremarkable white table and onto the light brown carpet below. I don't think she'd been dead that long, but I'm not a doctor and I didn't really try to check.

Instead, I turned and ran, all my tiredness gone in a sudden rush of adrenaline, down the stairs, out the door and into the night and the rows upon rows of bland, empty houses. And then, all at once, I wasn't running anymore. I was lying on the ground, collapsed, the tarmac rough and cool against my cheek, wet from my tears. I was going to die – I knew that now – just as she had, just as anyone else who came here had. How many corpses lay waiting behind the placid facade of this endless false suburbia?

And that was when I heard it. It was quiet, and my mind took a few moments to accept it could be real, but sure enough, there it was: the sound of my phone's ringtone. I looked up, and not three doors down was my car, the door still open where I had left it. I stumbled over, my legs still weak, and grabbed the handset, which should have been long out of battery, and I stared at the glowing screen. It was Alberto. He was calling me; I don't know how. But the tears came even faster now, as I answered, sobbing with relief to hear him yelling at me for taking so long. Had I forgotten? Was I even planning to bother? I tried to reply, to explain, but all I could manage to say, to get through the shaking sobs, was, "I love you." He went very quiet, and then he hung up. It didn't matter, though, because when I looked around, the windows of the houses were lit, and a woman was coming down from her front door to ask if I needed help with my car.

We're working on it, the two of us. We're not exactly back together yet, but I think it's going well. He's reluctant to sell the house, but I've made it quite

clear that I'm never going back to the suburbs, even if I can't really tell him why. I checked to see if I could find anything about Yetunde Uthman, and I did find a few old social media profiles, but I wasn't able to get through to any family or friends. As far as I can tell, she disappeared a year ago. And nobody noticed.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

The Lonely is possibly the most insidious of the powers, I believe. Certainly, it is the one that most delights in having you do its work for it. Even the spiders seem to have a hard time matching it for sheer seductiveness. Time to yourself, self-care, putting yourself first, not being a burden on those you care about. It doesn't even need to tell you any lies. It just waits for the lies you tell yourself.

We're all well aware that, with Peter Lukas in charge of the Institute, it's a very real danger to all of us. We are trying. Daisy, Basira and I, we don't leave the Institute much anymore, so we do spend a lot of time together. It's not that easy though. When everyone has so many walls, so many defences, sometimes you can feel lonely even when you're all in the same room. But it's better than the alternative, and at least none of us are suffering alone. Martin's got it the worst of course, but it still seems to be his choice, and I have to trust that he knows what he's doing.

Still feeling weak. Restless. I want to be proactive, but that hasn't ... (Sighs)
That hasn't been going quite so well for us lately.

Oh, uh...

Coe in, Melanie!

[Door opens]

MELANIE

John, have you got a moment?

ARCHIVIST

Uh, course, I was just, um, having a statement.

MELANIE

Oh ... A-an old one?

ARCHIVIST

Wha— Yes, an old one! I'm not— I'm doing my best.

MELANIE

Sure.

ARCHIVIST

What do you want?

MELANIE

Uh, I just wanted to talk to you about, well, um, my... 'career,' I guess? My position in the Archives.

ARCHIVIST

I see ...

MELANIE

Look, I'm not going to do my job anymore.

ARCHIVIST

I'm not sure I follow. You know we can't quit. We've all tried.

MELANIE

I didn't say I was going to quit. I said I'm not going to do my job: no researching, no filing, no field trips, nothing that is going to help the Institute in any way. I'll still be around, I just ... I can't be a part of this anymore. If I get sick, I get sick, and if I die ...

ARCHIVIST

Why?

MELANIE

Because this place is evil, John. And so, doing this job, helping it out, even in small ways, is in some ways evil tool. Every time we try to use it to do good, it just seems to make everything worse. And ... And I will not be a part of that anymore.

ARCHIVIST

What about the Unknowing? W-we saved the world.

MELANIE

Did we? I-I mean, I think it was the right thing to do, but how many people were killed to do it? W-we weren't even a neutral party. We did it as agents of The Eye, because Elias told us to.

ARCHIVIST

A-and then you put him in jail.

MELANIE

Martin put him there. A-and he's still doing harm! You ever think that maybe this whole ritual business is just an excuse, and that we're all just part of some huge, miserable fear machine?

ARCHIVIST

I've... considered the possibility.

MELANIE

Right, well, if I'm just another cog, maybe I can't leave the machine, but from this moment, I'm not turning. I'm jammed.

ARCHIVIST

Did your therapist suggest this?

MELANIE

N-not exactly. She's just helped me work through some things I've been thinking for a while. She doesn't know the details, just that I'm in a bad

contract situation working somewhere pretty awful. She thinks I work for the Tories.

ARCHIVIST

Melanie, could you ... Could you describe your therapist for me?

MELANIE

What? You think I wouldn't notice if she had cobwebs down her face?

ARCHIVIST

No.

MELANIE

That's it, isn't it? You really think I'm so stupid I wouldn't have noticed if my therapist was some kind of monster?

ARCHIVIST

I just... It was a worry.

MELANIE

Right, right, okay. I know. That is why I ruined my first four sessions and almost torpedoed the chance at a genuinely really good therapist, because I was so paranoid that she was going to turn out to be some ... *something* trying to manipulate me. But no. She's not full of spiders, or made of wax, or wearing the therapist's skin or whatever. She's just a well-trained professional, who I am paying to help me.

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

It's just, The Web can be subtle, you understand?

MELANIE

And? For all you know, its plan is to paralyse you with indecision, leaving you sitting here, terrified that everything you do is somehow all part of its grand plan. And who do you think that fear's going to feed?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, well, you are not the first to make that point.

MELANIE

Look, I didn't come here for a fight. I just wanted to let you know what was going on. If you need me, I'll be trying to get Daisy drunk.

ARCHIVIST

(Knowing) Good luck. It's only ever happened once, in 2006. She drank a—
Sorry. Didn't mean to.

MELANIE

Sure. See you around.

[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 Lydia Nicholas as Melanie King.