

MAG – 155 – Cost of Living

Content Warnings:

- Self-harm
- Infanticide
- Murder
- Near-death experience

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and fifty-five.
Cost of Living.

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Any luck?

BASIRA

No. If they're still around, they're staying hidden.

ARCHIVIST

Not like there's any shortage of places to lay low.

BASIRA

Hmm. London's what, 600 square miles?

ARCHIVIST

607.

BASIRA

(Sighs) Whatever.

ARCHIVIST

So I guess we'll want to look out for a pair of homeless serial killers now. I'll add it to the list.

BASIRA

No sign of Annabelle either.

ARCHIVIST

You still on that?

BASIRA

You're not?

ARCHIVIST

I mean... I don't know how much she can predict or manipulate the future, but I think she's proven she can at least avoid us finding her.

BASIRA

Yeah, well, it makes me feel better.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose that's something. How's Daisy?

BASIRA

I don't know. She's recovered from your little... confrontation, but she's still getting weaker. I'm worried she's -

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

BASIRA

Why did you call her and not me?

ARCHIVIST

Honestly, I panicked. Her name came up first on my phone.

BASIRA

I'm trying to convince her to go after them. To, uh... Hunt them.

ARCHIVIST

Why?

BASIRA

Because I'm not going to lose her.

ARCHIVIST

She goes hunting again, you might anyway.

BASIRA

And if she doesn't, she might die.

ARCHIVIST

Something you're fine with in certain other cases, and something she's made peace with.

BASIRA

Because of the guilt she feels over the stuff the Hunt made her do. It's not her fault.

ARCHIVIST

Earlier, when she was still out of it, I... I saw some of the things she was talking about, some of the things she did while she was police. I'm not convinced I disagree with her assessment.

Do you want me to tell you?

BASIRA

No. No I don't.

ARCHIVIST

You knew, didn't you? You knew the sort of things she did, and you let her.

BASIRA

No. Not exactly. I thought... It's not that simple.

ARCHIVIST

It never is. But that doesn't make it okay.

BASIRA

None of us are who we were, Jon.

ARCHIVIST

No. I suppose not. In many ways it's simpler now isn't it? At least now our demons have names.

BASIRA

Hmm.

ARCHIVIST

Have you thought any more about what I said?

BASIRA

Yeah, I don't think I can. Daisy wouldn't come if I didn't, and I'm not leaving her behind. Besides, both of us being blind would be... anyway, being stuck here isn't exactly her main problem right now.

ARCHIVIST

I suppose not.

BASIRA

And with those Hunters still out there--

ARCHIVIST

No, I understand. Just wanted to make sure you knew you had the choice.

BASIRA

Yeah. Anyway, I should go check on her.

ARCHIVIST

Sure. Do you mind closing the door?

BASIRA

Statement time.

[Door swings shut]

ARCHIVIST

(Sigh) Statement of Tova McHugh regarding their string of near-death experiences. Original statement given December 3rd, 2002. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

You've got to understand, I have so much to live for. Oh, okay, that's not quite it. I know most people have plenty to live for, but what I mean is that my life does good. I put a lot into the world. Did you read about that homelessness initiative that got 8,000 people into shelters? That was me. I've financed drug projects, organized inner city violence initiatives. I've always been so aware of the position I'm in, and keen to use that power to actually help people. And that's not money from some trust fund. I mean sure my parents loaned me the money to start, but I built my business up from the ground, and we now provide jobs for almost 700 people. And I *know* that everyone's life has value, but I just need to be clear that my impact on the world is a positive one. My existence does a lot of good, and that's only gotten more true since all this started. I've given more, spent more time on charitable stuff, and helped more people. Sorry, I'm just... aware of how this story makes me look and I don't want you to think I'm some selfish monster grinding people up just to extend my own ghoulish life. I'm trying to do good.

I've always tried to live a healthy life; never smoked or did drugs, watched my diet, got plenty of exercise. So when I had an epileptic seizure, the first one of my entire life, the month before my wedding... that wasn't fair. I mean, even if I had to have epilepsy - which I could live with - having my first attack at the top of a staircase, five weeks before the happiest day of my life, that's just *not fair*! There was no reason for it, I'd done everything right! It shouldn't have happened like that.

I remember the odd tingling feeling rising up from my stomach, through my lungs, until it hit my head. I'd never felt anything like it. I didn't know what to do and

even if I had I don't know if I could have done it in time. I don't remember falling exactly, just the world spinning and moving around me as I remained absolutely still. There were these cracks, like gunshots in my head. And even now I don't know if that was part of the seizure, or how my mind processed the breaking bones. Then I was on the ground, looking back up the stairs, and thinking to myself how strange it was that I wasn't there. I'd been stood just there, so why couldn't I see myself? Everything seemed very loud, then very quiet, then very bright. The last thing I saw was a man rushing to help. He was wearing a t-shirt with a silly little cartoon alien on it, and I thought, *was that from an advert?* And then I went away.

You know, it's strange. I'd never really feared death. I'm agnostic... Was agnostic... And always thought that if there was a God, then He'd know what was in your heart, and if you'd lived a good life then you'd be alright. But more likely I thought it would be nothing. No heaven or hell, no thought or sensation, just... Nothing. You wouldn't even notice you were gone. But it wasn't like that at all. I don't know if I have words for it. How can you describe being aware of the absence of everything? Life. Light. Warmth. It was very dark, and very cold. It dawned on me that this might be my existence forever. There, beyond time, and I tried so desperately to scream, but I had no lungs or throat in that dreadful place. I couldn't even cry. Then I was back in the light with such a sudden jolt that I found myself trying to blink, even though I had no eyelids or even eyes. But I could still see.

I was standing in what seemed to be an operating theatre. Doctors and nurses in scrubs and masks buzzed around and through me, busy with something on the

long table in the center of the room. It didn't take me long to realize that what they were busy with was me. I didn't look like myself, so bruised and discolored, with a great gash on my forehead. Is it odd to say that this sight filled me with relief? There was a sudden rush of realization. I wasn't dead, I was having a near-death experience! I'd read about people having encounters almost exactly like this one, and they had seemed fine. I might still be okay. I might live. Then I became aware of a long, steady droning sound, and my vision turned to the flat unmoving line on the heart rate monitor. The panic I felt before returned all at once, but now focused, acute. I didn't have any arms but still I tried to reach out, flailing towards the doctor who was leaning over my body, trying to restart my heart. And then I felt something. I felt myself reach into his chest, held the strong steady beat of his heart. Calm. Calm while I was lying dead on the table. There was a sudden moment of rage and hate that flowed out of me down at his torso, and he began to convulse. He staggered backwards from the table arms dropping to his side, struggling to speak. And I heard the drone of the monitor turning to a *beep. Beep. Beep.* And I was gone.

When I woke up I was lying in a hospital bed, very much alive although the faces around me were grave. I asked her what had happened, and one of the nurses very kindly explained to me about the seizure, my fall, and what my recovery might look like going forward. But I could tell she was holding something back, and after some pressing, she finally told me that the doctor who saved my life had suffered a fatal heart attack while he was treating me. I didn't tell her about what I saw, what I was trying to convince myself was a simple dream. A bizarre near-death experience. I couldn't have killed him, it wasn't possible. But there was no

point to putting that thought out into the world anyway. I just had to try and forget.

My recovery time was nothing short of miraculous. Within a couple of days I was out of the hospital, and my broken bones all seemed to be clean breaks that healed very fast. In the end, we didn't even need to delay the wedding and... despite everything, it was perfect. The church was magnificent, the reception the most fun I've had in years, and Daven was exactly the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. In lieu of gifts, we asked people to donate to a local children's charity, and they sent us a wonderful thank-you card. We honeymooned in the Caribbean, and everything was right with the world.

It was a year later that I slipped in the shower and cracked my head on the tap. I hadn't had any further seizures, and in fact the doctors hadn't be able to find any trace of epilepsy in my scans at all. No, this was simply a freak accident. Could have happened to anybody, but it happened to me. Again I found myself in that dark, cold place, and this time I simply waited, hoping against hope that this time, it wouldn't be forever. And to my great relief, it wasn't. Again I found myself present over my own body, a severed presence watching as the water continued to beat down on my unmoving form. I was starting to develop a suspicion, a vague idea of what might be going on. There was no one else around. Daven was on a business trip and I was alone in the house. I tried to move and I could. It almost felt like walking though I had no legs to carry me. Unable to touch the bathroom door, I simply moved through it, then out into the world, looking for something I couldn't quite name.

Perhaps that doctor had not been an accident. Perhaps his death and my life had been one and the same. Did I have to do it again? The idea appalled me to my core, but it seemed the only explanation. I *had* to live, I couldn't die, not then. We were on the verge of closing a deal that would provide fresh water to impoverished communities in a dozen developing countries. Without me, it would fall through. So I kept moving, senses attuned to what I needed, and I found her sitting in a park all on her own. An old woman, frail and shivering, staring out of the ducks over the water, empty bread bag by her side. If only I could have explained it to her, I'm sure she would have understood. She might even have agreed. But I couldn't talk to her, and I needed to live. She was found dead of a stroke, and I woke up in my shower with a splitting headache.

I thought I'd solved it. If anything else like that happened, I knew what I needed to do. But when I began to have a fatal allergic reaction during a lunch date only two weeks later, despite having no allergies previously, I realized I had miscalculated. Perhaps it was life itself that I was taking, and the old woman that had hardly any left in her, and it had run out too fast. This time I sought out a homeless man. Young and strong, though his life was clearly over as he tried to destroy himself through drinking. I followed him into an alley, and his liver gave out, just at the moment the EpiPen was pushed into my leg. But even that seemed to run out faster than it should have. The car accident was only three months later, and I even found myself resenting the poor vagrant for not having more life to sustain me.

I made a decision. One I am deeply ashamed of, but I honestly thought it was for the best. I couldn't keep living like that in the shadow of death, of what I had to

do to keep going. One sacrifice, I thought. Just one, from someone with their entire life ahead of them. I took a newborn. It's strange, the maths you do of it all. A full life ahead of it, but aside from the devastated parents, no real harm to the world as a whole. No good works left unfinished. It was a baby born to poverty, one whose life I thought would bring it pain, and I believed it would be the last I would ever need to do. Surely this would be enough, surely it would see me through to the time I was actually meant to die. That I could go peacefully into oblivion, not trapped in that dreadful darkness. But it kept me alive for 10 months, still less than the doctor. Eventually I realized it had nothing to do with age or health. It was about connection. About joy. The more friends, family, loved ones the person has, the further out the terror of sudden death spreads from me. The longer it keeps me alive.

I'm 40 now, and I have taken the life of beloved mothers, respected professionals, pillars of the community. But I have done so much good with my life, I've reached further helped more people than they ever could have. Since this became my existence I've thrown myself into philanthropy harder than ever, and the world is so much better for me being in it. I'm not saying how I live is right, or good, but it is the position I have been put in, and a decision I have to make. I never wanted to weigh up the value of a life, to set it on the scales against my own, but that's a choice that I am forced into. And it is one I will continue to make.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

What is the value of a life? Is it something that can be quantified, put down as numbers, good deeds, bad? And when your life your existence is at the cost of doing harm, what then? I've - **(laughs)** I've saved the world, the whole world. Does that give me the right to take what I need to survive? I've been reading nothing but these old, dry statements for so long, I - I feel weak. Like I'm fading away. Do I restrain myself, keep my appetite in check, even at the cost of my life? Or do I try to rationalize what I am, like Ms. McHugh? I find myself hating her, her callous self-deception. But am I so different? Daisy's chosen to resist in her own way, knowing full well it might take her life in the end, Melanie too. I respect them for it, but I - I don't know if I can follow their path.

I suppose I have a way out now. One that wouldn't even kill me, at least, I hope not. And yet here I am still. Am I a coward? I just... what if they need me? What if.

[Melanie knocks on door]

ARCHIVIST

Oh, come in, Melanie. Funny, I was just... how are you?

MELANIE

I'm... good, actually. Uh, yeah. Yeah. I am good.

ARCHIVIST

You sound like you've made a decision.

MELANIE

I have, yes.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

MELANIE

Thanks for telling me, by the way. It didn't look like it was easy for you.

ARCHIVIST

It wasn't. I don't think, uh... I don't think it wants to lose anyone, but I thought you of all people deserve the option.

MELANIE

Yes.

ARCHIVIST

But I understand it's a big thing. We'll keep looking. Maybe there's another way--

MELANIE

No, John. I'm going to do it. I'm quitting.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. You're sure you've thought it through? I don't know if we can look after you, you know? Afterwards.

MELANIE

You won't need to. I've - I've made a few arrangements, and... **(shaky breath)** it's going to be okay. Honestly. I think it is. I - I can't be a part of this anymore and if this is the price, then I think I'm okay to pay it.

(Inhale) It's - it's the rest of you I'm worried about.

ARCHIVIST

We'll be fine. Always have been.

MELANIE

(Scoffs lightly) Not always.

ARCHIVIST

No, I guess not ...well, if you're sure.

MELANIE

I won't be around after this, but I'll leave details in case you need to get in touch, um, but...

ARCHIVIST

I understand.

How are you planning on doing it?

MELANIE

Got, uh, got one of those awls from the book repair suppliers, up in the library?

(Shakily) If it can punch through books it can punch through, uh... Well it - it should do the trick. No reason to try and make it too complicated.

ARCHIVIST

I - I suppose not.

MELANIE

I've left a proper resignation letter on Lukas's desk. It was quite satisfying to write, actually. Almost made me wish it was Elias. He would have hated me not serving out my two weeks notice, heh. Not sure Lukas even knows who I am... probably for the best.

ARCHIVIST

We'll miss you.

MELANIE

(Wryly) Wish I could say the same.

ARCHIVIST

(Quietly) Yeah. Do you need any, uh... help?

MELANIE

(Deep breath) No. I've got this. But if you, um... If you could... In five minutes, I would appreciate it if you could call me an ambulance.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

[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, Frank Voss as Basira Hussein and Lydia Nicholas as Melanie Barker.