

MAG – 124 – Left Hanging

Content Warnings:

- Cancer
- Grief
- Vertigo
- Extreme Heights
- Suicide
- Emotional trauma
- Direct violence

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and twenty-four. Left Hanging.

[Tape clicks on]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Julian Jennings, regarding a cable car journey up the Untersberg mountain in Austria. Original statement given 11th December 2012. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

The part that really gets me is that it wasn't even our first time going up that cable car. I mean, none of it makes sense. It was all impossible, and the terrible things that happened while we were hanging there absolutely could not have happened. But given that they did, I don't understand why they happened to us. There was nothing special about us, nothing remarkable about our trip. Were we just random bystanders to something awful? We must have been, because I don't see why anyone would choose for something to happen to us. It must have been the old man, of course, but again, why?

My father passed away almost twelve years ago now. Pancreatic cancer. I'm sure I don't need to explain that it was devastating, probably the first true grief I've ever felt, but in the years that followed, I found that it brought me much closer to my mum. Her and Dad were always something of a unit, you see, and growing up I feel like I had less of a specific relationship with them as people and more a relationship with 'my parents'. Not unusual, but once I moved out and started to get on with my own life, we ended up becoming a bit distant, and on the few times a year I would see them, it was again going to visit my parents, without any real thought for the individual relationships.

This all ended with my father's death. Grief brought Mum and me closer than we had ever been before. I would call her regularly and I'd make the trip up to Swansea at least once a month, until I finally moved back there four years ago.

It was the second year after Dad passed that we started our annual holiday together. At first, it was just a way to try and get Mum a bit more interested in the world again, but soon enough it was a highlight of our year. We'd go for a week, normally, maybe two if I'd kept back enough annual leave. Mum wasn't great with long flights, so we tended to keep ourselves to Central or Western Europe, though I got her as far as Corfu one year.

Her big passion was mountains. We always had to go up a mountain. Well, to be fair, it wasn't mountains she loved specifically, it was views. There was little that delighted Mum quite as much as to see the whole of creation spread out before you like a grand carpet, and we would always burn through a good number of Euros using whatever coin-operated telescopes they'd set up at the lookout spot. She also found an affinity for the thinner air of higher altitudes. I never really understood how that worked, as I thought it was meant to make it harder to breathe, and after a few hours, I always tended to end up with a bit of a headache, but Mum took to it like nobody's business, and after a minute or two, was always more spry than I'd see her the whole rest of the year.

Of course, at her age, actually climbing a mountain would have been a bit much, so our holidays very much tended to be the highest peaks in Central and Western Europe that could be scaled by coach, train or cable car. Well-supplied as many European mountains are with public transport options, this did limit us a bit. So that's why, this year, we found ourselves returning to Salzburg, one of our first ever destinations, and to Untersberg, one of our favourite mountains, towered distantly over the city. It was a marvellous view, as I recalled, although the quickest and most reliable way to reach it was unfortunately by cable car.

You see, I don't do amazingly with heights. I wouldn't describe it as full vertigo – and certainly, when we're actually at the top of the mountain, I don't have any problem at all if I steer clear of the edges – but traditionally, getting from sea level up to the top is something of a trial to me, to say nothing of coming back down. I've never really shared these fears with Mum, of course. She got such joy out of it that I wouldn't want to worry her. Anyway, I remembered the cable car up and down Untersberg was a particularly uncomfortable one for

me. As the car accelerated towards the rickety looking pylons, there was this judder as the runners abruptly changed angles, and the car would swing back and forth in such a way that I had to sit down on the floor. I told Mum this was because I found it hard to balance, but honestly, it was so I didn't have to look out the window, at the ground almost a mile below.

When we arrived at the cable car station this time, I was relieved to see that they seemed to have replaced a lot of the structure since the first time we were there. The cables stretched up the mountain, fresh and strong, though still with that disconcerting curve to them. And there was a shine to the cars themselves that I really hoped wasn't just a fresh paint job. Mum appeared quiet and composed, but in that way she does when she gets excited, and we bought our tickets and joined the queue without any problems. It was near the end of the season and we'd arrived as early as possible, so the queue in this case only comprised of one other passenger: an old man with stark white hair and a gentle, amused smile. He had a walking stick in his hand, though his back was straight as an arrow, and it seemed like he only remembered to use it in those moments when he noticed he was still holding it.

The day was clear, and the sun illuminated the inside of the car as we stepped over the gap from the platform. I knew you'd be able to see for miles and miles from the top – something I was looking forward to doing when I had my feet firmly on the mountain, less so from the swinging car. The driver stood in the corner of the tiny metal box, looking at us with a bored expression and making some final checks on the controls, which amounted to two buttons and a phone. I sat, slightly unsteadily on the rough steel bench as Mum and the old man took positions at two of the windows with the best view. The driver nodded to himself, slid the door closed and turned a key in the control panel.

There was a shuddering through the whole structure of the car as the wheels above us began to turn, and we began to climb towards the peak.

In some ways, the first minute is the worst. The climb takes just over eight minutes in total, but in those first few seconds you can see all the detail of the ground as it falls away from you, and you feel every metre of that widening space of open air beneath your feet, held at bay by a floor that seems far too thin. By the second minute, I'd calmed down slightly, the angle of the cable and our speed of ascent having levelled out, and the third minute was almost peaceful.

I risked a look over to Mum, stood at the window, looking out with a serene smile at the retreating ground. I glanced over to the old man, whose face beamed with excitement and anticipation. Minute four was when we hit the first of the three support towers, and the sudden change of angle and speed sent me gripping the edge of my seat, staring resolutely at the floor and willing myself to ignore the swaying of the car. The fifth minute, I risked another look out of the windows, just as we hit the second tower and my stomach lurched. I sat back down again quickly, hoping the shaking of my legs wasn't audible to my mother, still staring out of her chosen window. The sixth minute was the last stretch with just open air below us and would have been the final part before we hit the last tower and started travelling over the mountain itself, but that's when the car came to a sudden, juddering halt.

Panic immediately pumped through me and I clenched my teeth together to try and hold in a cry. I took a moment and let out a shaky breath. It was fine. This sort of thing happened all the time, no doubt. Just a small delay. Someone at the top taking too long to board the car coming down the other way, maybe. I glanced over at the driver and, sure enough, he had a look of puzzlement and

irritation on his face, but nothing that could be read as concern or fear. He picked up the phone next to the controls and started speaking annoyed German into it, but from his expression it didn't seem like he was getting any answer.

I heard similar sounds of irritation from Mum, and gingerly looking over, I noticed that some low-level clouds had come about us, and the window was now covered with a fine, swirling mist, obscuring the view below. The weather had been forecast as clear skies, but it wasn't unheard of. I would have hoped that not being able to see the earth far below us would have blunted the terror I felt as we hung there, swinging gently, but instead it seemed worse, as all I could now picture was an unending, terrible void stretching out below me. I heard a small chuckle, and looked over to see the old man smiling to himself, his walking stick discarded on the floor.

What happened next was so fast I barely had time to process it. The old man turned towards the door of the cable car, the door I had seen the driver lock and secure when we first boarded, and he walked over to it. He gripped the handle and with a single, easy motion, flung it open. The driver saw what was happening and started to lunge to grab him, but it was too late. The old man turned back for just a second, looked me in the eyes and gave me a huge, theatrical wink. Then he fell backwards, out of the car, and was gone to the swirling air beyond.

The driver shouted something and my mother let out a shriek, but the sounds disappeared into the muted skies surrounding us. The driver was back on the phone, desperately trying to get someone on the other end, as the door just hung there, open to the nothingness beyond the car. I wanted to act, to help, to do something, but I was pinned to my seat with a confused fear. Then,

without warning, and without any input from the driver, the car began to move again. It travelled upwards, gaining speed, and swinging with such force, I was afraid we'd all be thrown out of the open door.

One minute. Two minutes. Three minutes. We should have hit another tower, or the top of the mountain, by now, but we just kept going, higher and higher, the clouds surrounding us tighter, flowing in through the open door. My mind had all but seized up and I felt helpless to do anything but watch as events progressed.

I don't know how long we climbed before the car stopped again. Mum was crouched on the floor now, gripping the handlebars above her for stability, and the driver was trying to get any response from the controls. The brakes finally started again with such grinding force that we must have pitched almost forty-five degrees forward, then back again, then forward. I could feel nausea wash over me as I was almost thrown forward onto the floor. Then everything was still again, save for the gentle swaying.

The car remained in place for some time. I think we were all just waiting for whatever was coming next. None of us spoke and, looking over at Mum, I could see my own fear mirrored across her face. After a while, when everything had calmed down, the driver looked over to us. We were all quiet, afraid I think of breaking the stillness we found ourselves in, but I saw him start to edge towards the door. I knew what he was trying to do. He wanted to close it, lock it back in place and get some semblance of control back. I wanted to tell him to stop, to warn him about whatever was about to happen, because I knew *something* was about to happen. But I could only stare at him as he slowly, achingly crawled towards his doom.

Sure enough, as he approached the opening, his hand just starting to reach out into the mist, I heard something on the cable that stretched out behind us. I didn't turn around, but I could hear the rhythmic, scraping sounds of something crawling rapidly towards us. I saw Mum's eyes focus on something behind my head and she screamed. It was a sound I'd never heard her make in my whole life, and one that I will never forget. There was a thump from above, the sound of something heavy landing on the roof of the car, and the driver froze, arm still outstretched. His eyes widened in sudden realisation, but before he could pull back from the edge, an arm, long, grey and completely inhuman, reached down from above with terrible speed. It grabbed his wrist, just for a moment, and then he was gone, his own scream vanishing into the abyss beyond the door.

In the quiet that followed, Mum and I just stared at each other, neither of us knowing what we could do except wait for whatever fate was squatting on top of the cable car. Then came three bangs, one after another, on the roof of the car. Knock, knock, knock. Then a laugh. A terrible, whistling sound like the howling of a gale. And then...

I don't know when I noticed the green light on the control panel, the one next to the button the driver had held when we first started the journey. It certainly hadn't been lit the last time we were moving, maybe not since the first time we stopped. I couldn't afford to let hope come into my heart, I knew that would be too cruel, but I also knew I couldn't ignore it.

I finally, painfully stood up. My whole body was shaking so violently I thought I would collapse before I'd even taken my first step, but little by little I inched my way towards it, never taking my eyes off the green light. Never looking towards the door.

When my fingers finally found the button, I slammed it with all the strength I had left in me, and I felt the car begin to move upwards again. I had no idea if whatever was on top of the car was still there, but when I saw the third tower rising up out of the clouds, I could feel myself weeping with relief. I didn't even feel the juddering as we hit it.

I don't remember much after that. I don't think I was making much sense. I know it took them a long time to get us back down from the top of Untersberg without using the cable car. I remember talking to the police, even if I don't remember whether I told them the truth. I think the official story became that the driver, a man named Otto Hessler, had killed himself halfway up the mountain by leaping to his death. The body was never found, and the report made no mention of an old man.

I still get nightmares, of course, and my fear of heights has worsened considerably. I've tried talking to professionals about it, but for the most part they treat it as though I'm talking in metaphors. And I generally let them believe that. The worst part is the strain the whole affair has put on my relationship with my mother. She refuses to admit any of it happened, repeating the same version of events given by the Salzburg police. She looks me right in the eyes and tells me she doesn't know what I'm talking about, that there was no old man, no clouds, nothing climbing the cables behind me.

We both know she's lying. I don't know if there'll be any more holidays. Certainly, none that involve mountains.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Simon Fairchild is one of the recurrent figures that I think disquiets me the most. Not simply for what he does, the endless spaces of height or depth to which he is so quick to condemn his victims, but the joy he seems to take in doing so. And I don't think there is much to this tale beyond that: an evil man tormenting and killing simply for his own pleasure, and to feed the power that sustains him. In other cases I might think the location noteworthy, might try to piece together some wider plan, but Fairchild seems to travel far and wide for his victims, with no motivation other than variety. I do not think I ever wish to meet him.

Of course, even if I did want to do research into this statement, I wouldn't have any help doing so. It's been a week and Melanie's attitude towards me hasn't softened, and Basira, though she is very willing to talk, still doesn't seem to trust me enough to let me in on whatever plans she might have. If she has any plans at all, of course. I could make her tell me, I know that, but I can't afford to burn any more bridges. Still no sign of Peter Lukas, of course. Or of Mart—
Wait.

Wait.

[Archivist opens door. The Archivist and Martin's subsequent conversation takes place in the corridor and is somewhat distant to the recorder.]

ARCHIVIST

Martin! Martin!

MARTIN

(Dry and noncommittal throughout this exchange) Oh... Hi, John.

ARCHIVIST

Martin, i-i-it's, uh— I-I haven't seen you.

MARTIN

Yeah. Sorry.

ARCHIVIST

Where, where have you been? I-I mean, I thought...

MARTIN

No, No I've been here. I just, uh, you know, been busy.

ARCHIVIST

Busy?

MARTIN

Yeah.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Working for Lukas?

MARTIN

No, P-Peter's— I— It's complicated.

ARCHIVIST

... Right.

MARTIN

...

Anyway, I should, uh, g—

ARCHIVIST

H-H-How are you Martin? Is everything...?

MARTIN

Oh yeah, no, I'm, I'm alright. Everything's fine.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Um. How, how's the poetry?

MARTIN

Oh, uh, well, I haven't exactly had a lot of time recently, so...

ARCHIVIST

Yes, yes, of course. You've been busy.

MARTIN

Yeah.

...

Look, John, I've really got to go, so, um... I'm sorry I—

ARCHIVIST

Oh, okay. Well, it was good... It was good to see you.

MARTIN

Yeah.

[Footsteps depart]

ARCHIVIST

(Sadly) Yeah.

[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 Alexander J Newall as martin Blackwood.