

MAG – 069 – Thought for the Day

Content Warning:

- Arachnophobia
- spiders
- Infestation
- Body horror
- Blood & gore
- Strangulation
- Attempted suicide

Discussions of: hospitals, rituals, compulsions (supernatural), graphic injury, physical violence

Mentions of: blackmail, emetophobia

SFX: low drone, high pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode sixty-nine. Thought for the Day.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

MARTIN

Here you go. Sasha in today?

ARCHIVIST

Oh... she's got the day off. Said she was spending the day with this Tom of hers.

MARTIN

Anything nice?

ARCHIVIST

Didn't say.

MARTIN

Have you ever actually met him?

ARCHIVIST

Why would I have? We're don't exactly hold socials. He sounds nice enough, I suppose. In a Kensington sort of way. You ever met him?

MARTIN

No but she's pretty private with that stuff. Not like Tim.

ARCHIVIST

Hm.

MARTIN

Just talk to him, please.

ARCHIVIST

I think we've said more than enough. I doubt there's much more words can do for us.

MARTIN

You can't work together like this.

ARCHIVIST

Ironically, I think working is all Tim and I can do together

MARTIN

Look. Jon... when was the last time we all just talked? Just talked, without all of this–

ARCHIVIST

Thank you for the tea, Martin.

MARTIN

Ok. Fine.

[Martin opens the door.]

He's not wrong, you know.

[Martin leaves, closing the door behind him.]

ARCHIVIST

I know. Statement of Darren Harlow... **(Sigh)** Statement of Darren Harlow regarding a failed psychology experiment at the University of Surrey. Original statement given 18th November 2010. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Things always seem so obvious in retrospect. That experiment was always a terrible idea. Even at the time, I remember thinking it sounded like something

out of a horror movie. I mean, every time I heard a new detail about it I'd go home and tell my wife and we'd speculate over dinner about how it was going to go wrong in some grotesque and horrific way. We'd laugh and suggest the ways it could turn those poor grad students into crazed killers or mutated monsters. And when I started to see more and more spiders around the lab, I turned the very real sense of unease into the... the fun sort of fear, like I was just playing at being scared. It's so strange, even when you're really looking for horror, it's impossible to actually believe it. It always feels like something you made up. Just having a bit of fun scaring yourself. Because those things don't happen. Not in the real world. But you think sometimes about what the real world is. Just what your brain mixes together from what your senses tell you.

We create the world in a lot of ways. I suppose it shouldn't be surprising that, when we're not being careful, we can change it. Before you ask any in-depth questions about the methodologies or structure of the experiment, I should make it clear – I'm just one of the cleaners. I have no idea how or why they started it or, god knows, where the funding came from. I find it hard to believe the Psych Department okayed it, but I'm not an academic, and those decisions are way over my head. I mainly take care of the science labs.

Most of the cleaning crews at the university get shifted around a lot, working in different buildings or departments one month to the next, but there's a lot of stuff in the labs that requires additional training to clean safely, so we're a bit more specialised than the rest. I mean, they still didn't let us within spitting distance of the really expensive equipment; that was all taken care of by the lab techs, but the point is I'm a much more familiar face around the science departments than a cleaner would otherwise be. There's also the fact that the science lot actually talked to me on occasion. I don't want to say it's 'cause I'm

white and the rest of the cleaning crew isn't, but they always talked to me in a way they didn't talk to the others, so I became the de facto point of contact between the cleaners and the rest of the staff.

Long story short, I generally knew roughly what the deal was with most of the experiments being run at any point.

So, when Dr Elizabeth Bates told me about the latest study by her psychology postgrads, I thought she was pulling my leg. The Psych Department is generally one of the least demanding from my perspective as it's almost entirely people sitting at computers or in interview rooms. Once or twice I think they were given use of an MRI machine at some hospital or other but that's more a neuroscience thing and, more importantly, didn't happen in the buildings I cleaned. Since I've been there, which is a good seven years now, they've never crossed over into parapsychology, nothing even remotely less than respectable research, so when Liz explained the experiment and I realised they were basically doing ESP research, I got a bit excited. I mean, she dressed it up with all sorts of science jargon and sent my head spinning plenty, but it still basically boiled down to seeing if the thoughts and feelings of a group of people in one room had any effect on the experience of a subject in a separate, sealed room. I mean she could talk about "group dynamics" and call it "proximity intuition" or whatever it was she said, but I know ESP research when I'm mopping its floors. Not that I minded, of course; I love that crap. I'm a horror nut but I generally tend toward the more sci-fi end. Demons and ghosts have never really got me but give me aliens or the sinister powers of the human mind and I am there. I didn't tell any of this to Liz, of course, I got the impression that it was a bit of a sore spot and I've no reason to piss off the people I work with. But you can be damn sure I was keeping a much closer eye on this experiment

than I was the others. Especially when she told me a bit more about how they were doing it.

The basic premise was pretty similar to most of these studies. There was a room with a one-way mirror where the subject would sit, and they'd be strapped up to measure physical responses. The other side of the glass was anywhere between one and twenty participants, who would be receiving stimulus for a certain response or feeling. Those feelings would be incited while their attention was on the subject through the mirror. Then they simply measured what, if any, response the subject had to something they couldn't see, hear or otherwise be aware of. Sometimes the subject was told there were people on the other side of the glass when there weren't, in order to get a control group and weed out any placebo responses.

The subject's name was Annabelle Cane.

What really got me, though, was what Liz told me about the specific nature of the feelings they were trying to project.

They were planning to work with fear.

Specifically, they had selected as projectors a group of people who self-identified as arachnophobes, and at certain points of their watching Annabelle, videos of spiders crawling, eating and spawning would be randomly projected over the glass, inciting an acute fear response.

The reasoning was that fear was both an extremely powerful emotion and one that would be quite easy to distinguish in Annabelle's responses. They wanted to see if they could use ESP to scare her. I told you it sounded like a set-up to a horror movie, right? I don't know how they didn't see that. I mean, maybe they did. Maybe they went ahead with it for the same reason I joked with Laura

about it instead of requesting a transfer. You come to relish the ghouliness of it, because deep down you know it's safe. The worst that might happen would a few upset students. It should have just been an idle flight of fancy.

Now, I can't really speak to what happened for the majority of the study. For obvious reasons I wasn't cleaning the rooms in question while they were doing the tests, but heard a few bits and pieces about it from Liz and some of the other researchers. It seemed to be going well to begin with. Annabelle was displaying some subtle but statistically significant signs of distress and unease while the spiders were being shown. Signs that were noticeably absent during the control periods.

I know that the fear reactions were certainly serious enough for the poor souls that had unwittingly signed up as projectors: I had to clean up when one of them was sick during the first round of testing. He had to leave the experiment, if I remember. Lucky sod.

I'm sure you can guess what I ended up cleaning more and more of over the course of the study. Cobwebs. I mean, you can't avoid them in buildings with high ceilings and inviting corners, but even so, there were more and more of them each day. I'd brush or Hoover them away in an evening only to find them returned the next morning, thicker than ever.

I never got a good look at the spiders behind them. Unlike most of the ones I've seen, sitting fat and proud in the centre of their web, the most I ever saw of these ones would be a quick scuttle of dark legs disappearing into a hole in the plaster or behind a wall installation. It creeped me out plenty, but in a good way, I thought. I knew that, logically, they were just escaping the winter. I mean, you know how cold it's been these last few weeks.

I'd try to spook Liz, telling her how her dark experiments were summoning up an army of spiders. I had no idea. The tests were progressing, and they had started introducing multiple projectors at once to see how it affected the intensity of the feelings Annabelle was receiving. Liz was very excited by the results. I can still remember her face as she told me that Annabelle had apparently reported having several unsettling dreams about spiders.

Notably, at no point in the experiment had she been informed that it was spiders being used. Liz was excited, telling me how the dreams seemed to map very well to the physiological responses they had been recording; how Annabelle had dreamed of "tiny legs running along her veins like a web". It was then they started to have problems, though.

While adding additional projectors had at first increased the severity of the responses, it seemed this had very quickly tapered off, and soon the measurements had changed significantly. They were still getting noticeable responses but they weren't like the ones they had gotten before. They didn't appear to be fear. Liz was irritated by this as, even though the results still looked good for a general ESP study, the variation in response tone would apparently muddy the research in ways she wasn't keen on.

I only saw Annabelle Cane once during this period. She wasn't hard to pick out. She dressed like a vintage clothing store exploded on her, and her short bleach-blonde hair stood out sharply against dark skin. The first time I saw her I'd liked her. She looked like the kind of student who occasionally talked to cleaners like we were people. Not that we ever actually spoke, but she had that air about her.

This time, though, it was just as she was leaving the mirror room. She was walking strangely, like her trousers didn't fit her right. She kept bending her knees at kind of odd angles, holding herself with this stiffness. Her arm was extended, and she ran her hand along the wall as she went, moving her fingers rapidly so it scuttled like... well, like a spider with its legs missing.

Even then I didn't really start to consider what might be happening. No, I didn't take it seriously until what happened last Thursday. I'd pulled a late shift and had just finished my first sweep of the labs. I'd made a start on mopping the corridors leading up to the rooms Liz had been using, when I noticed the lights were still on.

Now, she'd mentioned that that afternoon they were trying the first sessions with all nineteen of the remaining projectors – they'd had a predictably high dropout rate. Now, I know that the more people you have involved in a test, the longer it tends to take and the more potential there is for delays, so it might well have overrun, but it was half nine in the evening by that point, so it seemed very unlikely it would have gone on that long. I thought maybe they'd just left the lights on by accident. These things happen. I did my best to forget that the lights in those rooms were normally motion activated. I hope someday I'll forget what I saw when I opened that door, but I won't.

All the arachnophobes, Liz's "projectors", were stood in two circles, the one inside of the other. Their hands and arms were locked together in a complex, interlocking pattern and they walked around, rotating the whole thing slowly but surely. Liz wasn't there, but in the corner I could see one of her postgrad students, I think his was Mark, standing there, staring like he was in some sort of trance. I mean, they all looked like they were in a trance.

The other side of the glass I could see Annabelle Cane stood there, staring at them. Her body was hunched over and contorted in a way that was definitely not natural, and I really want it to have been a trick of the light, but for a second it looked like she had more than two eyes. Almost as soon as I opened the room, the movement of the circle stopped abruptly and their heads snapped to face me all at once.

I froze in panic. They dropped their arms to the side, and for a moment I was sure they were going to attack me, but instead they turned back towards the window, towards Annabelle, and walked up to it, lining close in front of the glass. With a sudden, jerky motion they drew their heads back, then slammed them into the mirrored window, shattering it all at once. I wanted to run, but I couldn't will my body to move.

I just stood there, watching the blood run down from the cuts in their foreheads, as Annabelle began to climb through the broken window, her limbs moving and reaching, slowly and deliberately. The others didn't move a muscle as she crawled over them, then over the floor towards me. When she was about a foot away from me, she drew herself up to her full height. I don't know exactly how tall she had been before but now she loomed over me by almost a full foot.

Her eyes locked on mine and I began to feel something. It was like a hundred tiny, scurrying legs inside my skull, moving and scampering through my mind. I felt my hands, which had dropped to the side of my body, begin to raise. They gripped my legs and then, apparently of their own accord, they began to crawl up me, climbing slowly over my stomach, my chest, my shoulders, until, finally, they came to rest upon my throat. I've never been a strong man but that didn't seem to matter as my own fingers began to close around my neck like a vice.

Panic was making me breathe fast and shallow, but within seconds I couldn't even do that. I don't know if you've ever been strangled, but it takes a lot longer than you think it does. I've no idea exactly how long it was before the edges of my vision began to go dark, but it felt like forever.

Then, out of the corner of my eye I saw Mark, the researcher, move. I don't know how he'd broken whatever spell Annabelle had put him under but he'd apparently managed to. With a sudden, unexpected motion, he charged at her and slammed his full weight into her side. The attack took her completely off guard and she fell hard against the edge of the broken window, the side of her head making a god-awful crunching sound as it hit.

All at once the others collapsed onto the floor, like their strings had been cut. My hands dropped as well, and I took a long, painful gasp of air. I collapsed, taking a few moments to try and regain myself. Mark already had his phone out and was trying to call the police. I was groggy and my brain felt like someone had taken a belt-sander to it, but I managed to struggle to my feet. I looked at the crumpled form of Annabelle Cane just as it started to get back up. I could see the side of her skull had been caved in, and beneath the wet mess of blood and bone, I saw a mass of dull white cobweb.

I ran. I'm not proud of it. I ran out of that building, back to my car and I just drove away. I drove for almost an hour before I finally pulled into a side road and started crying. I never saw any of them again.

The University administration contacted me before the police did. They told me in no uncertain terms that if I valued my job, I had officially not been in the building that night. I didn't really know what I'd have told tell the cops anyway, and I needed that job, so when I was questioned I told them I'd been home sick

with a stomach bug. I think the fact that I looked like death helped convince them, and I wore a high-necked shirt to the interview.

Official line was that Annabelle had suffered a psychotic break and broken the window, injuring a lot of people with broken glass before beating Mark half to death and fleeing the building.

The others in that room don't seem to remember anything, and I don't know if Mark ever mentioned me in his testimony. He and Liz still haven't returned to the University, and I've not made any efforts to contact them.

As far as I know, Annabelle Cane is still out there. I'm keeping my distance from anything even remotely spider-related, though. I somehow managed to live through one horror movie. I have no intention of going looking for another.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

More spiders.

Mr Harlow's testimony does at least have the decency to be widely corroborated. The story of the psychology student who went mad during an ESP study is still widely discussed in certain quarters of Surrey University, and there are multiple newspaper articles covering the events in depth, though none of them mention the, uh, arachnid angle, or indeed Mr Harlow's involvement. Both Mark Voight and Dr Elizabeth Bates left the University almost immediately following the incident under something of a cloud.

Dr Bates has refused our request for an interview point-blank, while Martin informs me that Mr Voight's testimony was disjointed and borderline incomprehensible.

Apparently, biologically, his account of the spiders doesn't make any sense according to Martin. Also, apparently, he cried a lot.

He did, however, at least confirm the presence of Mr Harlow at the event, and the rest of the conversation was a mess of rambling about legs and scuttling.

Despite his recent issues, Tim came through on this one. Police reports do support the official story of a student who suffered a violent episode and attacked other people involved in a research study. It was ascribed to a psychotic attack, though Annabelle Cane's parents have repeatedly stated she had no history of mental illness or violence.

Indeed, I've rarely seen so blatant a use of the image of a frothing lunatic outside the pages of lurid fiction.

I do not think she went mad.

Annabelle Cane has never been apprehended and appears to all intents and purposes to have disappeared. What is equally, if not more concerning, is that in the years since that statement, every one of the other participants in that study, Dr Bates' so-called "projectors", have also disappeared. I cannot help but wonder how many cobwebs might be found in their old homes.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

Supplemental.

I, uh, I've not been back in the tunnels. I find myself... let's call it what it is – I'm scared. Especially after last week's abortive exploration. And yet, every other lead seems to have dried up or given more questions without resolving anything, and short of confronting Elias with what I've found or waiting in the

unlikely hope of more tapes from Basira, I am struggling to settle on any plan that doesn't take me down into those tunnels. Down to find something that has made very clear that it does not want to be found. I should ask the others for help but I... I can't. At best, they'd just try to talk me out of it. At worst... No, I... if I'm going down there, I go alone. I should just leave it. They're right. But I can't not know. End supplemental.

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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