

## MAG – 057 – Personal Space

**Content warnings:**

- Isolation
- Nyctophobia
- Hallucinations

**Discussions of:** existential dread, altered reality, imprisonment

**Mentions of:** dehydration, starvation, loss of consciousness

**SFX:** low drone, high pitched tone

**[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]**

**JONATHAN SIMS**

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode fifty-seven. Personal Space.

**[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro *Continued*]**

**[Tape clicks on.]**

**ARCHIVIST**

Statement of Carter Chilcott, regarding his time spent in isolation aboard the *Space Station Daedalus* in September 2007. Original statement given April 4th 2009. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

**ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)**

We're all alone out there. I know the statistics, how big the universe is, the probabilities and proximities and the promises of other beings out there among the stars. But I've been there. There's nothing. Nothing but empty, uncaring void, lacing dead worlds and dead stars all together like a tapestry of lonely meaninglessness. Humans have existed for the smallest sliver of a fraction of a moment in the existence of the universe and we will be extinguished just as quickly. And when we are at last gone forever into the quiet emptiness of death, there will be nothing left but the cold universe and nothing shall mark our passing because there is nothing to do so. Dismiss me if you wish to, take comfort in your escapist fantasies of aliens and visitors from other worlds, but there's no proof I can give you beyond the testimony of one who has spent so very long staring into that black and empty infinity and knowing, truly knowing, what it means to be floating and forsaken in an empty universe.

I knew isolation experiments could be rough when I signed up. I'm not some naive fool who thought he'd endure a few quirky side effects for science. No, I'm an astronaut, so I do my research. When I was picked for the project, a long-term isolation study set in conditions of low earth orbit, I read up on as many previous cases and similar experiments from the past 30 years,

familiarising myself with possible side effects and likely psychological hurdles.

It was daunting to say the least.

I wasn't keen to experience some of what the previous tests seemed to promise would happen to my mind, but I didn't feel like I had much choice. I'd had my application to the International Space Station floating in limbo for so long that when a private consortium approached me, telling me they'd recently launch *Daedalus*, a small manned satellite of their own, and needed qualified crew members, I jumped at the chance to go to space at last. I should have realised that what they meant by crew member was lab monkey, but to be honest, even after I found this out, it didn't do a lot to dampen my enthusiasm for the project. I was going to space.

There were two other people technically on the crew. I say technically, as I never spent any time with them beyond the trip up to the *Daedalus*. Their names were Jan Kilbride and Manuela Dominguez. I'm sure that they probably did a lot more looking after the station than I ever did, but as far as I was concerned, I was the only one up there. From the chatter I heard before the mission began, each of us had an experiment of our own to be concerned with, but they were also there as a back-up in case something went horribly wrong with mine, since the observing scientists simply didn't have the option of intervening themselves. I remember the man in charge of my particular

project, Conrad Lukas, made a face of rather overstated disgust when he told me I wouldn't up there entirely on my own. I got the distinct impression he was one of those people who feel that ethical restrictions do nothing but bind the hands of the true scientist and leave them at the mercy of their subject's limitations.

My section of the tiny space station was completely self-contained. There was food, sleeping arrangements and zero gravity exercise equipment all for my personal use. The single entrance to the rest of the satellite was locked and sealed. It could be opened from either side, but on my side, it required a code. I did have access to the code in case of emergency, but I had way too much riding on the mission to even think about being responsible for its early termination. I also had one large, domed window. It allowed me a decent view of the earth below, as well as plenty of chance to stare off into space, which I did quite a lot in those early days. I was told the other astronauts would do their best to avoid that window while doing maintenance or repair work outside. Mission control had also supplied me with a lot of books and films and other entertainments as, like Conrad had told me at the first briefing, the experiment was into isolation, not boredom. So, when I locked that door for the first time, I was feeling in pretty good spirits about the whole thing to be honest.

I knew I was being monitored. There was a little camera mounted on the wall that kept a beady eye on me. It wasn't so invasive that I couldn't get away from it when I wanted to, but for the most part I was happy enough to eat and read and exercise in front of the watchful lens. Obviously, those assessing my progress would never communicate with me directly, and they might not even be watching a live feed, so if they had opinions on how I was undertaking my task, I never heard them. Even if my task was just sitting around in a room in space, waiting for my mind to break. I tried not to take too much comfort in the knowledge that there were people watching my every move, as I felt that to find that reassuring would go quite strongly against the spirit of the experiment. I had to really feel alone.

That at least didn't take too long to set in. I can't honestly see how strapping yourself in to sleep or drinking your juice with a space foil pack on a straw can have much effect on isolation, but I wasn't going to be the one to bring it up. I believe some people would have been more disturbed than others by its location orbiting Earth, but it didn't feel markedly different to me from any of the other isolation studies they conducted over the last few decades. If anything, the silent, rolling green and blue of the Earth far below was another source of comfort, in the sure knowledge of the billions of other people making their way through life who had no idea what was right above their heads.

Both of these comforts lasted me almost six weeks. That was when I was aware I should start to experience some of the more distressing side effects. I'd already passed through listlessness and a bout of insomnia, and I hadn't been using my exercise machine properly for almost a fortnight, but I still didn't expect the severity of the hallucinations when they began. Twice I was woken up by the sound of the door opening, only to find it as tight as it had ever been, and throughout the daytime, I would occasionally hear footsteps, which shouldn't even have been possible in zero gravity. There was also a blackout for about 20 minutes at one point that may or may not have been real. Certainly, we didn't seem to lose power in any other systems, except the lights.

So, this was all reasonably distressing, but at least it had the advantage of not being unexpected. No, the first warning I got about how bad things were going to get was the spacesuit. The clocks read it as 14.30 UTC and I was re-watching *28 Days Later*, one of the better films that had been provided for my entertainment, when a movement in the window caught my eye. At first, I thought it might have been some orbital debris moving past, but then I spotted it, still at the edge of the domed window. It was a hand. The white, bulky, gloved hand of someone wearing an EVA suit.

It started to float slowly across the window, followed by the rest of the arm, then the torso, until almost the whole suit was slowly floating across. I was excited by the idea of seeing another human being at first, even if it was only brief or might compromise some of the work, but as the suit made its painstaking drift across the space outside, it rotated enough that I could see clearly through the suit's visor. There was nobody inside. The floating suit was completely empty, and I started to suddenly get very scared.

At last it had passed right across and off into the night the other side and I stopped to try and calm myself in the face of what had been a deeply strange thing to watch. I managed to do so, but only until I looked again out of that window. There were no more empty, floating clothes, but I noticed something that for some reason hadn't dawned on me when watching the empty suit. It was, to put it quite simply, impossible, and I must have approached it from a hundred different angles trying to make sense of it. The Earth was gone.

At first, I assumed it must have been an orientation change, but that didn't make any sense. The planet below had never been hidden from my position before and if we'd shifted that radically, I would have felt it, I was sure. But still, the fact remained that where the earth should have been there was empty, dark space. I must have watched for hours, waiting to see the sun. We were definitely still moving and, from what I could tell, we still seemed to be

moving in some sort of orbit, but without a planet below. I have no idea why we kept to the same pattern. Regardless, the sun should have been visible sooner or later. After two days of waiting, I finally accepted that the sun and the moon had gone as well. It wasn't completely empty out there – far off in the distance, I could still see stars, twinkling and probably long dead, but I knew that there was nothing they could do to save me.

At some point on the first day, I remembered the camera. I focused my attention on it and began to scream and shout for help in the vain hope that someone might be watching a feed of it and be able to make contact. I cried and begged and pleaded with that camera for almost four hours before I was suddenly struck by a terrifying thought. I floated over to it and gently took hold of the cables that fed out from the back into the wall. I followed them along, looking for where they connected to the power or broadcasting apparatus.

What I found instead were a pair of neatly severed wires, transmitting nothing, powering nothing, connected to nothing. The camera had never even been turned on and had certainly not been transmitting anything to Earth. So, what data had they been collecting? I still have no idea the answer to that question, but I did feel like I gained some small sliver of control back after spending an all too brief hour smashing up the camera.

After that it was time to break out the code and get the door to the rest of the satellite open. I had decided that even if this somehow was simply a really elaborate and convincing trick to examine reactions to certain stimulus in a test environment, it was still far beyond what I had signed up for. One way or another, I decided I was getting out of this damned experiment. I opened the small safe that contained the passcode document and eagerly broke the seal on its container. I was desperate to get out of that door as soon as possible and took a few moments to memorise it. E109GHT8. I can still remember it vividly, as I entered that code over and over in an attempt to get that locked door to open. Each time, I painstakingly entered it with as much precision as I still had within me and each time the password field read out what I had apparently typed in: NO ONE IS COMING. And the door remained closed.

And that was it. I was trapped alone in a tiny room, floating in space – deserted, empty space. I had plenty of food and water, so starvation wasn't a danger, but sometime in the first week the clock stopped working. With no timepiece and nothing left outside of the sun or moon, keeping any sort of time at all became utterly impossible. If I had to guess how long I spent in that strange exile, I would say somewhere between three and six months. But that is based solely on my eating and sleeping patterns, which were largely fuelled by despair and that quiet, aching terror of being utterly forsaken. I couldn't

even read my books or watch anything, as characters seemed dead and lifeless, the emptiness of their artificial existence made plain to me.

The hallucinations stopped. I did not even get the comfort of company in my delusions, though at some point the line between dreaming and reality seemed to blur and I would be sleeping, strapped into my bed in the middle of the void, while at the same time floating through ancient graveyards or the open, empty sea. They weren't hallucinations though, they were dreams. Even if the cold did seem to seep out of them and into the bones of me.

I spent so long trying to get that door open, but nothing worked. The mechanisms and electronics were not accessible from my side. When I finally stopped trying, it was the final abandoning of my hope. That was also when I noticed something else that alarmed me in a very different way. I did some calculations and realised that my food and water levels did not seem to be depleting. For all the time I had been there, in what I could now only think of as my imprisonment, it did not seem like there had been any significant change in my supplies. No one could be re-stocking me because there was no one but me there. If the food remained static then, did that mean I could remain trapped in this place for the rest of my life? Assuming I even still aged. I began to very seriously consider the idea that I had died and this was hell.

Given that worry, the way I finally escaped could be considered ironic. I starved myself to death. Well, not to death, I suppose, given I'm alive enough to talk to you, but close enough. I don't know how long I just floated there, strapped into my lonely cocoon of a bed, refusing to eat or drink and waiting for the end. After everything else, I had no guarantee it was even possible for me to die, but I had to try. When I finally faded from consciousness for what I hoped was the last time, it was the greatest relief I have ever felt.

I don't know exactly when I realised I wasn't dead. There were various moments I faded back into consciousness and I know that I felt the re-entry very hard, but it's difficult to pin down clear thoughts before the hospital. No one's really given me an official account of what happened, aside from that it became known I was in serious danger of death and my colleagues on the *Daedalus* retrieved me and managed to keep me alive until the next opportunity to send me back down. I'm not pushing to know more, not really. I know what happened and no rational cover story that they could feed me is going to change it. I haven't followed up with Conrad and, as far as I'm aware, he hasn't made any attempt to contact me. I was paid in full though, which was a surprise.

I wanted to tell someone what really happened for almost a year before I found your Institute. There's nothing really to be done about it, but I wanted to get it off my chest. So, thank you for letting me get it down on paper.

**ARCHIVIST**

Statement ends.

While there's plenty of media coverage of the launch of the *Daedalus* satellite in early 2007 by Stratosphere Group, a consortium of various scientific and aerospace companies, it seems the actual operation of the facility is guarded with a great deal more secrecy by the various organisations involved. Martin was able to confirm that during its two years of operation it did have a total of three staff on board: Jan Kilbride, Manuela Dominguez and Mr Chilcott.

Beyond that, however, there's little that can be retrieved from beyond the wall of corporate bureaucracy.

Tim was, however, able to get a list of the businesses involved in the venture. Three names stand out: Pinnacle Aerospace, majority owned by the Fairchild family; a large private investment by Nathaniel Lukas; and Optic Solutions Limited, a relatively benign seeming company, manufacturing specialist cameras for research and industrial application, who are nonetheless notable for having their business address listed as being in Ny-Ålesund in Norway. I

fear, however, that's as much digging as I can do at the moment without drawing attention, so it may be wise to let the matter drop.

End recording.

**[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]**

**NOT!SASHA**

John?

**ARCHIVIST**

Um...

**NOT!SASHA**

What are you doing?

**ARCHIVIST**

Sash... er, I can't seem to find the new file for the Hill Top Road case. I thought I gave it to you to follow up on the children?

**NOT!SASHA**

You did, and I gave it back.

**ARCHIVIST**

Ah, right.

**NOT!SASHA**

Even if I hadn't, I would very much prefer it if you stay out of my desk.

**ARCHIVIST**

Oh, of course, sorry. I didn't realise you were still here, or I would have asked.

**NOT!SASHA**

Of course.

**ARCHIVIST**

I'll see if it's with Tim then.

**NOT!SASHA**

Also, John, I have asked before.

**ARCHIVIST**

What?

**[When Sasha speaks, the tape distorts slightly.]**

**NOT!SASHA**

Please don't record our conversations.

**[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]**

**ARCHIVIST**

Stupid. I thought Sasha had left for the evening. I wanted to have a look in her desk for anything that might shed light on her recent weird behaviour. I didn't get much of a chance, but it all looked normal, except there were a few scraps of torn paper. They could be from files or just torn scrap paper. It's hard to tell. I'm at a loss why she would want to destroy files though. Still, I think I probably need to back off from Sasha for a while after this. I'll just keep an eye from a distance for now.

I did find several pictures of her and her new boyfriend though, which puts my mind somewhat at ease. Well, mostly. There's something about him that doesn't seem quite right. Something about the smile, maybe? I mean, they're all pictures of Sasha and Tom, as I'm told his name is, having fun together, but... it's hard to put into words exactly, but every one of them looks somehow like a stock photo.

**[Tape clicks off.]**

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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 Evelyn Hewitt as Not!Sasha.