

MAG – 075 – A Long Way Down

Content warnings:

- Acrophobia
- Heights & vertigo
- Falling
- Graphic injury
- Sadism

Discussions of: sibling death, anxiety & panic, arguments, family conflict

Mentions of: alcohol, drugs, murder, hospitals

SFX: low drone, high pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode seventy-four. A Long Way Down.

[The Magnus Archives theme – Intro – Continued]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Stephen Walker, regarding his brother's disappearance from the top of Tour Montparnasse in October 2006. Original statement given November 7th 2006. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I hope my brother is dead. He must be dead. I would love to believe that this is all some elaborate prank, some bizarre attempt to fake his own disappearance, but deep down I know that's not my brother. So he is dead. If not, I can't even begin to comprehend how dreadful a fate that would be.

Some fears can only be endured for so long.

My brother Grant was always afraid of heights. I remember we used to climb trees as children. He would always get scared halfway up, and it would be an hour of coaxing and reassurance before he managed to climb down. He still tried to climb them, though. That was my brother: always full of bravery and optimism until the moment the terror set kicked in. He never did have the strongest survival instinct.

Generally he was fine with tall buildings, if they had a lift. Stairs were often more of a problem, especially if there were windows from which he could see the ground getting further away. Still, the majority of his phobia, strangely enough, was focused on ladders. That's not to say he fainted with horror just being in the same room as one, just that climbing up and down ladders was a particular sort of torture for Grant. Those few occasions when I saw him do so, the stark white terror I saw etched on his face with every slight rattle or shift of the thing, was enough to convince me that this wasn't some quirk to be gently mocked over Christmas dinner; it was a real and intense manifestation of his phobia.

For the most part it didn't affect our lives that much. We shared a small house in Jarrow, up near Newcastle, and it took more than a second floor to freak Grant out, although he pointedly never climbed the small stepladder that lead up to the attic. The living arrangements were less than ideal, as Grant had

been abruptly fired from his admin position with Deloitte in January so he didn't contribute much to the house except for an indentation on the sofa. I hadn't really wanted to take him in. I mean, it's not that I don't love him or anything, he's my brother, it's just that we'd always got on best when we spent most of our time apart. Familiarity does breed some sorts of contempt better than others, and I knew that we were unlike to be domestically suited to each other, as I am by nature quite fastidious in ways that I know my brother is not. However, I had recently gone through a break-up, and there were only so many well-meaning hints from my parents about what to do with the newly-spare room that, in the end, I caved and invited him to live with me.

Work had been slow coming for Grant. By the time he lost the job with Deloitte, his knowledge of database administration had been so specific and specialist, that he was struggling to find jobs that fit his skillset. Which meant more time for him to spend making our living room look like a bomb site.

I'm sorry. I know how this must sound, but I feel it's important you understand why I took him up to Tour Montparnasse in the first place. I couldn't have known what would happen. Deep down, though, in the hidden corners of my scepticism, I know it's not my fault. I know it's because of the man with the lightning scar. He did this. I don't know how and I don't know why, but he took my brother away from me, and if I ever see him again, I'm going to kill him.

The first time we saw him was when I broke my arm. It was about a year ago, just after Halloween.

We'd both been out to a party the night before; I had managed to lose my keys, and it was only as we approached our front door that Grant decided it was the right time to announce he'd left his keys in the house, assuming I'd

have mine. I was quite upset by this, and we had something of a row out there in the front garden, both of us yelling through blistering hangovers. We couldn't get a locksmith, as that would take hours and cost us a lot of money that, with Grant unemployed and living with me, I did not have. After another few minutes of recriminations, I spotted that Grant had left his window ever so slightly ajar. Normally I would have reminded him that leaving a window open invites burglars, but in this case that was almost exactly what we wanted.

I knocked on the door of the house next to ours. Jim Hancock was not the best of neighbours. He was the closest thing to a cartoon Cockney that I've ever met, and had a habit of blasting music loud enough to bleed through the walls of our terraced house. He was, however, a builder, which meant that he would have a ladder. He did and, after having a nice abrasive laugh at our situation, he went and fetched it. He wasn't interested in helping with the actual entrance to our home, and told us to leave the ladder in front of his garden, apparently unconcerned by the prospect of thieves.

Obviously I was the one going up the ladder. We placed it in the garden, trying to get the end nestled in the crook of the window, and I started to climb. It was less stable than I had anticipated. Grant was gripping it at the bottom, but the ground was softer than I thought, and as I reached for the window, I felt my stomach drop as the ladder pitched slowly to the side. I'd love to say that next thing I knew I was on the ground with a broken arm, but I remember every second of that fall. Like it was happening in slow motion. The rush of cold autumn air as I fell. The impact of my arm against the low brick wall.

The sickening crunch.

I lay there, my arm in absolute agony, as Grant ran over to check on me. It was clear that the bone was broken and we needed to call an ambulance. My phone had been smashed in the fall, and when I asked Grant to use his, he got very quiet and told me sheepishly that it, like his keys, was still inside the house.

Grant started knocking on people's doors but no-one answered. Maybe they weren't home, or maybe they had heard our blazing row and didn't want to help us. Even Jim didn't seem inclined to open his door a second time. It was becoming more and more clear that our only option was for Grant to climb in and get his phone, and I could see from his pale, frightened face that he had come to the same conclusion.

To his credit, I didn't have to talk him into it. My obvious agony seemed to do that for me. He hoisted the ladder off the ground and pushed it close to the window. Then he stood there at the bottom, droplets of sweat visible on his face, and looked at me. He placed his foot on the lowest rung and began to climb. It was slow and watching it was almost as painful as my shattered bone. His neck was rigid, stiff with the will not to look down. He was barely ten feet off the ground, and every time the ladder shifted slightly he made a small sound of terror. He kept his face away from me but I think he might have been crying.

It was as Grant was making his gradual ascent that I saw the man with the scar. He was stood there, just across the street, watching us. He was short, and wore an old grey suit, faded with age, that didn't seem to match his relatively youthful face. He wasn't wearing a tie, and the top two buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing a jagged array of pale white scar tissue that seemed to climb up the side of his neck like a flash of lightning. His pale eyes were entirely

focused on Grant making his excruciating way up the ladder. If he noticed me watching him, he gave no sign of it. When I looked at him, I had the strangest feeling, like a wave of dizziness washing over me, and my stomach dropped again, like it had when I fell. I tried to tell myself it was just from the pain in my arm making me feel ill, but it faded every time I looked away from that strange, scarred man who watched my brother.

I looked back to Grant, who was nearly at the top and clearly struggling. His hands were so slick with sweat he was having trouble holding on to the metal rungs, and he was swaying dangerously. I was certain I was about to watch him fall like I had, but just as I was sure he was about to lose his grip he reached out and got his arm into the open window. He grabbed hold of something inside, and started to pull himself through. Soon his torso had disappeared into the window, then his legs. Everything was quiet; I suddenly felt very alone. I turned to look at the man with the scar but it seemed like he had decided to move on. I could see him a little way down the street, walking away faster than I would have expected. I just lay there, with nothing to keep me company but the pain of my injury.

Then I heard the sound of the latch, cutting through the silence, and the front door opened to reveal Grant, still soaked in sweat, triumphantly clutching his phone. I congratulated him on overcoming his fear before gently reminding him that the reason we needed the phone was to call an ambulance. He nodded like he hadn't forgotten, and made the call.

The ambulance and hospital did pass in a bit of a blur. There was an X-ray, and a lot more detail about the specifics of the break than I really thought was necessary for the treatment instructions of “keep it in a cast and try not to move it”. It was irritating, but it wasn't as if it was the first time I had broken a

bone. Time passed, I healed, and I forgot about the strange man who had watched my brother almost fall.

My brother finally got another job shortly before Christmas, with Deloitte again, though a different department, but he didn't seem inclined to move out of the room in my house. He did offer to cover the rent for a few months, which I did appreciate, as paying it solo had wiped out a good deal of my savings. It wasn't like I had other housemates lining up to join me, so I resolved to make the best of it and live with his irritating habits. It was fine, you know. We didn't get on any better than we had when he was unemployed, but without the lingering resentment of money I could just about tolerate his occasional hygiene issues. And life rolled on.

It was about two months ago that I started planning for Paris. There was a conference I was due to speak at, and I hadn't had a holiday since I broke up with Carly, so I decided to take a full week there to really relax. I did not invite Grant, which you would have thought would make him think twice about coming with me, but you'd be wrong. As soon as I mentioned it to him, he was online checking if there were any more seats on my flight. There were. Then he kept bugging me to change my hotel booking to a twin room until I finally relented and did so. Every time I mentioned something I was planning to do he would invite himself along, generally getting me to arrange it and saying he'd pay me back. I'm sure he intended to, and was just excited to spend some time hanging out in Paris, but at the start of October he lost his job again.

He had been caught smoking weed on company property. It hadn't been on the clock at the time, and he managed to talk them out of actually calling the police, but he was dismissed on the spot and told in no uncertain terms that he was not welcome to apply for any further vacancies. I imagine he wasn't going

to get a reference, either. He was devastated, of course, and I will admit that I wasn't as sympathetic as I could have been. From my point of view, it was his own damn fault; because of it I was suddenly on the hook for a reasonable amount of money. It was clear that when we went to Paris I was going to have to pay for him, and he was so despondent that I didn't have the heart to tell him he couldn't come.

So that's why, when we went to Paris three weeks ago, I was both seriously pissed at Grant, and in almost complete control of where we went while we were there. I think that's why I decided to take him up Tour Montparnasse. There was no way I was going to get him up the Eiffel Tower, but I reckoned, correctly, that he wouldn't have heard of the Tour Montparnasse, the actual highest point in Paris accessible by the public. It just looked like a normal skyscraper, so I reckoned it probably wouldn't ring any alarm bells for him until we were actually in the lift.

You've got to understand I just wanted to freak him out a little bit. He'd have a bit of a panic, I'd pretend to have forgotten about his phobia, and we'd head back down with me feeling slightly avenged.

I couldn't have known.

At first it was all going exactly according to plan. I was vague about the attraction we were going to see, and he clearly hadn't heard of the Tour Montparnasse, so he didn't make any fuss when we went inside, even when we first got into the elevator. As it started to rise, though, I saw the apprehension start to creep across his face and he asked where the lift was taking us. I had to fight to suppress a smile as I told him we were heading up to the best view in Paris and his face started to drain of colour. By the

time we reached the top his legs were shaking so badly he was finding it hard to stand. I feigned concern, though inside I was savouring his discomfort more than was probably healthy.

I helped him out of the lift, and he turned around almost immediately, about to get back in, but something about the idea of going back down again so soon clearly caused him to hesitate. He mumbled something about sitting down and collecting his thoughts, and staggered over to a seat a good distance away from the barriers that surrounded the building's rooftop observation terrace.

I left him to collect his thoughts and walked over to the edge. The view was breathtaking. I could see all of Paris stretching out before me, including the Eiffel Tower. And in the mid-morning sun it was one of the most beautiful and serene things I had ever seen.

It was as I gazed at the majestic city below me that I felt a lurch in my stomach, like I was falling, and I pitched forward into the barrier, bruising my arm and sending an agonising echo of my broken bone shooting up my body. I braced myself on my hands and knees, trying to overcome the sudden swimming nausea in my head. Finally, I managed to centre my vision enough to look up and there he was. There was an icy breeze that high up, but he seemed not to notice as his loose, thin shirt billowed around that sprawling white scar. He stared at me, and I felt again like I was falling right through the floor. I tried to speak, say anything, but my breath seemed caught in my chest. The worst part, though, was his expression. He looked bored.

At some point I felt hands gripping me and I was pulled gently from the floor. It was a pair of tourists from New Zealand who had come over to see if I was alright. I mumbled something about vertigo, though the feeling had faded now.

I looked around, but there was no sign of the scarred man. I looked again, and realised with mounting alarm that there was also no sign of Grant. I checked, but the terrace wasn't huge and there was nowhere for him to be hiding. I thought he must have taken the lift back down, but he wasn't in the lobby, or outside, or anywhere. He was gone.

I didn't realise my phone was dead until several hours into the search. When I finally charged it, I had dozens of missed calls from Grant and almost four hundred text messages. Most were too scrambled to read, but those that weren't were asking where I was. Where anybody was. Where the elevators were.

There was one picture that seemed to have come through without too much corruption: it seemed to show the terrace, but where the barrier should have been was just a sheer drop, with the top of a ladder reaching up and over it. I couldn't make out the city below it. I tried to call his phone so many times, but whenever it actually connected, all I heard was the sound of rushing wind.

I know that man with the scar took my brother. I don't know how he took him, or where, but I know he's gone. I haven't seen either of them since, and I don't think I will. It never felt like I was what he wanted. I really hope Grant is dead. Because, if not, I have a horrible feeling deep inside that he's still on that ladder.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Michael Crew. The man with the lightning scar. A fractal pattern burned into his flesh, chased by the manifestation of that pattern and then jumped out a window. So what is he now?

It strikes me that whenever a person gains any sort of power from these books, often they change, not just their actions, but who they are. It almost seems as though the power uses them, rather than the other way round. Did Leitner's book do something to Michael Crew? Others who encountered it reported similar feelings of vertigo to those reported by Mr. Walker, but it also puts me in mind of the fate of Robert Kelly, the skydiver who fell for far longer than he...

[The door to the office opens]

Hello? Basira, what are you doing here? I thought...

BASIRA

Here.

[A box is put on the table]

ARCHIVIST

Are those the tapes?

BASIRA

As many of them as I could get.

ARCHIVIST

I don't understand. You said we were done.

BASIRA

(Exasperated) They're covering it up. Altman's death. Saying he was dirty. That he got stabbed in a botched drug deal.

ARCHIVIST

Wait. So the operation you went on...

BASIRA

Doesn't exist. I mean, I didn't know Leo well, but... it's not right. And they seemed happy enough to get me out the door.

ARCHIVIST

I still don't understand why this leads to me getting the tapes. I mean, not that I'm ungrateful.

BASIRA

Well they're sure as hell not going to solve Gertrude's murder, so you might as well have them.

Before... I don't know, maybe I still had enough police in me not to just steal from Evidence, but now...

ARCHIVIST

They've rather lost your loyalty. I thought they were watching you?

BASIRA

No, not since the Brodie op. Everyone's been too busy. Daisy knows, and she's fine with it. There shouldn't be any problem until next inventory, and even then it's only if they can be bothered with the sectioned stuff. You should be in the clear.

ARCHIVIST

I... I don't know how to thank you.

BASIRA

Well, if I never see you again, or hear about any of this... that'll be thanks enough. Take care.

[Basira leaves and the door closes]

ARCHIVIST

Right. I wonder where to start...

[Tape clicks off.]

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Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.